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# Humanitarian Leader

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Evolution, ideas and the possibility of change of  
the humanitarian sector

RAPHAEL GORGEU



# THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

## Evolution, ideas and the possibility of change of the humanitarian sector

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Raphael Gorgeu is Senior Research Associate at HERE-Geneva and a consultant in humanitarian affairs. He has about 20 years of experience in the humanitarian sector, both in the field and at headquarters, in operational, advocacy, policy and strategic leadership positions. Raphael was Director of Policy and Partnership at the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) from 2015-2018, and served as Deputy Director of Operations and Head of Analysis, Positioning and Advocacy at Médecins Sans Frontières between 2018 to 2022. Prior to this he was Country Director with Médecins Sans Frontières in South Sudan, Yemen and Haiti, and has held multiple field positions with other INGOs. Raphael holds master's degrees in management, humanitarian aid, and international relations, and followed a PhD in Political Science. He has a specific interest in philosophy and a deep appetite for exploring social science theories.

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# Abstract

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This article reflects on the research project *Thinking about the evolution of the humanitarian sector: an exploration within the world of ideas*, conducted by Raphael Gorgeu, Senior Research Associate at HERE-Geneva. The project explores the dynamics of change specific to the humanitarian sector through a socio-phenomenological approach, acknowledging the centrality of ideas in order to grasp how social reality changes. Based on a literature review of 8,000 documents from the international humanitarian system, it describes the historical evolution in the way humanitarian aid has been thought of over the period between 1991 and 2021, and reveals the presence of autonomous forces and mechanisms shaping the idea of humanitarian action over time. By introducing the approach developed for this work and discussing some of its conclusions, this article aims to be as useful for researchers as it is for humanitarian aid professionals and leaders, providing an original way to think through the logics of change specific to this sector.

## Leadership relevance

*By exploring the dynamics of evolution specific to the humanitarian sector, this article contributes to reflections on how professionals, leaders and researchers in the sector think about change. The original analytical framework, the broad historical perspective on the last thirty years, and the revelation of some mechanisms and forces that orientate logics of transformation offer useful additional levers to approach the conduct of change.*

## Introduction

Since its formalisation at the beginning of the 1990s, the humanitarian sector 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. In light of this evolution, I conducted, as Senior Research Associate at HERE-Geneva, a research project titled, *Thinking about the evolution of the humanitarian sector: an exploration within the world of ideas*, which explores the dynamics of change specific to the humanitarian sector.

Applying insights from theoretical frameworks in social sciences which acknowledge the centrality of 'the world of ideas', this work seeks to bring new perspectives on how to approach change in humanitarian aid by focusing particularly on the period 1991-2021.

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This article aims to introduce some of the key elements of this research and is intended to be useful to scholars, professionals and leaders of humanitarian aid in thinking about how to approach logics of change specific to this sector. It discusses the importance of examining the collective representations of humanitarian aid (and their evolution) in order to contribute to reflections on how change unfolds within this sector. It also focuses on the central argument of this research, namely the presence of mechanisms and forces autonomous to agents<sup>1</sup> that influence the transformation of these collective representations. In the light of this finding, the article concludes by questioning the room for manoeuvre available to humanitarian agents in driving change. The reader can refer to the [full report](#) of this research for further details and content, and to the podcast episode *Spelunking* produced by [The Trumanitarian](#), which also offers an overview of this work.

### The centrality of ideas to think about change and the notion of a 'conceptual framework of thoughts'

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,

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'agents' is to be understood in this article as referring to structured and recognised organisations, and not to individuals.

opportunities and limits of each agent 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 (decolonisation, the end of the cold war, the 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 have in common the understanding of 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 took an alternative path, drawing mainly from the phenomenological current of philosophy and the constructivist paradigm in International Relations and sociology. Described as *socio-phenomenological*, the approach developed consisted of acknowledging the centrality of ideas and representations for understanding how social reality changes, considering that they have a significant influence on agents' behaviour and on the trajectories of a sector.

Applied to the humanitarian domain, the ways in which reality and humanitarian aid are approached, and thus the ways for an agent to subscribe to them, would be the very basis of any action and transformation. The behaviours, choices, strategies, actions of agents, and the orientations and mechanisms of evolution of this sector, would be fundamentally part of ways of thinking, and 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 would shape the trajectories through which the sector evolves.

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For instance, describing and thinking about a crisis mainly as 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 example that illustrates this is how describing and considering a crisis as mainly a humanitarian situation or as mainly linked to political issues, influences the way an agent designs its operational strategy in this reality. For instance, some organisations (such as Médecins Sans

Frontières), see the migratory situation in Europe as a consequence of the inhumane policies of European states and the European Union. The action they then take is a form of political engagement, where their presence is not only justified by and articulated around a response to humanitarian needs but is designed as a political act that aims to confront European migration policies.

One final example is evidenced by the humanitarian response of the United Nations and its partners (NGOs and donors) to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. This response was mainly part of a global reading of this crisis, understood as a human and societal one (and not only as a matter of public health), an approach that was presented in the reports of the UN Secretary General (UN, 2020). It was no longer a question of only responding to a medical emergency but of thinking about humanitarian action in a broader economic and social framework, articulating both short-term and long-term actions, and multi-dimensional in its nature.

Each agent considers its action and its mode of action within the frame of specific meanings given to humanitarian aid. These different ways of thinking about aid (which translate into action) refer to what this work has called 'conceptual frameworks of thoughts'. These conceptual frameworks of thoughts constitute the very foundations of the action of the various agents involved in humanitarian work.<sup>2</sup> Within the humanitarian sector, various conceptual frameworks of thoughts face each other. Some conceptual frameworks of thoughts are more dominant than others (carried and integrated—to different degrees—by a majority of agents), and thus construct significant trajectories and contours in the way in which the idea of humanitarian aid evolves and influences the positionings of the different agents. The more these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts are internalised within a sector, the more they influence the behaviours and ways of doing of agents and of the sector.

These dominant frameworks of thoughts are reflected in narratives and patterns of responses to crises. They are modes of thoughts which, imposing themselves as dominant, orient the modalities of action, but leave a margin of manoeuvre in the way they are translated into reality. Exploring how change deploys within the humanitarian sector therefore required examining the evolution of these dominant conceptual frameworks.

<sup>2</sup> This focus on 'the world of ideas' finds its roots in the phenomenological paradigm in philosophy, as well as in the constructivist paradigm in International Relations and in phenomenological sociology. More specifically, the notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts has been inspired by the concept of *épistémé* developed by Michel Foucault and that of social representations put forward by Serge Moscovici. The reader can refer to the full version of the research paper for further details on the theoretical framework used to develop this general approach, along with a more detailed definition of this notion of conceptual frameworks of thoughts. A partial bibliography is also available at the end of this article.

## Methodological approach

In order to grasp the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector, this work took a kind of shortcut, focusing mainly on the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the dominant social group in the sector, i.e. what is commonly referred to as 'the international humanitarian system' under the aegis of the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Indeed, the characteristics of this international humanitarian system allow us to consider it as a social group envisaged as a "real, but partial, directly observable collective unit based on collective, continuous and active attitudes" (Gurvitch in *Lexique de Sociologie*, 2010, p150), 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" (Merton in *Lexique de Sociologie*, 2010, p150). Furthermore, due to its weight in the humanitarian sector (such as its financial volume), the organisations which compose it and gravitate around it, its normative role which orients (or at least influences) a large number of humanitarian agents, and its legitimacy granted by the United Nations resolution 46/182 of 1991, this international humanitarian system has raised itself as the dominant mechanism in the sector.

On these bases, the methodology consisted, 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 period<sup>3</sup>). These documents range from meeting notes, to action plans, strategic documents, policy frameworks, evaluation or mission reports, and operational procedures, but also include 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.

Additionally, considering that conceptual frameworks of thoughts translate in action, this literature review was complemented by the analysis of all Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs or CAPs<sup>4</sup>) developed within the international humanitarian system during the period studied. These Humanitarian Response Plans present the operational approach designed for a response to a humanitarian crisis under the coordination of the IASC. Finally, these two blocks were reinforced by other existing research (notably linked to the evolution of the humanitarian sector and analysis of specific crises or

<sup>3</sup> All these documents were mainly found on the IASC website, [Welcome to the IASC | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](https://www.interagencystandingcommittee.org/)

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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).

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

### The idea of humanitarian aid in constant transformation

On the basis of this literature review, this research attempted to construct a historical description of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector. Grasping these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts and their evolution over the last 30 years means identifying the major and profound trends in the ways of thinking about humanitarian aid, which guide action, and which can be observed over a long period of time. This historical description highlights that the dominant collective representations of humanitarian aid are neither pre-existing nor fixed. Despite certain continuities, profound changes in the way humanitarian aid is conceived of and deployed (in terms of its main orientations) can be observed and identified.<sup>5</sup>

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As an illustration, the link between humanitarian aid and a comprehensive approach to needs has undergone an evolution in the last three decades. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, humanitarian action was mainly considered as an 'emergency action', relatively disconnected from broader developmentalist and political agendas. In the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the concept of a linear continuum between 'emergency, rehabilitation and development' emerged. This concept has evolved again since the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016, and a certain consensus has appeared around describing some humanitarian contexts as 'long-term crises', alongside an associated narrative about the volume and cost of humanitarian assistance and the lack of development means in such contexts. This consensus has contributed to an evolution in how to address the vulnerabilities of

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<sup>5</sup> The reader can refer to the full report for a more complete presentation of this historical description. Briefly, it is articulated around five main elements: the extension of the idea of the scope of humanitarian aid; humanitarian aid, a question of contexts; humanitarian aid, a question of agents and partnerships; humanitarian aid, a question of proximity and links with related sectors; and the idea of a humanitarian sector as a specific sector, the central piece behind the edifice of conceptual frameworks of thoughts.

populations. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals that are currently occupying a central place in humanitarian action, a new paradigm has emerged seeking a nexus between humanitarianism, 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 gained considerable importance in recent years and is now firmly anchored in the dominant thoughts of the sector, reinforced by the United Nations resolution 46/182 of 1991 and the road towards Agenda 2030.<sup>6</sup> This trend is not only imposed by a broader 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 crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has consolidated this trend, catapulting the role of states into a new dimension of leadership.

The idea of the scope of humanitarian action has also evolved over the last thirty years. Mainly focused on 'life-saving' activities such as emergency health, and access to food, water, and shelter 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 income-generating activities (from 1996 onwards), rehabilitation and early recovery (from 1997), mental health care (from 1999), disaster risk reduction (from 2000 and even more so from 2005), etc. A turning point took place from 1997 onwards, with the emergence of the concept of 'protection' as an integral part of humanitarian aid. This concept was mainly initiated in the frame of what was then called 'complex emergencies'<sup>7</sup>. It was then extended to the rest of the international humanitarian system through the development of specific approaches to protection according to topics or contexts, such as the application of protection in situations of internal displacement (IASC, 1999) or in the context of natural disasters (IASC, 2006). Assistance and protection are seen as complementary, and this complementarity as indivisible, though they continue to exist as two distinct pillars which cannot exist without each other.

This evolution in the way of thinking about the scope of humanitarian action nevertheless reveals certain invariants, such as the 'domain approach', which organises humanitarian aid into categories of specific needs (health, food and food security, water and sanitation, shelter, protection, etc.). Humanitarian responses are

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<sup>6</sup> Agenda 2030 is the overall UN framework for pursuing Sustainable Development. See <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

<sup>7</sup> The term *complex emergencies* was defined by the IASC in 1994. It refers to crises characterised by a breakdown of authority resulting from conflict and requiring the mobilisation of the entire international humanitarian system and enhanced coordination to better navigate the political dimension of such contexts.

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. 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 initiated 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 programs, going beyond the traditional boundaries of humanitarian aid.

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This literature review has also clearly revealed another central invariant—a very simple but particularly powerful idea—that humanitarian aid is a sector, specific and different from all others. It is anchored so profoundly in the collective representations of the humanitarian sector, that it appears to be the centrepiece of the structure of all the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. 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. 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 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.

The evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is certainly not linear. There are shifts and reversals, along with 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, which highlights some remarkable forms.

Finally, tracing this evolution over the last thirty years in no way amounts to questioning the relevance and effectiveness of the way in which humanitarian aid is thought about and deployed. The aim of this research was not to criticise the content of these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, but simply to describe their transformation over time.

## The modalities of evolution

On the basis of this historical perspective, this research also aimed to examine the modalities of evolution of these dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. However, the purpose was not to look at each conceptual framework of thoughts or each situation with its respective characteristics and unseal the modalities of change specific to each. The objective was to identify potential 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.

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In this analysis, the totality of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts are together taken as a *sui generis* social fact, considering them as a “proper object, independent of individuals” (Durkheim, in *Lexique de Sociologie*, 2010, p132). A *sui generis* social fact consists of “ways of acting, thinking and sensing which are external to the individual and which are endowed with a power of coercion by virtue of which they are imposed on her/him” (Ibid.). Accordingly, we shall therefore consider that “social phenomena are things and must be treated as things” (Ibid.). This ‘proper object’ responds to patterns of realisation which, even if resulting from a social construction, would go beyond individual will, and would impose themselves on agents. On the basis of the literature review conducted for this research, 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 the mechanisms and forces at work behind this transformation.

This article presents five of the forces and mechanisms identified in this research that seem particularly

enlightening for contributing to further reflection on the change modalities linked to the humanitarian sector<sup>8</sup>.

### The articulation between the diversity of agents and their positioning patterns

In parallel to games of influence and domination between agents that impact the realisation of change, 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 capacity to influence it are two autonomous and opposing forces. One encourages the stabilisation of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector by pushing agents in the sector to share relatively similar conceptual frameworks of thoughts, to embrace the dominant ones, and thus to reinforce them. The other tends towards an extension and explosion of the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the sector.

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 international Western-led NGOs, certain states, including the BRICS countries, are making their appearance on this chessboard, as are some regional organisations such as ASEAN and other institutions like the World Bank. 'Global South' 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 are developing, encouraging 'newcomers' to integrate into the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. This maintains a certain continuity and uniformity of thoughts and actions within the humanitarian sector. However, this diversification of agents also affects and profoundly transforms the conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the whole sector. Indeed, each agent brings to the table its own perspectives on the manner in which humanitarian aid is (and should be) conceptualised and articulated. The meanings of humanitarian aid are therefore directly influenced by the autonomous dynamics of interactions between agents, by what is at play 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.

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### Processes and degrees of internalisation

A conceptual framework of thoughts can be recognised by, among other things, its stability over time. It is of course not irremovable or 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. And every dominant conceptual framework of thoughts has a degree of internalisation. The higher the degree of internalisation, the more stable and embedded a conceptual framework of thoughts will be in the international humanitarian system. For instance, the concept of the centrality of protection in humanitarian action has become more deeply anchored since the late 1990s, while the degree of internalisation of the nexus between humanitarianism, development and peace is still relatively fragile.

This degree of internalisation is made possible by a *process of internalisation* that takes many forms. For instance, it manifests in the development of reference documents that articulate a conceptual framework of thoughts and define its modes of application. It can also be seen in the way a system organises itself structurally. Finally, and crucially, this internalisation process is achieved through the concrete operationalisation of 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-Peace Nexus, which requires concrete implementation throughout humanitarian crises.

The degree of internalisation therefore fulfils a function of resistance towards 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.

<sup>8</sup> The reader can refer to the full research paper for further details and content regarding the mechanisms and forces of change that this work has identified. They have been grouped into four categories: Games of interaction between agents; changes in the contextual environment; processes and degrees of internalisation; and games of interactions between conceptual frameworks of thoughts.



## Internalisation's impacts

In light of the weight of these degrees and processes of internationalisation, two questions arise. 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 the emergence of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts, even if this possibility cannot be totally excluded. However, a period of intense internalisation tends 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 or reflection and revisiting the conceptual framework of thoughts concerned or other issues. In this respect, the implementation period of the cluster reform<sup>9</sup>—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.

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***A period of intense internalisation tends to hinder reflections on other conceptual frameworks of thoughts.***

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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 is 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 profoundly change the conceptual framework of thoughts on which it acts, the latter is nevertheless adjusted through this process 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 depth during this process of internalisation, be simplified, decomplexified, and unpacked, in order to create a common understanding for the greatest number of agents. To put it another way, a conceptual framework

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<sup>9</sup> The cluster reform, established in 2005, aimed mainly at a better coordination of the international humanitarian system. See [What is the Cluster Approach? | HumanitarianResponse](#)

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 if it is to gain acceptance in the international humanitarian system.

## Confrontation between degrees of internalisation

These internalisation logics also impact the possibilities for the evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. The observations made in this research tend to show that the possibility of the emergence of a new dominant conceptual framework of thoughts is linked to the confrontation of the latter with more internalised conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is, 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 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.

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***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 to stabilise and internalise itself.***

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In this game of confrontation between degrees of internalisation, one dominant conceptual framework of thoughts seems to be particularly powerful in its capacity to facilitate or hinder the development of new conceptual frameworks of thoughts: the idea of the humanitarian sector as a specific sector. If the emergence of a new conceptual framework of thoughts comes into tension with the idea of a humanitarian sector as a specific sector, then the force of resistance will be significantly increased. 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.

These forces of resistance to preserve the existence of the humanitarian sector as an object in its own right could be seen as an additional factor in understanding why the various calls to 'break down the silos' between different sectors are so difficult to translate into action.

## A logic of progressive evolution

There is a *limited range of possibilities* for the emergence of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is, there is no infinite number of possible dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts at any given time. It should be considered that the *perimeter of this range of possibilities* around the development of new dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is correlated to existing dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts. That is to say, 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 humanitarian aid 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. The evolution of dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts is therefore mainly gradual, not radical.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to highlight three main points.

The first one is to acknowledge that change of the humanitarian sector 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 the 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 through. The second one refers to the continuous evolution of the dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts of the humanitarian sector. Collective representations of humanitarian aid are constantly evolving, and 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 idea is that the change of the humanitarian sector, and more specifically of its dominant conceptual frameworks of thoughts, is the result of a social construction. At the heart of this construction are forces and mechanisms of change that deploy in an autonomous manner, imposing themselves on agents.

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 agents in conducting change? A

constructivist approach such as the one used in this research would usually discredit the notion of a 'rational agent', which would act following a conscious, articulated reflection to bring about change. The capacity for reflection on the part of the agent is not in question here, but needs to be nuanced. 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). Each agent also has a degree of influence and can deploy strategies in an effort to provoke change. However, an agent, and even more so a group of agents, must also deal with the forces and mechanisms that impose themselves on it (even if socially constructed), 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 attempt, in an articulate way, to come up with strategies for change? The reflections that have emerged from this research, combined with my own personal experience in the humanitarian sector, leads me to suggest that the voluntary or conscious capacity of an agent or group of agents—and thus the willingness of agents to lead change—is probably overestimated.

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What I wish to express here, without questioning the voluntary influence that an agent can have on the evolution of the humanitarian sector, is that the change of the international humanitarian system (at least in its current state) and its conceptual frameworks of thoughts is 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.

Of course, there are many examples of the willingness of certain agents to bring about change in the humanitarian sector. 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, and that the forces and mechanisms of change revealed here

are probably unknown to some, or not really considered by others.

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We are then 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 not become central to the realisation of change. The general equation is so complex, and perhaps elusive, that it would be particularly difficult to believe that we could control all aspects of how a sector evolves. Indeed, this work has identified some of these autonomous mechanisms and forces. But surely others also exist. Furthermore, these forces and mechanisms are not independent of one another. They intermingle, oppose and complement each other through complex interactions. Their weights and influences fluctuate according to situations. Attempting to model these interactions and variations in influence in their entirety appears very laborious, if not impossible, at this stage of knowledge.

But faced with all this, the agent's intention remains. A ball thrown by an agent coming up against a multitude of others in a complex field of forces will always be difficult to control. Nevertheless, it has at its source, the agent's intention to contribute to change.

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