

# The challenges of research in the humanitarian sector: An evolving relationship

**Julien Antouly<sup>1</sup>, Vincent Leger<sup>2\*</sup> , Camille Raillon<sup>3</sup> and Virginie Troit<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Coordinator of Scientific Programmes, Development and Social Innovation, French Red Cross Foundation, Montrouge, France

<sup>2</sup>Research Officer, French Red Cross Foundation, Montrouge, France

<sup>3</sup>Scientific Officer, French Red Cross Foundation, Montrouge, France

<sup>4</sup>Executive Director, French Red Cross Foundation, Montrouge, France

\*Corresponding author email: [vincent.leger@croix-rouge.fr](mailto:vincent.leger@croix-rouge.fr)

## Abstract

*The context of humanitarian action has changed considerably over the past twenty years. These upheavals have given rise to a need to reflect on humanitarian action, as evidenced by the new focus on scientific research by humanitarian actors since the turn of the century. This new approach has led to the creation of numerous organizations dedicated to research within the sector itself, so that scientific*

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knowledge on humanitarian action is no longer produced solely by university researchers. One such organization is the French Red Cross Foundation, founded in 2013. This organization bears witness to the diversity and depth of the issues affecting the humanitarian sector, and the challenges of responding to them. Its history and its past and present difficulties and successes also illustrate the complexity of implementing such a response.

This article aims to analyze and capitalize on several examples of scientific programmes built in direct relation to the humanitarian sector, in order to draw lessons from them (success factors, difficulties encountered, testimonials of applications of research results). In the article, we provide retrospective information on collaboration between the humanitarian and social action sectors and the academic sector, and look to the future by anticipating the shortcomings and needs that organizations – like researchers – will have to address in order to nurture the solidarity practices of tomorrow.

**Keywords:** research, science, knowledge, academic sector, university, humanitarian sector, French Red Cross Foundation, innovation, expertise.

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The relationship between the humanitarian sector and the world of research is multifaceted. The humanitarian sphere and humanitarian workers can be both objects and producers of research, and they can also serve as catalysts for cooperation between the academic world, civil society and recipients of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian action has been studied by researchers for at least as long as it has existed in its modern, secular form, which began when the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was created. The ICRC has always encouraged university collaborations,<sup>1</sup> on the one hand with legal experts, for research into the question of rules and how to communicate them, and on the other hand with health and medical experts,<sup>2</sup> to improve the care provided to victims in armed conflicts and other crisis situations. As international aid has gained prominence,<sup>3</sup> the humanities and social sciences (HSS),<sup>4</sup> together with their respective methods, have made real contributions, from action research into operational programmes and systems<sup>5</sup> to more fundamental or critical research in the area of development aid.

1 The *International Review of the Red Cross*, “a peer-reviewed, academic journal produced by the [ICRC] and published by Cambridge University Press”, started these collaborations in 1869. “About the Review”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, available at: <https://international-review.icrc.org/about/about-review> (all internet references were accessed in October 2024).

2 The humanitarian sector, including the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement), was essential in the advancement of nursing care and numerous aspects of public health.

3 Virginie Troit, “Social Sciences Helping Humanitarianism? A Few African Examples”, in Thomas Fouquet (ed.), *Transition humanitaire au Sénégal*, Karthala, Paris, 2016.

4 See the journal *Humanitaire* for an analysis of the relationship between anthropology and humanitarian action. *Humanitaire*, Special Issue No. 4, Autumn–Winter 2007.

5 The example of ENDA Tiers-Monde, an organization in Senegal, is instructive in this regard. Cheikh Gueye, “Entre recherche fondamentale et actions en développement”, in T. Fouquet (ed.), above note 4.

In addition, researchers and humanitarian practitioners may team up for a number of reasons, such as for purposes of reporting to donors, to analyze specific actions, for joint lobbying, or to come up with innovative approaches. Still, despite a growing call for accountability,<sup>6</sup> some observers believe that there is not enough humanitarian research, or that such research is lacking in quality, tainted by bias or beholden to power dynamics.<sup>7</sup> In the past decade, we have seen an expansion in HSS research not only *about* the humanitarian sector (fuelled in part by interest in humanitarian studies<sup>8</sup>) but also *with* the humanitarian sector (in increasingly inclusive initiatives) and *by* non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and associations (based on questions and considerations concerning core operational activities<sup>9</sup>). Research initiated by humanitarian organizations takes various forms: it may be conducted in-house or outsourced, for example, and it may reflect various types of support and forms of collaboration with the academic sector (researchers may be hired, funding may be made through grants, projects may be run through partnerships, and so on).

The French Red Cross Foundation (the Foundation) was created in 2013 to further develop the relationship between academia and the humanitarian sphere by promoting research and bolstering cooperation between university researchers and those segments of civil society involved in humanitarian and social action. The Foundation represents a step forward in the effort to strengthen links between academia and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement). It was initially created as an endowment before becoming a public service organization in 2017 with the aim of institutionalizing and perpetuating a professional forum dedicated to research, under the guidance of subject-matter experts. Its strategy is predicated on using HSS research to enhance current practice and social innovation, improve learning mechanisms and implement more inclusive and ethical collaborative efforts. Its founders believed not only that the “research–development–innovation” functions are indispensable to development efforts in the private sector, but that they also represent large-scale investments. It is difficult to set up permanent functions of this type within humanitarian organizations and NGOs, whose association-based legal structure implies considerable constraints, including a limit on headquarters investments. However, transnational and local humanitarian entities with an extensive operational footprint, some of which work alone within communities, bear significant responsibilities and face significant challenges, and they stand to

- 6 Henrik Buljo Anstorp and Cindy Horst, *Broadening the Concept of Humanitarian Accountability*, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Oslo, 2021.
- 7 Enrica Leresche *et al.*, “Conducting Operational Research in Humanitarian Settings: Is There a Shared Path for Humanitarians, National Public Health Authorities and Academics?”, *Conflict and Health*, Vol. 14, No. 25, 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00280-2>.
- 8 Valérie Gorin, “Humanitarian Studies: A Field Still in the Making”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, No. 25, 2024, available at: [www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr/2024/03/20/les-etudes-humanitaires-un-champ-toujours-en-voie-de-constitution/](http://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr/2024/03/20/les-etudes-humanitaires-un-champ-toujours-en-voie-de-constitution/).
- 9 Valéry Ridde, “Researchers and Humanitarian Actors: Moving from Mistrust to Efficiency”, *Humanitarian Alternatives*, No. 17, 2021, available at: [www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr/2021/07/19/chercheurs-et-acteurs-humanitaires-passer-de-la-mefiance-a-lefficiency/](http://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/fr/2021/07/19/chercheurs-et-acteurs-humanitaires-passer-de-la-mefiance-a-lefficiency/).

benefit from an analysis of their work environment and of the effectiveness and relevance of their efforts. Over the past ten years, the results produced by the Foundation's scientific programmes have offered an overview of the diversity and depth of the problematics found across the international aid sector and within the humanitarian/research dichotomy. In 2024, the Foundation backed over 120 research projects and 150 researchers, whose focus was on strategic issues for the Movement in particular<sup>10</sup> and for the sector as a whole: access to health care, health emergencies, migration and displacement, risks and catastrophes, and the transformation of the humanitarian system and its values.

Intent on helping the humanitarian sector evolve through its research-based activity, the Foundation decided to focus on HSS. Unlike other centres and foundations that NGOs have set up, however, the Foundation did not limit its scope to the Movement. The focus on HSS made sense for two reasons: first, HSS-related issues and fields do not attract sufficient funding from sponsors, and second, societal transformation is a complex process that involves overcoming humanitarian challenges as well. Indeed, humanitarian organizations must grapple with fast-changing and multi-site crises, such as new forms of armed conflict, evolving social bonds, multiplying climate risks, and large-scale human displacement and migration. A multidisciplinary and scientifically rigorous approach is needed to better understand operational activities, whose underlying issues and specific circumstances vary. The Foundation is involved in over a dozen fields of research, some aimed at meeting needs unique to a given situation, others at observing social dynamics. These fields often employ a similar combination of methodologies and resources, such as archives, questionnaires, mapping outcomes, interviews and participant observation, despite their different approaches and merits. Sociological studies, for example, look at the social relationships that inform emotional and social behaviour both during and after crises. Anthropological research takes a more profession-oriented approach, exploring human health, belief systems and cultural mores, and how they are affected by risks. Political science analyses focus on questions of governance, power dynamics and the balance of power in the humanitarian sector at various scales of action. Through these and other disciplines, the Foundation aims to bring the scientific process into contact with humanitarian aid and social action in a knowledge-based effort to help shape and enhance the strategies and programmes designed to overcome today's challenges. The results? Highly practical recommendations based on action research; key insights into our environments; and more critical approaches that will lead to new ways forward while avoiding the errors of the past.

The authors of this article,<sup>11</sup> who have taken part for several years in the development, oversight and promotion of HSS research programmes, wish to

10 Refer to the global challenges described in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) 2030 Strategy, available at: [www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/about-ifrc/strategy-2030](http://www.ifrc.org/who-we-are/about-ifrc/strategy-2030).

11 The four authors have either worked in the Movement or for other NGOs, or have carried out academic research into humanitarian subjects.

share their experience and suggest ideas for broadening the debate. They begin this article by discussing key initiatives in humanitarian research, with a special focus on the Movement, drawing in part on the history of knowledge production in the area of humanitarian action. Next, they summarize the main lessons that have been learned by those involved in research collaborations between the academic world and the humanitarian sphere over the past ten years, highlighting in particular how these collaborations functioned and the impact they had. Lastly, the authors list the main challenges to strengthening the link between research and humanitarian action from a more forward-looking perspective.

## The evolving relationship between the humanitarian sphere and academic research

The production of knowledge on humanitarian action is at least as old as the ICRC, an institution that dates back to the end of the nineteenth century. This can be seen in the development of a new body of law – international humanitarian law – and in the emergence of war surgery and war nursing, organized efforts to battle epidemics, and awareness-raising about hygiene and public health.<sup>12</sup> Knowledge production has made considerable progress, particularly since the 1960s, when newly formed NGOs focused their work on the new States that came out of the decolonization movement. The humanitarian sector's subsequent economic and operational expansion led to a sharp rise in the need to professionalize the sector in response to a critical analysis of the sector's failures and its risk of being manipulated, as well as to increasingly specific technical requirements in numerous operational situations.<sup>13</sup> Growing interest in knowledge production among academics can be seen in the creation of master's programmes and dedicated research centres – such as the Network on Humanitarian Action (NOHA), a university association set up in 1993 – with varying levels of organization from one country to the next.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, public and private organizations have been set up to support and assess public policy in the area of international cooperation.

The relationship between knowledge and humanitarian programmes has been analyzed in several major works, including those of historian Joël Glasman.<sup>15</sup> The starting point for these analyses is the principles developed by

12 See the work done on the public health development project at the IFRC led by Melanie Oppenheimer, Susanne Schech and Romain Fathi: “Resilient Humanitarianism: The League of Red Cross Societies, 1919–1991”, 2024, available at: <https://sites.flinders.edu.au/resilient-humanitarianism/>.

13 V. Gorin, above note 8; Joël Glasman, *Petit manuel d'autodéfense à l'usage des volontaires*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2023.

14 “NOHA Story”, 2024, available at: <https://nohanet.org/noha-story>.

15 J. Glasman, above note 13; V. Gorin, above note 8; French Red Cross Foundation, *L'essentiel scientifique: 10 ans de recherche au cœur des vulnérabilités*, Paris, 2023, available at: [www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Essentiel-Scientifique\\_10ans\\_de\\_recherche.pdf](http://www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Essentiel-Scientifique_10ans_de_recherche.pdf). It is also worth mentioning issue No. 17 of *Humanitarian Alternatives*, on “Research and Humanitarian Aid: The Challenges of a Collaboration”, available at: [www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/parution/issue-17-july-2021/](http://www.alternatives-humanitaires.org/en/parution/issue-17-july-2021/).

Jean Pictet in his discussion of the principle of proportionality,<sup>16</sup> which is a pragmatic concession aimed at guiding humanitarian entities in their operational decisions and resource allocation.<sup>17</sup> Glasman, in analyzing how humanitarian principles are applied,<sup>18</sup> observes how a need to objectify humanitarian needs (quantifying them and making them measurable) emerged alongside basic data and knowledge production:

Pictet's initial hypothesis was widely accepted: the idea that human suffering can and should be quantified and that this work is the remit of humanitarian agencies. The issue of objective knowledge was very clear in Pictet's argument, as he sought to link impartiality – a principle of justice – to objectivity – a principle of knowledge. Pictet explained that traditional charity is “short-sighted”: it favours those close at hand. Humanitarian aid, however, cannot be short-sighted. ... There is a need to know every fact, know everything, see everything. ... Adherence to the principle of proportionality involves in-depth knowledge of the world's woes. Effective assistance requires both intelligence and discernment. Charity implies knowledge. There is even a need to be all-knowing in order to be able to apply the principle to its full extent.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, since the 1990s and the highly criticized humanitarian response to the Rwandan genocide, the push to have the humanitarian system better manage its “best practices” and to increase its accountability has resulted in new initiatives such as the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP)<sup>20</sup> and the *Global Humanitarian Overview* published by the United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA),<sup>21</sup>

16 Jean Pictet, “The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 61, No. 719, 1979.

17 Marion Harroff-Tavel, “Neutrality and Impartiality”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 29, No. 273, 1989, p. 537.

18 See Joël Glasman, *Humanitarianism and the Quantification of Human Needs: Minimal Humanity*, Routledge Humanitarian Studies Series, Routledge, New York, 2020, p. 34: “In 1965 the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross officially endorsed the principles – and they were also adopted by the governments of all the parties of the Geneva Convention. The resolutions relating to the fundamental principles were now obligatory and constraining for the organizations of the Red Cross Movement. In this version, the principle of proportionality was subsumed under by the principle of impartiality – and the necessity of a form of knowledge that objectifies needs was entrenched: The observation of the principle of proportionality supposes a deep knowledge of the miseries of the world. Efficient aid demands as much intelligence as discernment. Charity implies understanding. One should even be omniscient to be able to apply the principle in all its rigor.”

19 Joël Glasman, “The Invention of Impartiality: The History of a Humanitarian Principle, from a Legal, Strategic and Algorithmic Perspective”, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires (CRASH), 2020, available at: <https://msf-crash.org/en/publications/invention-impartiality-history-humanitarian-principle-legal-strategic-and-algorithmic>.

20 ALNAP, which was set up in 1997, defines itself as “a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, donors, academics, networks and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve the response to humanitarian crises”. See the ALNAP website, available at: <https://alnapp.org/>.

21 This annual report, created by OCHA in 2015, assesses humanitarian needs around the world and the level of resources allocated to meet them, as measured by the UN system. It also summarizes the trends driving humanitarian needs and provides an overview of ways in which the system is delivering better help. See,

both of which gather data and produce analyses on the sector. Humanitarian groups also work together to address knowledge gaps, as can be seen in the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi),<sup>22</sup> which supports research on the treatment of diseases that are overlooked by the commercial sector. This transformation of international humanitarian work, following the end of the Cold War, aligns with the growing power of the UN and, according to numerous authors, the spread of neoliberal methods.<sup>23</sup> A growing sense that a culture of evaluation and critical analysis was needed gave rise to research departments at NGOs such as the Centre for Reflection on Humanitarian Action and Knowledge (Centre de Réflexion sur l'Action et les Savoirs Humanitaires, CRASH), an initiative of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Major crises such as the AIDS pandemic also spurred NGOs to collaborate widely with researchers, sometimes including behind-the-scenes link-ups with NGOs of the South like Environment and Development Action in the Third World (ENDA Tiers-Monde).<sup>24</sup> It is clear that the relationship between the research world and NGOs has evolved, with researchers – working alone or as part of a group – shifting more easily from one sector to another and, at the same time, linking up with each other.<sup>25</sup>

Starting in the 2000s, humanitarian organizations have put in place in-house teams of researchers and experts to expand their reporting efforts and improve their operations in a growing number of fields. In the early 1990s, the Movement set up expertise, research and learning centres, centres of excellence and reference centres. An analysis published by the Feinstein International Famine Center<sup>26</sup> describes how, in response to a series of high-profile technology- and transport-related accidents and the traumatic psychological consequences caused to their victims, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Danish Red Cross created the Reference Centre for Psychological Support, and then how concern for the impact of climate change led to the creation of the Climate Change Centre, in partnership with the Netherlands Red Cross and under the lead of a renowned environmental expert. On the practitioners' side, numerous entities focusing on knowledge and expertise sprouted up throughout the 2010s in the form of foundations,<sup>27</sup>

for example, OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*, December 2023, available at: [www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrfes](http://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrfes).

- 22 MSF came up with this initiative in 2003 after winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Its aim is to explore not-for-profit models to ensure that serious diseases in the poorest countries are not overlooked by medical research. See the DNDi website, available at: <https://dndi.org/about/who-we-are/>.
- 23 Michael Barnett, "Humanitarianism Transformed", *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2005.
- 24 Virginie Troit, "Le 'métissage' des ONG, un laboratoire pour l'avenir de l'humanitaire", Youphil, 2014, available at: <http://www.youphil.com/fr/article/07743-metissage-ong-laboratoire-avenir-humanitairesenegal>.
- 25 One avenue for such cooperation is the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA), a network of several hundred researchers around the world who work on humanitarian action, development aid and international cooperation, in crisis situations. See the IHSA website, available at: <https://ihsa.info/>.
- 26 Peter Walker and Larry Minear, *One for All and All for One: Support and Assistance Models for an Effective IFRC*, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, Boston, MA, 2004, available at: [https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/one\\_for\\_all.pdf](https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/one_for_all.pdf).
- 27 One such foundation is CRASH, which was born of a desire on the part of the directors of MSF to create a structure to support critical reflection on MSF's own operations. In contrast to most think-tanks and

academies,<sup>28</sup> platforms<sup>29</sup> and labs<sup>30</sup> – and contrary to popular wisdom, many of these are located in the global South.<sup>31</sup> In France, the French Red Cross Foundation, the Médecins du Monde Foundation, the Action contre la Faim Foundation and the Handicap International Foundation were created in the space of just five years to produce knowledge and expertise along with ethical guidance. New network-style initiatives, like the International Association of Professional Assistance and Protection, were set up to deliver analysis, training and advice.

The growth of the humanitarian sector, alongside that of the big think-tanks that are funded in part by the States that finance most humanitarian aid,<sup>32</sup> has paralleled the push to professionalize humanitarian work and move away from its volunteer aspect, which confers upon it – rightly or not – a sense of “amateurism”.<sup>33</sup> This has resulted in the formalization of teaching, research and professional training. Among universities, humanitarian studies<sup>34</sup> programmes have been set up, and international links have been forged. The International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA), created in 2009, connects hundreds of researchers and laboratories – not to mention practitioners – whose work focuses on such major topics as conflicts, protection, human rights, international cooperation and development policies, migration and global health. The IHSA counts among its members world-class centres such as those at Harvard University and Tufts University in the United States, the University of Oxford, the London School of Economics and the University of Manchester in the UK, Erasmus University in the Netherlands, and Deakin University in Australia. It also has links with master’s programmes throughout the world, some of which have relationships with dedicated labs. NOHA is an association of European universities that promote education and research as part of a push to professionalize the sector; in 2023, the year it started publishing the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, the network included universities from nine

research bodies devoted to the study of humanitarian aid, CRASH is an integral part of a relief organization, and in this sense it can be considered a pioneer in the field.

28 The Turkish Red Crescent Academy, created in 2020, is one example.

29 These platforms and hubs, which in some cases are backed by national or multilateral sponsors, bring together several organizations and focus on new humanitarian practices. They combine technical knowledge, research and training in order to promote various mechanisms or policies. Examples include cash transfers, which are the focus of the British Red Cross’s Cash Hub (available at: <https://cash-hub.org/about-us/about-the-cash-hub/>), and forward-looking action, under the German Red Cross’s Anticipation Hub (available at: [www.anticipation-hub.org/about/](http://www.anticipation-hub.org/about/)).

30 The Global Migration Lab was set up in 2021 by several National Societies. See the Global Migration Lab website, available at: [www.redcross.org.au/globalmigrationlab/](http://www.redcross.org.au/globalmigrationlab/).

31 The Kenya Red Cross Society’s International Centre for Humanitarian Affairs (ICHA) was formed in 2012. See the ICHA website, available at: [www.icha.net/about/](http://www.icha.net/about/).

32 We are thinking in particular of the Peace Research Institute Oslo, in Norway, and the Overseas Development Institute, in London. They were founded in the 1950s and 1960s and get some public funding from overseas development assistance or EU countries, and they are now considered highly reputable humanitarian research institutes.

33 J. Pictet, above note 16.

34 Humanitarian studies are less commonly the subject of separate degree programmes in French universities, which tend to retain a structure based on major disciplines, than in universities in English-speaking countries.



EU member States and nine partner universities from other continents.<sup>35</sup> These new entities are a dynamic forum for people, knowledge and experience from academia and the humanitarian sphere to intermingle and overcome stereotypes and mutual mistrust. Many humanitarian workers become researchers, while researchers are hired by NGOs in an ongoing effort to develop an analytical culture all the way up to their boards of directors. Sponsors have also begun funding partnerships between researchers and NGOs (e.g. the UK Department for International Development, and the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission<sup>36</sup>). The Humanitarian Future programme at King's College was supported by both major international NGOs and bilateral donors between 2004 and 2015. Ties between NGOs and university researchers have expanded in both number and fields, in particular in HSS. Humanitarian organizations no longer turn to researchers only when they have an urgent need for a solution to an operational problem; they now offer themselves up as topics of research in order to anticipate future challenges. As a result, in some humanitarian situations research topics are increasingly paired up with operational concerns throughout the project cycle; some research even looks at the perception of the work of NGOs among the communities in which they are active,<sup>37</sup> or at more institutional topics like governance, fundraising and communications.<sup>38</sup>

With only a few exceptions, the changing relationship between research and humanitarian aid has been the subject of relatively little study or commentary.<sup>39</sup> Collaborative efforts between humanitarian organizations and researchers are not keeping up with the extremely complex situations that these actors now face and the various roles played by each of them, raising a range of epistemological, scientific and even ethical questions. Best intentions aside, these partnerships are limited by the length of the studies; the expected results; varying categorizations and types of language; the complementary nature of action research, applied research and fundamental research;<sup>40</sup> the imperatives of academic and publishing freedom; and the question of data ownership. Researcher Valéry Ridde has noted that “[t]he organization of partnerships between the humanitarian and research

35 See “NOHA Story”, above note 14.

36 V. Ridde, above note 9, p. 3.

37 A good example of this is the research done by MSF's Caroline Abu-Sada in several countries: see Caroline Abu-Sada (ed.), *In the Eyes of Others: How People in Crises Perceive Humanitarian Aid*, MSF-USA, 2012. According to Sabrina Ferstler, “[t]his concern is nothing new, with other studies on the topic being carried out by other NGOs, polling institutes and researchers. Those studies analyzed the mechanisms inherent in the perception of humanitarian action, seeking to explore the perception of the ‘humanitarian enterprise’ (meaning that they look at all parties involved, both governmental and non-governmental). But they also address the perception of humanitarian aid by people in conflict zones. ... It is the whole point of this study that is not limited to the safety aspect despite being published by a medical association that is engaged in self-analysis.” Quote taken from Sabrina Ferstler, “MSF dans le regard des autres”, *Humanitaire*, Vol. 31, 2012, available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/humanitaire/1259> (authors' translation).

38 Pascal Dauvin, *La communication des ONG humanitaires*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2010; Virginie Troit, “La photographie, prisme de lecture et enjeu révélateur du système de l'aide internationale”, *Mondes en Développement*, Vol. 1, No. 165, 2014.

39 For two examples, see *Humanitarian Alternatives*, No. 17, above note 15; V. Gorin, above note 8.

40 Handicap International's experience in Rwanda is instructive in this regard: see V. Troit, above note 3.

communities is never easy”, adding that “collaborations are not exploited to their full potential or ignoring any lingering prejudices”.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, financial pressures weighing on humanitarian organizations and the scandals<sup>42</sup> that they experience heighten their sensitivity towards any threat to their reputation, as they endeavour to operate under a viable business model that is not overly dependent on outside funding.

When the French Red Cross set up its own research department in 2013, it quickly became clear that the academic world in France was highly compartmentalized, with insufficient and ill-targeted funding in view of the level of learning needs. To make matters worse, few researchers from countries on the receiving end of humanitarian aid were included in research projects despite their front-line work in crisis situations.<sup>43</sup> This only served to exacerbate existing asymmetries with Western research, leading to perspective bias in numerous research projects. Researcher Larissa Kojoue also mentions, in the case of Africa, the tendency for young researchers to seek work as consultants. For her, “consultancy and expertise respond to different logics. The terms of reference are more or less imposed, the time allotted for data collection is short, [there is] pressure for help for action in the service of the sponsor, etc.”<sup>44</sup> She also notes that research must maintain its own space for its own objectives, which are “positioning in scientific, empirical and theoretical debates through publications; priority to rigorous and intensive field surveys; priority to the production of empirically based new knowledge; [and] respect for international norms and standards in science”.<sup>45</sup> Partnerships with researchers, the relationship with innovation and the use of results are fundamental and creative avenues to explore, since the aim is to come up with a collective view of the future and of how collaborations between the academic and humanitarian spheres can be of benefit to society.

41 V. Ridde, above note 9, pp. 1–8.

42 A few well-known scandals are the fraud involving Arche de Zoé in Chad (see “Arche de Zoé: Retour sur un fiasco humanitaire”, *Le Monde*, 2 December 2012, available at: [www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/12/02/arche-de-zoe-retour-sur-un-fiasco-humanitaire\\_1798665\\_3224.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/12/02/arche-de-zoe-retour-sur-un-fiasco-humanitaire_1798665_3224.html)), sexual abuse by Oxfam staff in Haiti (see Jessica Elgot and Karen McVeigh, “Oxfam Loses 7,000 Donors since Sexual Exploitation Scandal”, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2018, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/20/oxfam-boss-mark-goldring-apologises-over-abuse-of-haiti-quake-victims](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/20/oxfam-boss-mark-goldring-apologises-over-abuse-of-haiti-quake-victims)), and the ICRC’s financial crisis in 2023 (see Aline Jaccottet, “Au CICR, le directeur Robert Mardini craint une crise financière d’une ampleur inédite”, *Le Temps*, 7 March 2023, available at: [www.letemps.ch/monde/cicr-directeur-robert-mardini-craint-une-crise-financiere-dune-ampleur-inedite](http://www.letemps.ch/monde/cicr-directeur-robert-mardini-craint-une-crise-financiere-dune-ampleur-inedite)).

43 Marie-Thérèse Mengue and Virginie Troit, *Transition humanitaire au Cameroun*, Karthala, Paris, 2023, pp. 11–26.

44 Larissa Kojoue, “Consultant or Researcher? The Dilemma of Young Academics in Africa”, *World.edu*, 2018, available at: <https://world.edu/consultant-or-researcher-the-dilemma-of-young-academics-in-africa/>.

45 *Ibid.*

## Supporting research “by and for” humanitarian organizations: The experience of the French Red Cross Foundation

By the end of 2023, the French Red Cross Foundation had supported over 120 research projects in nearly two dozen fields, with a focus on migration, health and epidemics, the humanitarian transition, and catastrophe and risk management. With ten years of research under its belt, the Foundation now serves as a vantage point from which to observe the diversity and depth of contemporary issues and challenges, and of the implementation of research results in the humanitarian sphere. Over the past decade, the Foundation has strived to encourage and support credible, independent scientific research, the aim of which is to provide responses in unexplored areas of interest and produce knowledge that will help humanitarian practitioners better understand their environment. At the same time, the aim of these collaborations – in line with the principles underlying the Movement’s work – has been to produce actionable knowledge that will improve humanitarian organizations’ ability to meet social and humanitarian needs based on a fuller understanding of the given situation and on analyses of how aid can be provided most effectively. In order to meet these two objectives, the Foundation has gradually put into place methodological tools that researchers and practitioners can use to collaborate more effectively. Its approach has been based on the implementation of a programme for entities within the Movement followed by one for staff members and volunteers, as well as on the development of post-research project workshops for project participants and internal stakeholders.

In pursuit of its ambitions, the Foundation has developed tools and methodologies that can help ensure research findings can be put to good use, in part by prompting researchers to focus their attention on the needs expressed by operational teams. The intention is not just to expand the knowledge base on humanitarian work, but also to “carry out research with humanitarians”. The specialized literature dealing with knowledge transfer and use reveals the existence of different research models, some more effective than others.<sup>46</sup> Two competing models worth highlighting are the “science-push” and “demand-pull” models. The first is a one-way model premised on the notion that new, innovative and high-quality knowledge will necessarily be used by humanitarian organizations and policy-makers.<sup>47</sup> The second model considers that the end user – humanitarian organizations, in our case – is able to express its needs and wishes. The premise underlying the second model is that research results will be used more effectively when the responses provided by researchers, the knowledge produced by researchers and the end users’ needs are in closer alignment.

46 Christian Dagenais and Valéry Ridde, “Le transfert des connaissances scientifiques, ‘c’est bien, mais c’est pas encore arrivé’”, *Revue Francophone de Recherche sur le Transfert et l’Utilisation des Connaissances*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2020.

47 Christian Dagenais, “Vers une utilisation accrue des résultats issus de la recherche par les intervenants sociaux: Quels modèles de transfert de connaissances privilégier?”, *Les Sciences de l’Éducation – Pour l’Ère Nouvelle*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 2006.

Unfortunately, the results do not always meet expectations, especially when humanitarian practitioners do not play a large enough role in the research process. This is why the specialized literature often mentions a third model, which is viewed by some as particularly effective in knowledge transfer: the “social interaction” model.<sup>48</sup> In this third model, more emphasis is placed on the collaboration process between researchers and practitioners as a key success factor. The model promotes ongoing interaction throughout the research project – i.e., while developing the research thesis and objectives, collecting and analyzing data, and publishing the results. In the English-speaking world, the need for more expansive collaborations between researchers and practitioners is apparent in the growing number of terms for this type of research: participatory research, action research and intervention research, to name just a few.

In line with this approach, over time the Foundation has developed a new format for its research programme: the Red Cross and Red Crescent Joint Programme. The first phase of this process consisted of assessing the research needs of the various entities comprising the Movement, from local French Red Cross units in France to National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) around the world. A method for assessing needs was also developed as part of the process, based on guidelines on the needs and expectations of humanitarian practitioners. In some cases, workshops were held in which researchers and practitioners of social and humanitarian action came together to identify needs. In the second phase, the programme provided financial and expert support to one or more researchers so that they could work together with teams active on the ground. The researchers were free to run the projects however they wanted in terms of methodology and protocols, though the Foundation nevertheless sought to act as a go-between, ensuring that each step of the way (guidelines, literature review, data collection and analysis, presentation, and so on), the researchers’ and practitioners’ respective points of view were all taken into account. The aim was to create an environment in which participants could explain their work, and understand the other parties’ contributions, through workshops or monitoring committees that would meet once every two to six weeks. At these gatherings, the researchers are free to discuss past research projects and publications, their research objectives under each new project, and the methodology they intend to employ. Field teams and their headquarters supervisors, for their part, can discuss their needs and expectations, not to mention their own expertise and knowledge gained from the work they have carried out and the operational environment. These practitioners often play an important role in identifying and gaining access to people, sites and data that could benefit each project. The preliminary data analysis and the results discussion are an important step in each new project, as practising humanitarian workers can help refine conclusions and come up with initial recommendations. Starting in 2018, the Foundation has run several research programmes using this

48 Réjean Landry, Nabil Amara and Moktar Lamari, “Climbing the Ladder of Research Utilization”, *Science Communication*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2001.

approach, each time tweaking the approach in response to observed strengths and weaknesses.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the availability of these new tools, it quickly became clear that involving Movement staff and volunteers in research projects would continue to be difficult. Collaborations tend to require professionals with extensive experience and sector-specific expertise, and who are in roles in which they oversee operational programmes. That said, staff members and volunteers are the Movement's foundation and are often the ones on the front lines, helping those who are suffering and in need; the ability to produce relevant and actionable knowledge also depends on their involvement. Those working on the ground, carrying out the French Red Cross's mission of alleviating suffering, are uniquely situated to report on the obstacles they face in the field. To ensure their input is not overlooked, the Foundation set up a programme with them in mind, called Bénévo'Lab. Through this programme, all French Red Cross staff and volunteers can call on the Foundation's technical and research support teams to help them handle operational challenges that arise during Red Cross missions. These front-line individuals may not have the time or distance needed to reflect on their work and the associated challenges without outside support, so the Foundation arranges to put the staff member or volunteer into direct contact, for a full year, with a researcher who specializes in the field in question and can support them in their work.

Each year, the Foundation invites French Red Cross staff members and volunteers to submit a request for support. The Foundation reviews and assesses the requests based on whether the topic lends itself to research, how relevant and useful the topic is for the Movement, and the scope for improving fieldwork as a result of the requested research. The selected projects are in turn submitted to the academic community through calls for support, and the Foundation then selects the researchers who will be the best fit for the selected projects. The Foundation does not discard any of the submitted requests – those which, despite their worthiness, are not accepted owing to the limited funding available are passed along to the Foundation's research partners, who will explore future opportunities to carry out tailored research aimed at delivering a clear and actionable response to the questions that are asked. And so that the women and men who carry out humanitarian work in the field day after day can benefit from the research and its results, and to bolster their ability to help those who are most vulnerable, the selected researcher carries out their work in close contact with the staff member or volunteer who proposed the project. This approach allows each worker whose request is accepted to play a part in every stage of the research

49 For more on the various programmes designed using this approach and the resulting publications, see Estelle Fourat, *Les dimensions de l'accueil alimentaire: Comment mieux nourrir les migrant.e.s*, French Red Cross Foundation, Les Papiers de la Fondation No. 27, 2020, available at: [www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/les\\_dimensions\\_de\\_l-accueil\\_alimentaire\\_fourat.pdf](http://www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/les_dimensions_de_l-accueil_alimentaire_fourat.pdf); Aïssa Diarra, *Mauritanie, Mali, Niger: Comment améliorer l'accès à la santé sexuelle et reproductive*, French Red Cross Foundation, Pratiques & Humanités No. 4, June 2022, available at: [www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/aissa\\_numerique\\_21\\_07\\_2022\\_bv-1.pdf](http://www.fondation-croix-rouge.fr/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/aissa_numerique_21_07_2022_bv-1.pdf).

project: preparing the call for academic support, monitoring the field side of the project and presenting the results. At the end of 2023, seven research projects were completed as part of the Bénévo'Lab programme.

In the third phase, the Foundation designed group workshops that focus on implementing the research results. These workshops were inspired by the fact that the results of collaborative research projects – even if they are recognized for their merit, shared across the organization and widely considered feasible – may only have a limited operational impact. Other factors can get in the way, such as funding limits or evolving humanitarian needs – and the sometimes high level of staff turnover within programmes, for example, can undermine a joint project's continuity. Research results are not always easy to put into effect; it involves a complex buy-in process, together with mutual understanding. What's more, in some cases, it can be difficult to transform high-quality research findings into concrete action and incorporate them into existing humanitarian programmes.<sup>50</sup> In response to this concern, the Foundation recently developed a method based in part on a new type of group workshop called post-research and social innovation workshops (*atelier post-recherche et innovation sociale*, APRIS). Through APRIS workshops, researchers and practitioners team up to devise new practices in light of research findings in HSS. Due to their experimental nature, these workshops, which are still taking place, provide participants with a good opportunity to consider appropriate models for joint efforts between researchers and practitioners and for getting humanitarian organizations to buy into the research findings and implement them. So far, two high-potential research programmes have been selected, and an initial workshop has been carried out in Niamey, Niger, in conjunction with the Red Cross Society of Niger and the French Red Cross. From 2020 to 2022, the Foundation carried out a research project linked to a regional maternal and child health programme called the Regional Gender and Health Programme in the Sahel (Programme Régional Genre Santé Sahel, PROGRESS); the project was implemented by the French Red Cross in partnership with the Red Cross Society of Niger, the Mali Red Cross and the Mauritanian Red Crescent. As part of that programme, the Foundation coordinated and supported a research project led by the Laboratory for Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development (Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local, LASDEL).<sup>51</sup> As a result of this research, the National Societies involved were able to expand their knowledge of the situations and environments in which they operate and adapt or rework their operational approach.

In May 2023, the Foundation ran an APRIS workshop in Niamey together with the Red Cross Society of Niger and the French Red Cross. It was attended by representatives of over a dozen organizations and National Societies, who

50 Paul Knox Clark and James Darcy, *Insufficient Evidence? The Quality and Use of Evidence in Humanitarian Action*, ALNAP, London, 2014.

51 LASDEL is a Niger- and Benin-based social science research laboratory that runs empirically based qualitative studies that meet international quality standards. It was created in 2001 in Niamey, Niger, and expanded in 2004 to Parakou, Benin.

held a range of positions (project coordinators, technical experts, volunteers, etc.) in different regions. This pilot workshop resulted in various advances. First, it highlighted the impacts of link-ups between researchers and humanitarian practitioners. The researchers' findings were used to expand practitioners' knowledge base and understanding of local norms and dynamics, which in turn enabled the practitioners to adapt and further develop various programme components. For example, changes were made to training courses on "respectful and humanizing care" for health workers in order to account for situations of gender-based violence that the researchers had documented. This workshop also led to modifications in the community mobilization strategy under the PROGRESS programme in Zinder, Niger. The workshop participants engaged in a detailed examination of the key messages that need to be addressed through their various communication channels and activities (such as radio broadcasts, caravans and "chats"), taking into account the full range of research contributions and conclusions. These messages are designed to influence the social dynamics and norms that have an impact on women's health and their ability to make decisions on issues that have a bearing on their right to health care.

More broadly, the observations resulting from the APRIS workshops contain some initial lessons. First, they show that the involvement of practitioners in the research process is indeed positive, as it helps the researchers to adapt and refine their research objectives in view of operational considerations. It is also apparent that, to ensure buy-in and improve the impact of research findings, the focus should be on findings that practitioners have accepted and approved. More innovative and scientifically sound findings that do not win over practitioners will be much more difficult to advance and apply. Lastly, programme activities and operational constraints must be given primacy, with research findings gradually incorporated where appropriate.

## **The humanitarian and academic sectors: A necessary but challenging partnership**

Significant progress has been made across the humanitarian sector, yet collaborative projects with the academic world continue to face major challenges and obstacles that limit the extent to which research can influence and contribute to humanitarian organizations' ability to meet the needs of the most vulnerable.

First, such collaborations are hindered<sup>52</sup> by the difficulty of primary data collection and by the need to ensure the safety of researchers in regions experiencing a humanitarian crisis. Several targeted solutions to these problems have been developed (including by researchers at the International Institute of

52 Daniel Maxwell, Peter Hailey, Jeeyon Janet Kim, Erin McCloskey and Maria Wrabel, *Constraints and Complexities of Information and Analysis in Humanitarian Emergencies: Evidence from Nigeria*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Boston, MA, 2018.

Social Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam<sup>53</sup>) and translated into several languages. Another limitation relates to the fact that exhaustive and rigorous research projects take more time than that allowed by short-term humanitarian operations. This is particularly problematic when it comes to qualitative data collection methods, which are an essential component of a more complete understanding and analysis of the dynamics inherent in humanitarian work.<sup>54</sup> Limited access to higher-risk areas means that researchers must rely primarily on quantitative methods and numbers-based analyses. Yet various researchers have highlighted the downside of reducing human lives and experience to numbers in databases, as this dehumanizes those affected and results in a less nuanced understanding of the situation on the ground.<sup>55</sup>

Second, funding is scarce for collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Humanitarian organizations often struggle to convince sponsors to fund the research projects they come up with, since traditional sponsors often provide only operational support, while public and private research funding mechanisms favour link-ups with universities. And it's not just the research itself that is underfunded, but also the work needed to publish the results and put them into play.

Humanitarian research today faces other limitations besides funding and operational access: it also draws few researchers from countries affected by crises. In general, inequalities remain significant in the academic world. For example, only 3% of scientific research produced worldwide comes from sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>56</sup> This can be chalked up to a shortage of researchers, but also to a paucity of public research funding in these regions. This lack of funding combined with a failure of governments to put in place national policies in this area forces researchers to engage in other types of work or even leave their countries. These asymmetries are especially blatant in humanitarian research, where Western universities and researchers predominate. This suggests that, alongside the push to “localize aid”, an effort should be made to “localize research”.

A fourth challenge relates to respect for and the defence of researchers' freedom and independence. In the humanitarian sector, researchers commonly work on a consultancy basis, with sponsors and humanitarian organizations “placing orders” for their services. In addition, under the terms of some research collaborations, the data collected remain the property of the entity that placed the order, which can limit the researchers' ability to publish their findings. This is

53 Dorothea Hilhorst, Lucy Hodgson, Bram Jansen and Rodrigo Mena, *Safety and Security Guidelines for Field Research in Complex, Remote and Hazardous Places*, International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 2016.

54 Amélie Sundberg, *Beyond the Numbers: How Qualitative Approaches Can Improve Monitoring of Humanitarian Action*, ALNAP, London, 2019.

55 Sandrine Revet, “Compter et raconter les catastrophes”, *Communications*, No. 96, 2015.

56 Sarah Botton, Linda Zanfani and Rohen d'Aiglepierre, “L'aide internationale peut-elle participer à l'ancrage de la recherche africaine?”, *The Conversation*, 6 September 2021, available at: <https://theconversation.com/laide-internationale-peut-elle-participer-a-lancrage-de-la-recherche-africaine-166770>.



why it is crucial that such collaborations respect researchers' freedom by taking into account their specific concerns over the long term.<sup>57</sup>

The humanitarian sector also needs to capitalize on and share experiences, particularly when it comes to collaborative initiatives with the academic sector. Many such initiatives are under way in the Movement, having been developed over time by numerous National Societies. That said, the space for peer exchange and sharing is relatively small. To address that gap and make research and science more accessible to members of the Movement, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Research Consortium was created. In the same vein, humanitarian organizations involved in research must actively support the widespread distribution of the final publications. It is for this reason that the Foundation publishes all of its work online (in the IFRC's digital library, for example), where it can be accessed free of charge, and recently produced a broad overview of the main findings of research projects that it has backed over the past ten years.<sup>58</sup>

One final challenge worth mentioning is the ethical dimension of humanitarian research. Not only must research ethics be maintained,<sup>59</sup> but the role and place of researchers in crisis situations and in crisis-affected zones must be carefully considered.<sup>60</sup> Research collaborations between researchers and humanitarian practitioners give rise to various ethical questions, nowhere more clearly than with regard to obtaining the informed consent of crisis-affected people, protecting their dignity, and putting research findings into practice. Researchers and humanitarian workers often take a different approach to communications and information-sharing: researchers are generally accustomed to publishing their findings, while humanitarian workers may be more inclined to keep some information confidential, either for safety reasons or to safeguard the people they serve. In the end, it is important to protect all stakeholders – researchers and practitioners alike – against the ethical risks that arise during the research process, in order to ensure that the projects are sound and the results are actionable.

57 Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "Promouvoir la recherche face à la consultation: Autour de l'expérience du Lasdel (Niger-Bénin)", *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 202–203, No. 2–3, 2011.

58 French Red Cross Foundation, above note 15.

59 International Sociological Association, *Code of Ethics*, 2001. Research ethics in the humanitarian sector are necessary to ensure that vulnerable people taking part in studies enjoy dignity, respect and safety. Research ethics aim to safeguard the fundamental rights of study populations, while at the same time building trust between researchers and the communities they work with, as this will underpin long-term, respectful relationships. Solid research ethics in the humanitarian sphere can also help avert potential situations of exploitation, ensure that the findings are valid and maintain scientific integrity. Ultimately, this effort will support the quest to enhance humanitarian work and improve the quality of life of crisis-affected people.

60 Rodrigo Mena and Dorothea Hilhorst, "Ethical Considerations of Disaster Research in Conflict-Affected Areas", *Disaster Prevention and Management*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2022.