Humanitarian Technologies of Trust

written by Julie Billaud
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"Trust in humanitarian action" was the top item on the agenda of the 33rd international conference of the Red Cross movement which took place in Geneva in December 2019. The reason for such a thematic choice was, according to a statement published on the conference's website, the wide-spread perception of a "declining trust in institutions and governments, an increase in public scrutiny, and calls for stronger integrity and accountability" (ICRC 2019). Between the lines, one could easily read a desire to find an institutional response to a series of

scandals that had tarnished the reputation of several prominent international organisations in the years that preceded the conference (Gayle 2018; McVeigh 2019).

But beyond these episodes which pushed the Movement to take a public stand in favour of greater accountability, trust remains a major operational concern of relief agencies. "We operate in contexts where we're relatively powerless so the only thing we have is trust", an employee of the International Committee of the Red Cross told me once. By underlining the key importance of trust for humanitarian organisations, she conveyed the idea that alleviating human suffering required a constant effort of impression management among ICRC's interlocutors, be they weapon bearers, governmental authorities or affected populations. Trust was therefore less conceived as a cognitive capacity or affective disposition than as a conscious operational strategy (Carey 2017, 20) for accessing populations in need.

Since the 2000s, external pressures for 'evidence-based' programming have pushed humanitarian organisations to establish more collective and managerial forms of trust. While 'operational trust' primarily relies on interpersonal relations and references to the law, 'accountability trust' (Slim 2019) is generally accomplished through internal compliance and control mechanisms as well as procedures meant to enhance beneficiaries' participation. The 33rd conference, which called for more transparency, reflected the growing salience of 'accountability trust' in the humanitarian sector.

In this essay, I examine how these two forms of trust are accomplished in violent urban contexts. I chose these specific situations because there is not internal consensus on how to address them and because they have historically triggered heated debates between those who consider them as a deviation from the ICRC's core mandate – notably because they tend to integrate development components disconnected from the organisation's historical orientation toward situations of emergencies – and those who on the contrary share the view that they represent a necessary adaptation to the changing dynamics of warfare worldwide. These

tensions enable me to examine the organisation's mode of operation in situations that do not directly fall under the traditional juridical scope of 'armed conflict' and to simultaneously highlight a paradox in the ICRC's conception of trust. Indeed, while the organisation's legalistic logic has traditionally led to a conceptualization of trust as the end-result of a "moral contract" rooted in the Geneva Conventions and operationalized through "confidential dialogue" and face-to-face interactions, more recent concerns for accountability have surprisingly led to the establishment of managerial procedures where trustworthiness is achieved through the emptying out of social relations (Corsín Jiménez 2005).

Mandate-based trust and the 'urban problem'

"Throughout history, the ICRC has broadened the category of 'victim' and expanded the scope of the response. But from the outset, its approach has been above all pragmatic and not idealistic at all. What matters is the response, not the morality that guides that response (...). Unlike the French Sans-Frontières movement, which is based on revolt, the ICRC does not have this desire to revolt in its DNA. There is no culture of protest. In this sense, the organisation adapts more easily to the Anglo-Saxon managerial model with its fascination for efficiency that leaves little room for idealism." (Interview, February 2016, translated from the French by the author)

This is in such pragmatic terms that an ICRC employee working at the headquarters in Geneva explained to me the organisation's historical expansion of its activities, beyond those provided by its international mandate as guardian of the Geneva Conventions. Indeed, since its inception, the ICRC has been preoccupied with human suffering even in situations where international humanitarian law does not apply. Because the original objective of the Conventions was to standardise the rules of war, "armed conflicts" – and more specifically those of an international nature – are the benchmark upon which all situations of violence are addressed. Its "right of initiative" in Non-International

Armed Conflicts (NIAC) is nevertheless guaranteed in article 3 common to the 1949 Geneva Conventions.

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The organisation's operational practice and doctrine have been adapted over time to address the humanitarian consequences of violent situations that do not reach the level of an armed conflict. For example, the term 'Other Situations of Violence' (OSV) appears in Red Cross law (i.e the legal and regulatory texts adopted during the Movement's statutory meetings) but the notion has no formal legal implication: it remains non-binding "soft law" from which no enforcement can be derived.

To justify its involvement in contexts marked by urban violence, the ICRC therefore draws an analogy between "other situations of violence" and "armed conflict". Both situations involve the use of force and have similar humanitarian consequences such as torture and ill-treatment, physical and psychological damage, disappearances, deprivation of freedom and separation of families. Commonalities between the two contexts, in spite of the lower intensity of violence in OSVs, entrust the ICRC to "offer its services" to state authorities, notably by visiting detainees in prisons, where it enjoys unique access and expertise.

A number of strategic re-alignments occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, demonstrating an increased awareness of the connection between urbanisation and the irruption of violence in cities. During the 30th conference of the Movement in 2007, urban violence started to be perceived as distinct from violence in armed conflict and a causal link was established between social inequalities, discrimination, poverty and the occurrence of violence (ICRC/IFRC 2007). New forms of interventions and categories of victims (beyond the original focus on prisoners) were identified as a result, including the youth, victims of

sexual violence, displaced persons and families of minors in detention.

These doctrinal developments highlight the centrality of legal interpretations and diplomatic negotiations in the broadening of categories of "victims" worthy of humanitarian aid. While an analogy between armed-conflict and urban violence granted the organisation's access to prisoners, 'soft Red Cross law' reinforced its legitimacy in operating in 'other situations of violence'. References to the law effectively served to maintain states' trust in the organisation while placing them in the position of privileged operational partners. It simultaneously advanced a rather limited response to urban violence, not geared toward addressing its root causes but rather meant to mitigate its humanitarian consequences through targeted interventions.

Figure 1 – Screenshot of promotion video of the 33rd international conference of the Red Cross Movement

Operational trust and confidential dialogue

In spite of recent efforts to understand the specific characteristics of urban violence, notably its systemic aspects, the legal basis of actions undertaken by the ICRC greatly explains the organisation's focus on armed violence in urban contexts. Consequently, most activities implemented in cities somewhat mirror those the organisation is accustomed to carry out in situations of armed conflicts. In the Maguadoran city of San Sombrero [1], for example, where the ICRC has been present since 2010, urban violence (UV) programs are not designed to address the root causes of violence but to turn violence into a manageable risk. In other words, their purpose is not to eradicate violence but rather to make it a liveable condition (Billaud 2020). The main method used for achieving this objective is "confidential dialogue" with weapon bearers, a method grounded on the belief that protection of vulnerable populations can be achieved if parties to a conflict are sensitised to international norms related to the use of force.

From 2010 to 2015, ICRC delegates worked in close collaboration with Maguadoran Red Cross volunteers in six "priority zones", i.e six *comunas* which had the highest homicide rates in the city. The project aimed at preventing armed violence and mitigating its direct and indirect consequences as well as reducing communities' vulnerability to violence by strengthening their resilience and facilitating their access to public services (health and education). Taking inspiration from a similar program implemented in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the program followed a multidisciplinary approach. Activities consisted in a combination of protection dialogue with law enforcement authorities and gangs, assistance in the field of health and economic security as well as education (emergency preparedness training and violence prevention education in schools, reinsertion activities in detention centres for minors). Dialogue with armed actors required, like in situations of armed conflict, direct, confidential and regular face-to-face meetings with them in the hope that such conversations would lead to behaviour change. The mere presence of ICRC delegates in the *barrios* was believed to have a calming effect on the surrounding environment.

Delegates working for the project during this period shared with me vivid memories of their networking methods. They explained how they managed to reach *combos'* chiefs and cartels' leaders thanks to the relationships of trust they were able to build with gang members detained in the prisons they visited. Using snow-balling strategies similar to those of social scientists as well as methods of participant-observation comparable to the "street corner ethnography" developed by the Chicago School of urban sociology, delegates capitalised on information collected in prisons and in the barrios to gradually move up *combos'* pyramidal organisational structure. Their patience and temerity were constantly tested as *combos* sought to evaluate their trust-worthiness. "Words of mouth, personal relationships and reputation were of key importance. People accepted to speak to me because they knew me personally, not because I worked for the ICRC. They saw me regularly in the *barrios*. They knew where I lived. They had information on my family. I knew I was under their close watch but that was the price to pay to be accepted", a delegate who had worked at the beginning of the UV project in San Sombrero told me.

To complement emergency-preparedness and violence-prevention trainings carried out in schools and places of detention, assistance was provided to specific categories of "victims". Priority was given to those who were wounded, either physically or psychologically, sexual violence survivors, minors enrolled in *combos'* activities, and those who were denied access to essential services, had been forcibly displaced or whose relatives had disappeared. These selection criteria remained largely similar to those applied in more classic ICRC operational contexts. Assistance was therefore not considered as a means to address structural violence (Farmer 2009) through poverty alleviation (even though it clearly contributed to this goal) but rather as a form of compensation to victims of armed violence as well as a means to build trust with communities and initiate dialogue on protection issues.

Accountability trust and community-based protection

In 2015, at the end of this five-year program, the ICRC struggled to find a renewed position of relevance in San Sombrero. The decrease of homicides as a result of a truce between the two main competing *combos*, the reduction of financial and human resources and the reconfiguration of institutional priorities following the Peace Accord between the armed rebellion and the Maguadoran government, led the ICRC to reconsider the set-up of its program.

Its geographic approach based on the regular presence of delegates in "priority zones" was abandoned in favour of a thematic one focusing on urgent protection issues such as sexual violence, minors' recruitment, forced disappearances and the use of force. If this method was partially justified by long periods of relative calm in some *barrios*, it simultaneously made the ICRC lose essential contacts with gangs as well as its operational anchorage in the *barrios*.

This increased distance between delegates and "victims" (such as sexual violence survivors or families of the disappeared) deeply transformed their relationship. Having to travel to the ICRC office in the city centre to receive support – in contrast to the first period of the UV project when delegates were regularly present in the barrios – victims were now confronted by a bureaucracy in charge of handling their case. Such tasks involved redirecting clients to responsible public services and entering details of each "case" in the "protection database" for future follow-up. Demands for 'evidence-based' humanitarian action required a more systematic approach to data management and contributed to an inflation of administrative tasks in protection teams' everyday work. The intensive labour involved in maintaining up-to-date the database so as to be able to derive trends and statistics used for reporting to donors was symptomatic of the bureaucratization of delegates' profession. It also indicated a shift in the way the organisation conceived its role as 'guardian of the Geneva Conventions', moving away from its original direct witness status in conflict zones to embrace a more technocratic approach to 'civilised wars' where 'humanity' is measured according

to quantifiable benchmarks.

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In the *comunas*, communities were made responsible for their own protection through resilience-building activities. This approach responded to external calls for greater "accountability toward affected populations" whereby affected people were no longer considered as mere beneficiaries or victims, but also as "agents in their own protection" (ICRC 2016). To meet this requirement, the ICRC partnered with the Maguadoran Red Cross to empower the youth in schools and detention centres to find alternatives to violence using a methodology meant to achieve 'peace and coexistence', internally called *la metodologia*. As explained in a public communication, the purpose of the program was:

.... for young people to learn about different life alternatives, to highlight other ways of seeking solutions to conflicts, which include respect for life, the importance of listening to others, respect for human dignity and teamwork; (the program taught the youth to) value themselves as people and (sought to make them) understand that not everything revolves around money but that there are other essential things in daily life such as love, respect, companionship, solidarity and friendship.

By teaching young people "different values" such as "peace, friendship, love", the program implicitly assumed that such morals lacked in poor communities, hence reproducing the very stereotypes that contributed to their stigmatisation and that justified violent state policing in the *barrios*. The methodology overlooked the various forms of structural inequalities responsible for the everyday violence that dominates in San Sombrero's poor neighbourhoods. Far from being a neutral, technical and pragmatic answer to identified 'needs', *la metodologia* represented a distinct mode of governing, part of an advanced liberal political project emphasising the need for certain groups to improve themselves through self-

management (Ilcan and Lacey 2006). The principle of "accountability to affected populations" was operationalized through "self-help" programs whereby *barrios* inhabitants were trained in the art of "self-protection" and violence was turned into an object of management.

In a situation where armed violence had become a chronic problem, the ICRC's intervention remained minimalist not only in the biopolitical sense of "maintaining life on the threshold" but in the sense of "acting to preserve life at a distance" (Silva Rocha Lima Forthcoming). Ironically, the managerial techniques mobilised to ensure "accountability to affected populations" and therefore their "trust in humanitarian action" – to use the title of the 33rd Red Cross conference mentioned at the beginning of this essay – involved keeping them at a distance while turning them into self-disciplined individuals able to manage their own safety.

The humanitarian techniques of trust I have described in this essay (mandate-based, operational and accountability-based), far from being mutually exclusive, are rather complementary and used strategically by ICRC employees depending on circumstances and interlocutors. Yet, the bureaucratization processes triggered by the growing valency of accountability-trust has forced the organisation to prioritise and structure its work differently, making face-to-face interactions 'in the field' between delegates and beneficiaries less regular. Such an example highlights the paradox of technocratic mechanisms established to ensure organisational transparency where corporate moral responsibility is asserted through the production of experience-distant forms of knowledge perceived as more robust and objective. Surprisingly, the institutionalisation of trust through systematic reporting impedes on the establishment of the human-to-human relations of care from which humanitarian action originally derived its ethical legitimacy.

[1] Names of countries and cities where these observations have been carried out have been fictionalised in order to honour the confidentiality requirements of the ICRC.

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