SIX SHADES OF STRATEGIZING: THE HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract—This exploratory paper looks into humanitarian development action by suggesting a strategic framework to better understand its stakes for stakeholders. In reference to the two theoretic trends of organised strategic action and of strategy-as-practice, the authors introduce an original matrix highlighting six cases of humanitarian development action. The matrix is illustrated by six humanitarian development cases.

Keywords—Actors; humanitarian action; organization theory; strategy-as-practice.

I. INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian action has broadly evolved since its creation in the XVIIIth century. While they were originally influenced by the movement of the Red Cross and its founding principles, nowadays we notice the presence of a variety of humanitarian actors, not limited to NGOs and donors [19]. In parallel, a growing interest is given to the humanitarian action through various subjects such as law, sociology and management. The evolution of humanitarian action shows the complementarity of the two approaches: emergency humanitarian action and humanitarian development action. Humanitarian development action is continued over time and appears as a support for emergency action [12][20]. Indeed, the development enables to reduce the risks associated to emergency, for example the repetition of humanitarian crises, and to support the reconstruction in the long run. This action can be defined as a genuine strategic action through the characterisation of game rules, context and practices.

In spite of a long-standing debate within the humanitarian field, with an opposition between developmentalism and urgentism [15], today, NGOs no longer focus on emergency programmes. The most significant example is that of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an NGO that originally defined itself through a philosophy mainly emergency-oriented, and that currently implements aid programmes on the medium and long-term [2]. In the MSF 2016 yearly report, it is thus possible to spot activities that are clearly part of a developmental approach after a humanitarian crisis: the reconstruction of health, hospital maintenance, water sanitation or the implementation of a medical information system easing the collection and analysis of data. The growth of humanitarian operations reflects today the actors’ will to conclude long-term actions in order to prevent risks (pre-crisis) and re-build after the emergency of the action (post-crisis).

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Crozier and Friedberg [7] offer a vision of strategic interaction in reference to which they define their theory of organised action. This reference now constitutes a solid theoretical basis of action, that continued in the early 2000s through the significant contributions of strategy-as-practice movement, defining action through its practical meaning [6][18][22]. The meeting of the two approaches aims at producing a summary of strategic action, applicable to the context of humanitarian development action, and to highlight the main characteristics. An analysis of the literature lead to highlighting the inputs of strategic analysis of action, of which we find traces in strategic learning management [8], then those of practical strategic analysis, before concluding to a summary of strategic action.

A. Strategic analysis of action

During the 1970s, Crozier and Friedberg [7] developed the French school of organisational sociology by taking interest in the way actors of an organisation build and coordinate their collective actions. Through their strategic analysis of action, the authors define the organised action and bring to light its contingent character. The organised action is revealed by the consideration of power relationships exerted upon other autonomous actors. The authors emphasise on the agents’ freedom of action, given that they are seen as minds capable of scheming and manipulating, and will make particular choices and arrangements to turn away from constraints of collective action. This freedom is not absolute, as the pressures maintained between the actors will influence the behaviours of individuals and, more broadly, the organised action. Thus, the
organised action is characterised by interdependent and individual behaviours stemming from power relationships with the aim to carry out collective conducts.

The organised action takes part in the strategic analysis of action. It reveals the complexity of the relationships between actors as well as the vision contingent to action. Thus, the strategic analysis suggests the consideration of inter-structuring mechanisms established between the game rules of the environment and the action. This inter-structuration brings light to the reciprocity of influences and exchange mechanisms between the system and the action. This system is characterised by a strong political and cultural influence. With this in mind, the game rules constrain the action while offering to seize opportunities. In parallel, the action could influence the game rules of the external system. The action interacts with the contextual game rules and the possibilities of action are not affected.

The strategic analysis of the action enables the identification and characterisation of the components of the action according to its organised nature: the strategic actors, the system (which marks the action as a contingent construct) and the game rules. Using these elements, the action can be defined as a contingent construct structured by games rules in which autonomous and interdependent actors lead collective conducts. This approach, which now sets the tone in organisation theory, can be complemented by the presentation of more recent literature, set in motion by the strategy-as-practice trend, which places strategic practices at the heart of the analysis of action.

B. Practical-strategic analysis of the action

The trend of strategy-as-practice takes root within the current practice turn marked by Bourdieu’s inspiration [4]. Indeed, this brought to light the practical dimension of action. The practice turn theory in sociology is often approached via a dualist view of the system characterised by an exclusively microeconomic or macroeconomic approach, respectively characterising individualism and societism [21]. In order to use a coherent and consistent vocabulary, Whittington [22] suggests a definition of the three fundamental terms of this trend: (1) Practitioners compose all the internal actors taking part in the action strategy (top managers, middle managers, operational staff) and external actors, indirectly involved, such as consulting firms, media and financial institutions; (2) Practice (praxis) refers to the intra-organisational work carried out by practitioners through the development of the strategic action and its implementation; and (3) The practices refer to the mechanisms rolled out by practitioners in the implementation of praxis, including traditions, norms and procedures showing in reflection and action.

With this in mind, “strategy can then be conceived as a set of actions developed through social interactions, routines and conversations through which managers as well as members of the organisation define a direction for the company” [16:18]. The strategy is understood through its actions taking into account all the interactions and exchange mechanisms that compose them. In addition, the way of thinking and doing the strategy is studied through practical perspectives: “It is a question of understanding how individuals carry out their actions within a context, it being understood that these actions are not only the result of a debate, but that they are part of a context of social relationships, meanings, rules and routines, know-how and objectives giving meaning to action, in other words that these actions update and renew a set of existing practices” [16:17].

With this definition, the trend of strategy-as-practice takes on its full meaning. The strategy is not only the result of a decision between practitioners, it also comes under a context in which its action is embedded and with which it interacts. The action can be understood through its relationship to a context composed of regulatory mechanisms from various fields, as well as through all the practitioners composing it. Based on the literature of strategy-as-practice, the action can be characterised by the following elements:

- Practitioners’ practices: as defined above, these refer to all the mechanisms implemented by the actors involved in the action strategy. This characteristic induces a broad scope of action that is not strictly limited to organisational boundaries. The practices carried out through the implementation of the action define the links between the actors.

- The relationship with the context: the strategy is considered “as an action that acquires its meaning depending on the socio-economic, political and cultural context in which it operates” [16:19]. The context itself is composed of regulatory mechanisms. The action is then placed in a
context and interacts with it by updating the different practices.

The current trend of strategy-as-practice is of obvious interest: the interaction between action and context, described earlier in the strategic analysis of the action, seems to be highlighted again. But it also points out that political and tactical games are very present among practitioners to reinforce their legitimacy, including through the use of lies or data manipulation. While this literature reinforces the embedding of action in its context, its major contribution is to give genuine practical meaning to action [11]. Thus, the action can also be defined through the analysis of its actors’ practices. The suggested theoretical framework therefore highlights the importance of two elements of the action: the contextual game rules and the practices of strategic actors.

III. AN APPLICATION TO HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

With regard to contextual game rules, while taking into account the context and regulatory mechanisms, particularly socio-economic, cultural and economic ones [16], is shown through the trend of strategy-as-practice, Crozier and Friedberg [7] highlight more clearly the interdependence between action and game rules. Indeed, the action is shaped around arbitrary game rules, on the one hand, constraints regarding the possibilities for action, and on the other hand, opportunities and deployment capabilities [9]. Thus, the game rules will structure the action while promoting interactions between the action and its context. Depending on their constraining and/or facilitating nature, three types of rules can be distinguished: (1) Constraining rules, which impact the possibility of action by imposing a constraint on the action; (2) Facilitating rules, which enable seizing opportunities by increasing freedom of action; and (3) Mixed rules, which represent neither a pure constraint nor an overall interest in action.

The practices of strategic actors take into account all the mechanisms exerted during the development and implementation of the strategic action. The practices, defined by Whittington [22], are routines of shared behaviours. While these seem to be part of overall practices, it should be noted the presence of more autonomous practices implemented at the periphery [3]. This analysis refers to strategic episodes, the awaydays, which mark the transition from a routine context to an exceptional and temporary context suggesting the implementation of spontaneous and creative practices [1]. By using the term of strategic actor developed by Crozier and Friedberg [7], we take into consideration the actors’ room for manoeuvre through their practices implemented in the action. Thus, the practices of strategic actors can be distinguished according to their interdependent or autonomous nature: (1) Overall practices are implemented in a common way by all actors with a view to carrying out collective strategic action; and (2) Autonomous practices are exercised on the periphery by strategist actors using their margin of freedom to set up strategic practices.

TABLE I. STRATEGIC ACTION DEFINED BY THE GAME RULES AND THE PRACTICES OF STRATEGIC ACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game rules</th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomous</td>
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Through its interventions in pre-crisis and post-crisis periods, humanitarian development action plays a genuine strategic role. Indeed, it sets up a sustainable action over time, reducing the risks of crisis while ensuring economic, educational, social, cultural and health development to benefit the populations. The proposed definitions give a major role to context and actors. In that respect, we will define strategic humanitarian development action by characterising the contextual game rules as well as the practices of strategic actors:

− **Contextual game rules.** In a humanitarian development intervention, it is vital to take the context into account. Indeed, because of their binding nature, the game rules may limit the possibility of development action or, on the contrary, facilitate the implementation of programmes. The game rules refer to the socio-economic, political and cultural context of the place where the action takes place. Thus, the constraint exerted by the game rules depends on several factors such as the social and economic situation of the intervention zone, the geopolitical situation of the intervention zone and the political relations maintained with the States involved in
the intervention, the dominant culture within the intervention zone and the religious heterogeneity of the participants. Moshtari and Gonçalves [13] also indicate that contextual factors significantly influence collaboration among humanitarian organisations.

− Practices of strategic actors. There is evidence of the presence of different actors in humanitarian development action, including governmental and non-governmental, national and international organisations, members of these organisations, local actors (companies, population) and private and public donors. The diversity of actors reinforces the complexity of implementing practices, especially since the strategist nature of the actors leads them to develop, at times, autonomous practices. Ngamassi et al. [14] thus compare the network cliques and the network effectiveness to analyse the collective mechanisms of collaboration between humanitarian organisations. Overall practices will be conducted according to different criteria such as the establishment of collective conduct, the relationships maintained between the various strategic actors, the conflicting individual objectives and the actors’ willingness to assert their room for manoeuvre.

In order to show the different illustrative cases of strategic action in the context of humanitarian development action, we use six very concrete humanitarian development situations (see Table II). The restricting or facilitating nature of the game rules will differ from one situation to another and will depend on the socio-economic, political and cultural context in which humanitarian development action will take place, as the six examples studied show. An increased knowledge of these game rules will have a positive impact on the action carried out by promoting the seizing of opportunities and the adaptation to contextual constraints. Taking into account of game rules will thus play a key role in the implementation of the action through different decisions such as the need to work jointly with all participants or plan the intervention over time by avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources. This will make it easier to identify the coordinating body of the action, based on the cluster model [10], and thus improve the results of the action. Success will then depend on the fact that the practices deployed by strategic actors are in line with the contextual game rules.

**TABLE II: INTERPRETATION THROUGH THE STRATEGIC ACTION OF THE SIX HUMANITARIAN DEVELOPMENT CASES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game rules</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 1 Fighting endemic urban violence in Central America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 2 Helping migrants to facilitate their integration in Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 3 Earthquake prevention to avoid humanitarian crisis in Dhaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 4 Construction of a partnership network in the Lake Chad basin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 5 Fighting gender-based violence of a sexual nature in Darfur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 6 Rebuilding the medical system to solve the Ebola virus in Sierra Leone</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**IV. CONCLUSION**

If the development of operational tools is vital to the success of a humanitarian development action, the current strategic stakes should not be underestimated. To do so, it seems important to understand the involvement of actors in their political dimension, which is all the stronger as the number of humanitarian actors is large and has complex roles. The present reflection is based on a central theoretical framing, that of strategic action to identify cases involving differentiated humanitarian actions. By using an original framework, the aim was to highlight the different components of strategic humanitarian development action. While the practices deployed must take into account the requirements of the context, they do not necessarily have to comply with them. The implementation of overall or autonomous practices will then play a decisive role in the deployment of strategic action by interfering with the participation of actors, meetings between them and the length of the intervention. To achieve long-term results, these practices must be pursued through collective practices. From this point of view, a link between autonomous practices and overall practices seems necessary to promote long-term action, which we believe is a key research theme.

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