Part of the ‘Learning and Innovating to Improve Crisis Response’ project, funded by:
The ‘conventional’ aid sector has never been as structured as it is today. International standards have been developed and staff and organisations have become increasingly professional. But a number of developments have begun to call into question the notion of ‘aid quality’.

The number of people requiring humanitarian assistance in the world has never been as high as in 2022. In late 2021, the UN estimated this figure to be almost 280 million people, or one in every 29 people globally. And yet, in parallel to this, humanitarian space has continued to contract due to the increasing number of restrictions that many states have imposed on humanitarian action, increased insecurity for aid actors and numerous violations of International Humanitarian Law. The conflict in Ukraine is an example of this, with Russia using humanitarian corridors to advance their own political interests. In addition, humanitarian space has been limited since 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic: border closures, quarantines and other measures taken by the majority of states to stop the pandemic from spreading immediately restricted the ability of aid operators to do their jobs. At the same time, the pandemic context highlighted the many initiatives that exist at the local level, based on mutual aid and solidarity. This raised the question of how international aid organisations can support these local initiatives. And in addition to calls for aid ‘localisation’ (promoting local actors in the response to crises), there is also increasing focus on the environmental footprint of aid, which has encouraged aid practitioners and donors to revise their operational methods. Finally, donor demands have increased, notably the demand to screen partners – and even beneficiaries – in order to combat money laundering and the funding of terrorism.

Though some of these developments have been discussed at previous Autumn Schools, today we want to look at how they are affecting aid quality. Over the years, the term ‘quality’ has acquired a negative connotation for some who see it as having essentially become a donor requirement, based on a technocratic vision, and the ‘over-standardisation’ of the sector. The concept of ‘quality’ has also gradually been diluted with the emergence of important new issues such as localisation and the environment. Nevertheless, international aid organisations, donors and (above all) those who receive assistance, continue to demand aid quality. In this context, we need to look at what ‘quality’ means and how we put it into practice.

So, what can we do to give back meaning to the notion of quality? Can it still be considered a sophisticated notion when the international aid system is no longer capable of meeting all the needs of crisis-affected people? Who has the legitimacy to define what constitutes aid quality? Donors? Aid practitioners? Beneficiaries? Governments? How do we redefine quality so that affected people and local actors are, at last, given a prominent place? In a system that is increasingly focused on the ‘local’, can we continue to ignore alternative visions of quality?

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1 Which includes: donors, multilateral agencies and international NGOs, also referred to as ‘traditional’ aid actors, as opposed to organisations that are locally based but who are rarely integrated into formal international aid mechanisms. For more information, see: V. Léon, Local and conventional aid actors: taking inspiration from new ways of working together, March 2022, here.
2 According to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), quality is defined as the totality of features and characteristics of humanitarian assistance that support its ability to, in time, satisfy stated or implied needs and expectations, and respect the dignity of the people it aims to assist.
7 The focus of the 2021 edition of the Autumn School was local solidarity, the 2020 edition looked at solidarity during a systemic crisis, and in 2019, the theme was climatic issues affecting the aid sector.
These are some of the questions that Groupe URD would like to invite you to discuss at the 15th edition of the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid.

QUALITY & PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CRISIS
Despite successive reforms of the humanitarian system since the beginning of the 2000s – the Humanitarian Reform Agenda in 2005, the Transformative Agenda in 2010 and the Grand Bargain in 2016, the sector still seems unable to deliver aid that satisfies people’s needs and is implemented responsibly. The level of dissatisfaction with the aid that is delivered remains high among beneficiaries: surveys carried out by Ground Truth Solutions with beneficiaries highlight that the aid delivered does not cover all of people’s priority needs. What is more, the ‘participation revolution’ that was announced during the Grand Bargain – which aimed to include aid beneficiaries in the decisions affecting their lives – has not taken place significantly in practice. Accountability is still principally oriented towards donors, and beneficiaries still do not have a great deal of influence over the goods and services that they receive. And yet, this influence underlies the question of aid’s relevance and its capacity to adapt to people’s needs and expectations, which may differ depending on the context, the population group or the period.

How do we, once and for all, ensure that affected people have a significant role in determining the assistance that they receive? How do we ensure that this assistance remains relevant and agile to their needs and expectations and to changes in the context? How do we ensure that quality does not simply see affected people in the passive role of beneficiaries, but rather as having a genuinely active role in the response? How do we move from a ‘donor’ vision of quality to a vision that genuinely integrates feedback from beneficiaries?

QUALITY & LOCAL ACTORS
Over the years, international aid organisations have increased their collaboration with national and local partners, either for reasons of fairness – for example, in connection with the issue of ‘localisation’ – or out of necessity – for example, due to the increasing difficulty of gaining access to certain regions. The place that quality should be given within these partnerships has never been very clear, and the issue of localisation has raised further questions about the approach that aid organisations should adopt: should quality frameworks that have been developed internally or at the international level be imposed on national and local actors who often do not have the same vision of what ‘quality aid’ means? How can the right balance be found between guaranteeing the quality of aid operations without transforming local organisations into ‘clones’ of the dominant, conventional aid organisations (typically, the main international NGOs)?

The common thread running through these questions is the issue of whether actors of the ‘Global South’ have access to and are able to adopt the standards and quality frameworks developed internationally. Indeed, it may be difficult for local actors who are not part of, or not familiar with, the rules of the conventional aid system, to assimilate these standards. What is more, the processes involved in recognising an organisation’s ability to apply these standards, such as certification, which are often long and require financial resources, can further limit access to them. And finally, these international standards and frameworks do not necessarily correspond to local and national organisations’ vision of quality.

How do we ensure that actors from the ‘Global South’ have access to international quality standards without transforming

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them into ‘clones’ of international NGOs? What should our approach be to quality and accountability within formal and informal partnerships with local actors? How do we take into account and recognise alternative visions of quality in an (over)formalised and standardised conventional aid system?

QUALITY, HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND FAIRNESS
As mentioned above, the ways that the humanitarian sector has evolved have not only had an impact on the approaches and operational methods of aid organisations, but also appear to call into question the humanitarian principles that guide their actions. Derived from the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and incorporated into international law since the beginning of the 1990s, these principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – can seem ill adapted to certain crisis situations where compromises may need to be made. This is the case, for example, in relation to negotiations to gain access in armed conflict contexts, where certain principles can be sacrificed in order to achieve broader objectives and to increase the effectiveness of the operation. The concept of neutrality can also be problematic in relation to organisations who depend to a great extent on government funds or organisations who decide to support a particular population group. In the case of the war in Ukraine, can we consider that assistance delivered to Ukrainians is neutral? And, with regard to localisation issues, is supporting Ukrainian citizen-based movements and municipalities not a way of taking part in the conflict? The question of neutrality is also relevant in relation to so-called ‘Triple Nexus’ (Humanitarian-Development-Peace) programmes where aid organisations are involved in ‘Peace’-related activities involving civic participation and local democracy. Given the limits of humanitarian principles, fairness is emerging more and more in debates and reflections as a notion that could be the ‘modern guiding principle of humanitarian action’.

The advantage of this notion is that it allows new questions to be asked constantly and it can be used in new situations that bring new choices, whereas humanitarian principles are sometimes perceived as imposing certain ways of thinking and certain ways of taking action.

To what extent are humanitarian principles still useful for guiding the actions of aid organisations? What are their limits and in what situations can they be called into question? To what extent can other emerging notions such as fairness help to overcome the limits of these principles? What is the link between humanitarian principles, fairness and quality, and to what extent can these notions mutually reinforce each other?

AN INVITATION FROM GROUPE URD
Whether you work in academia, in a civil society organisation or in the aid sector, we invite you to come and share your thoughts and questions so that we can work together to redefine the notion of quality. Over two days, witness accounts from different countries and different sectors will show the variety of ways of understanding quality. We will use these concrete examples as the basis for discussion about the place that affected populations and national and local actors should have. The exchanges and discussions will provide food for thought for the revision of the Core Humanitarian Standard and there will be a collective exercise for this purpose.

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10 Derived from the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, humanitarian principles are based on international humanitarian law and have been endorsed by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991) and Resolution 58/114 adopted in 2004. For more information, here.
11 Christina Bennett, Matthew Foley, Sara Pantuliano, “Time to let go – Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era”, April 2016, ODI HPG, here.
12 In relation to the Ukraine war, Hugo Slim expects that some conventional actors, in the name of an ‘activist tradition of resistance humanitarianism’, will opt for ‘political solidarity’ with the Ukrainians and for actions that will forgo strict neutrality but will still meet the requirements of impartiality. Read more here.
TAKING A NEW LOOK AT ‘QUALITY’ IN TODAY’S CONTEXT OF STANDARDS AND RESTRICTIONS