Humanitarian technologies of trust

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Abstract
What is trust, and how is it established in humanitarian operations? Why do humanitarians consider trust a vital resource in their work? Building on the International Committee of the Red Cross' response to urban violence and the anthropological literature that conceives trust both as a modern social virtue and a technology of power, I examine the ways in which trust is enacted and practiced in humanitarian settings. While the organisation's legalistic logic has traditionally led to a conceptualisation of trust as the end result of a 'moral contract' rooted in the Geneva Conventions and operationalised through 'confidential dialogue' and face-to-face interactions, more recent concerns for accountability have surprisingly led to the establishment of technocratic procedures where trustworthiness is achieved through the emptying out of social relations.

Keywords: accountability, bureaucracy, conspiracy, humanitarian action, mistrust, power, technology, trust

'Trust in humanitarian action' was the top item on the agenda of the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross which took place in Geneva from 9 to 12 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 2019a). 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, notably Oxfam whose employees had been found guilty of sexual exploitation in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti (Gayle 2018), as well as Amnesty International, which was heavily criticised for its 'toxic work culture' in an audit report published in 2019 following the suicide of two of its employees (McVeigh 2019). But beyond these episodes which pushed the Red Cross 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

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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 an affective disposition than as a conscious operational strategy (Carey 2017: 20) for accessing populations in need. Because trust was generally seen as something that had to be earned and constantly regained, as an active process rather than a stable outcome, it required specific communication competencies that were intentionally cultivated among Red Cross employees.

In the rest of this article, I draw inspiration from Hugo Slim's distinction between operational trust, which he describes as interpersonal and intimate, and accountability trust, which derives from internal control mechanisms meant to ensure financial transparency and sanction bad behaviour (Slim 2019). I add 'mandate-based trust' to his typology because the ICRC's international mandate as 'guardian of the Geneva Conventions' is instrumental to its reputation as a trustworthy humanitarian actor. Access to populations in need, in many ICRC staffers' opinion, is primarily the outcome of a global consensus on the laws of war which entitles the ICRC to intervene on the frontlines of conflicts all over the world. Mandate-based trust is therefore the ideological foundation based on which operational trust can be achieved and therefore a powerful lever for accomplishing the humanitarian objective of protection. I conceive 'operational trust' as the outcome of various social technologies mobilised by Red Cross workers (confidential dialogue, proximity) so as to highlight the tactical efforts the organisation has to deploy in order to operationalise its obligations and responsibilities under international humanitarian law.

Since the 2000s, external pressures for 'evidence-based' programming have pushed humanitarian organisations to establish more collective and managerial forms of trust. While 'mandate-based' and 'operational trust' primarily rely on delegates' social skills, their command of international law and their capacity to translate its principles for various audiences, 'accountability trust' is generally accomplished through internal procedures meant to ensure financial transparency as well as beneficiaries' participation and responsibility for their own protection. Technologies mobilised to achieve 'operational trust' specifically target vulnerable populations and the various state and non-state actors that seek to assert their control over them whereas those of 'accountability trust' follow the corporate logic of transparency and the principle of affected communities' participation that is now commonly associated with 'good governance'. Because these have become globally accepted standards, overlooking them necessarily leads to reputational damage. The 33rd conference, which called for more transparency, reflected the growing salience of 'accountability trust' in the humanitarian sector as well as its underlying managerial rationality.

In this article, I examine how these three forms of trust are accomplished in urban contexts understood as violent. I chose these specific situations because there is no 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 conceptualisation of trust as the end result of a 'moral contract' rooted in the Geneva Conventions and operationalised 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).

Before engaging with different trust-building practices at the ICRC and their ongoing transformations, I sketch out the social contours of trust (or the lack of it) in humanitarian settings and their relation to coloniality, transparency and bureaucracy. Because international aid has been historically structured by unequal power relations (Fassin 2010)—between the Global North and the Global South and between aid providers and beneficiaries—and is intimately associated with nineteenth century 'civilising missions' and Eurocentrism (Barnett 2011; Forclaz 2015; Rodogno 2011), trust has come to represent for humanitarian workers an important resource whose value is proportional to its inherent illusiveness and scarcity. The humanitarian technologies of trust—in the Foucauldian sense of procedures for governing populations—described in this article have to be placed in this longer history of foreign interventions carried out in the name of 'humanity' and whose rationalisation techniques provide an appearance of neutrality while maintaining structural inequalities. Even though humanitarian organisations tend to be oblivious of such power asymmetries, they largely explain the difficulty to overcome mistrust in humanitarian zones of contact.

Trust, transparency, conspiracy

How to explain the doubts, anxieties and general scepticism that humanitarian operations trigger among beneficiary populations in spite of their explicit good intentions and claims of transparency? Why do aid programmes so often spark conspiracy theories in the local settings where they are deployed even if their explicit objective is to respond to urgent needs? I wrote these questions in my field diary when carrying out fieldwork in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2016, where I shadowed the activities of ICRC delegates in charge of addressing the humanitarian consequences of the conflict taking place in the Kivu region bordering Rwanda. These questions emerged as a result of several instances when local ICRC employees alerted me of the disquiet that our presence caused in the villages we visited. The organisation's international mandate

to monitor the conduct of hostilities in conflict zones is what endowed delegates with the responsibility to record breaches of International Law in this part of the country so as to feed its dialogue with men in arms with empirical evidence: a task called 'protection' in humanitarian parlance. Travelling in Kivu involved complex logistical arrangements because of the lack of infrastructures and a volatile security situation resulting from the presence of armed groups, the Congolese army and the MONUSCO (the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DR Congo). Reaching isolated villages implied the use of the ICRC air fleet as well as motorbikes, the pathways through the dense forests becoming almost impassable during the rainy season. The visible presence of these vehicles almost exclusively reserved to those in positions of power in a context where mobility was unequally distributed, elicited paranoid thoughts about white men coming to spy. The *Kimbirigiti* spirit—the protective spirit of the Lega tribe who speaks through village elders—I was told once, had complained about the *muzungu*'s (white men) planes coming to spy over the village. On another occasion, upon our arrival in a settlement of recently displaced persons, I was advised to hide my white motorbike helmet whose colour was apparently reminiscent of colonial headgears. The helmet was also believed to have the magic power of recording conversations even when *muzungu* were not around. Far from being irrational, such rumours represented 'the intimate terrain of personal experience' (White 2008) as well as a powerful social commentary about the privileges associated with whiteness. While stories of white men coming to spy were reminiscent of actual experiences of white colonists seeking to assert control over territories and populations through systematic information gathering and knowledge production, they simultaneously highlighted the intrinsic tenuousness of trust toward 'familiar strangers' (Bonhomme 2012) among the populations the ICRC was in charge of protecting.

Far from being exceptional, 'mistrust and suspicion—and the idioms, (conspiracy) theories and practices they generate—are fundamentally entangled with political economic histories and geographies of imperialism' (Biruk 2022). For example, Didier Fassin (2007), in his ethnography of the post-apartheid government's response to the AIDS epidemic in South Africa, establishes a link between African National Congress leaders' initial rejection of antiretroviral treatments and the long-term legacies of colonial public health and epidemics which justified racial segregation and fostered popular suspicion toward biomedical science. Drawing attention to conspiracy theories according to which the AIDS epidemic and its treatments were part of a plot to eradicate the black population, Fassin contends that paranoid social thought around AIDS in South Africa is deeply coloured by memories of the past which feed anxieties toward 'Western' modes of treatment on Africans. Fassin argues that South Africans' suspicion toward Western science and biomedicine should not be reduced to behaviourist or culturalist explanations but should rather be understood in light of embodied memories of racial segregation, political oppression and the collective experience of racist stereotypes about Africans' sexuality. His work raises a number of questions of great relevance for humanitarian action, notably with regard to relationships forged in humanitarian

encounters. Indeed, humanitarian organisations' concern about trust and considerable investment in trust-building is proportional to the distrust toward external interventions that is pervasive in the postcolony (West and Sanders 2003).

But such suspicious structures of feelings persist even in regimes of transparency that emerge in the exercise of neoliberal power (Marcus 1999). Indeed, the New Public Management culture that permeates contemporary humanitarian organisations, while seeking to rationalise operations through administrative and technocratic measures, frequently produces additional layers of opacity. According to Erica Caple James (2012), the aid apparatus frequently fosters perceptions of 'malevolent bureaucraft' because of its efforts to present interventions in technical terms and simplify complex conditions like 'poverty' or 'disease' (trauma, illness, gender-based violence). James coins the term 'bureaucraft' to capture the intersection between bureaucracy, witchcraft and other occult practices in Haiti in the years following the restoration of democracy in 1994 when assistance was provided to victims of human rights abuses. She shows how the bureaucratic trail produced by humanitarian organisations, instead of generating certainty about whom was worthy of relief and international attention, enhanced popular feelings of injustice and fed paranoid ways of thinking that took the form of slander and gossip. The limited and closely monitored resources allocated by humanitarian organisations together with enrolment processes which remained incompletely understood locally produced unfulfilled desires and rumours about the illicit accumulation of aid resources.

These examples demonstrate that transparency and conspiracy thrive simultaneously in humanitarian contexts and that as an 'ideoscape' (Appadurai 1996) that travels the globe, 'transparency' does not always achieve the objectives of good governance that it promises. As Harry West and Todd Sanders argue, 'in the globe's constituent localities, key words such as transparency, conveying notions of trust, openness, and fairness, must dance endlessly across the same terrain as vernacular key words expressing suspicion, hiddenness, and treachery' (2003: 23). Emergencies, disasters, and the precarious life conditions that justify relief operations are particularly prone to suspicion because needs are usually monumental in scale when the humanitarian response always remains minimalistic, partial and temporary. In such situations, the distribution of assistance relies on practices of prioritisation aimed at identifying 'the most vulnerable' so as to address their 'basic needs'. Selection, triage and enrolment processes therefore tend to perpetuate the prevailing economy of scarcity, reducing those targeted by aid to mere existence or 'bare life' (Agamben 1998) and their humanity to mere biological needs. Establishing trust in such circumstances is a particularly difficult task and the techniques employed to achieve this objective, far from being neutral, are tailored to convince others to relinquish control over their destiny. By agreeing to give up their citizens' rights and trust humanitarian organisations, aid beneficiaries are tutored to embrace new forms of subjectivity and social relations geared toward accessing aid resources and other benefits in the absence of a functioning state. In this form of 'humanitarian citizenship' (Cabot 2019) whereby rights are replaced by humanitarian logics and sentiments, trust can be conceived as a governing technology. While benefiting

from some degree of care and protection, the subjects of humanitarian assistance are simultaneously placed under the control of relief agencies which are in charge of servicing and managing them. In other words, claims to intervene on behalf of a universal humanity provide justification for the elaboration of new governing techniques (Feldman and Ticktin 2010).

In the rest of this article, I describe the methods used by the ICRC in order to obtain the trust that is necessary to deploy its operations and access 'populations in need'. I pay particular attention to violent urban contexts where its mandate is not directly applicable given the traditional orientation of international humanitarian law toward armed conflict.

Mandate-based trust and the 'urban problem'

As mentioned earlier, most Red Cross staff believe that the trustworthiness of the organisation automatically derives from the Geneva Conventions that explicitly position the ICRC as a first-line responder and accountability holder in conflicts zones. International law is therefore the main technology mobilised by delegates to assert the legitimacy of their presence in such contexts. An employee working at the headquarters in Geneva explained to me the centrality of legal arguments in the gradual expansion of the ICRC's mandate (translated from French by the author):

> 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.

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. Such a right means that the ICRC can make an offer of humanitarian services to state authorities who remain free to accept or reject them.

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. During the 25th International Conference of 1986, for instance, the statutes of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement were revised so as to reinforce the ICRC's statutory right of humanitarian initiative, giving the organisation the possibility to operate outside of armed conflicts.

A policy document drafted in preparation of the conference (ICRC 1988) offered a new conception of 'internal strife' which classified urban violence as one type of violence resulting from such situations. In describing the acts of violence against defenceless persons, the text highlighted the multi-faceted components of the harmful act, broadening the scope of potential perpetrators (individuals, armed insurgents or pro-government groups, security forces), victims (individual civilians or groups of civilians) and forms and effects (intimidation, harassment, terrorism). The document conceives the ICRC's role as one of a 'watchdog' in charge of monitoring the situation, hence reiterating the analogy with its role in armed conflicts. If interventions remained focused on prisoners, the document mentions additional activities; including actions aimed at mitigating the humanitarian consequences of arbitrary practices; confronting acts of violence directed against defenceless persons; fighting against forced disappearances; and providing material assistance to affected populations (ICRC 1988: 20–25).

To justify its involvement in contexts marked by urban violence, the ICRC therefore draws an analogy between 'other situations of violence' (OSV) 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, an activity for which it enjoys a unique reputation and expertise.

For example, the decision to establish a programme devoted to the problem of violence in the poor *barrios* of the Maguadoran city of San Sombrero[1] was triggered by the forced displacement of rural populations fleeing the conflict between the guerrilla, the military and paramilitary groups. This massive influx of people caused important tensions in neighbourhoods that already suffered from unemployment, poverty, poor housing conditions and a general lack of public infrastructures. In 2009, it was estimated that at least 6.6 per cent of the population of San Sombrero had been forcibly displaced. For the ICRC, the violence so pervasive in the *barrios* of San Sombrero was a direct consequence of the armed conflict taking place in the countryside. Furthermore, the victims of urban violence presented the same sociological profile as the victims of the armed conflict: they came from the most socio-economically marginalised sectors of the nation-state—the rural poor, with a high proportion of them belonging to Indigenous and Black communities. Finally, one armed group responsible for the violence taking place in the *barrios* was a paramilitary group also involved in the armed conflict. No strong justification could be found not to come to the support of victims. If the ICRC was mandated to intervene on the frontlines of the armed conflict, the frontlines of the drug war that was raging in Maguadora presented forms of violence that were too similar to the ones it was accustomed to handle elsewhere.

At the policy level, in the 1990s and 2000s, as urban violence programmes (UV programmes) started to be put in place in various cities around the world, a number of strategic re-alignments occurred, 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, sexual violence survivors, displaced persons and families of minors in detention.

These doctrinal developments highlight the centrality of legal interpretations and international diplomatic negotiations in the broadening of categories of 'victims' deserving 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 OSV beyond the narrow scope of prisons' visits. This legalistic rationality informs the way the organisation originally conceived trust as the end result of a contract enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and honoured through confidential dialogue and face-to-face interactions with weapon bearers and victims. References to the law effectively served to maintain states' trust in the organisation while placing them in the position of privileged operational partners. Because the ICRC generally seeks to avoid substituting for state services, the model it aims to promote when implementing such programmes is based on collaboration. While state officials maintained a cautious distance with the ICRC in San Sombrero's *comunas* and refused to be directly involved in violence prevention—by contrast to other countries where civil servants were the primary beneficiaries and implementing partners of UV programmes (Silva Rocha Lima 2022)—the Maguadoran State's acceptance of ICRC operations for victims of the armed conflict made it difficult to outwardly reject its intervention in the city. Its mandate was therefore instrumental in obtaining authorities' tacit authorisation for the programme. In spite of this absence of collaboration, the ICRC remained concerned with offering a limited humanitarian response to urban violence not geared toward addressing its root causes but rather meant to mitigate its consequences through targeted interventions.

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 designed to address violence in cities somewhat mirror those the organisation is accustomed to carry out in situations of armed conflicts. In Manguadora, for example, where the ICRC has been present since 2010, the UV programme is not designed to address the root causes of violence but to turn violence into a manageable risk. In other words, its 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 in the belief that protection of vulnerable populations can be achieved if men in arms are sensitised to international norms related to the use of force. Confi-

dential dialogue is a form of diplomatic activity which consists in raising awareness among warring parties of the humanitarian consequences of armed violence.

The achievement of operational trust primarily relies on the central figure of the delegate who acts both as an 'accountability holder', responsible for verifying compliance with international standards related to the use of force, and 'accountability giver' in charge of providing relief to affected populations. Although a delegate's authority is tightly linked to the ICRC's international mandate as discussed in the previous section of this article, acceptance is never a given and has to be carefully worked out in practice. To be considered a trustworthy 'neutral intermediary' necessitates continuous efforts of impression management and the projection of a certain image of familiarity (Luhmann 2018: 18–24). This reputational concern leads delegates to try and be predictable when discussing with their interlocutors, i.e. to be identifiable as representatives of the organisation through their discourses, demeanour and attitude. During my fieldwork, I was often impressed by the ritualistic dimension of delegates' dialogue with authorities, by their efforts to act according to an assigned script and to follow a certain protocol and etiquette. By contrast to the other humanitarian workers such as those of MSF or Doctors of the World I came across, whom I could easily recognise through their frequently slovenly look, ICRC delegates took great care of their appearance, particularly before a meeting with a military officer, a prison director or the chief of an armed group. Even in situations where sanitary infrastructures were seriously lacking, ICRC delegates strived to project an image of expertise and professionalism.

Internal publications discussing the figure of the delegate insist on the moral incorruptibility that a delegate should embody. In an article of *Revue Internationale de le Croix Rouge* published in French in 1975, Pierre Boissier, a Swiss lawyer, member of the ICRC and director of the Henry Dunant Institute, describes the delegate as 'a negotiator and a man [*sic*] of action', an 'exceptional human being' endowed with the 'dynamism of the youth and the prudence of maturity' (1975: 514), able to take quick decisions, while being careful not to rush; independent and yet capable of following orders. The long list of personal competencies Boissier presents, which seem to contradict each other at times and are conceived as inherently masculine, echoes the *Manual of the Delegate* published a few years earlier, which provides detailed guidance on how a delegate should present himself to the outside world: 'If a delegate needs to know how to wear a tie [*sic*], he should also know how to roll up his sleeves' (CICR 1972). Boissier further insists that the title of the delegate, in spite of its honorific connotation, should not be conflated with diplomatic work: 'The delegate conducts negotiations with governmental and military authorities. Yet, these undertakings have little to do with diplomacy. If tact is necessary to deal with Ministers and commanders in chief, *the ultimate goal is human beings and not political interests*' (Boissier 1975: 514, emphasis added, translated from the French by the author).

The delegate is therefore conceived as an outstanding humanitarian actor whose professional efficacy depends on his moral integrity and his capacity to remain neutral: 'He must be tactful and show that he places his action above all

political contingencies', the 1972 *Manual of the Delegate* maintains (CICR 1972: 165). According to Peter Redfield (2011), the ICRC masters 'the political art of abstaining' and distinguishes itself from other humanitarian organisations through its orthodox approach to neutrality. While an organisation like Doctors Without Borders (MSF) puts emphasis on moral authenticity and is primarily committed to reducing suffering, the ICRC is particularly attentive to preserve its reputation as an impartial actor and practices a 'disciplined refusal of involvement beyond its core mission' (Redfield 2011: 60). This approach derives from many warriors' traditions of honourable behaviour which associate 'humanity' with the capacity to exercise restraint in the use of force.

The rhetoric of 'purity', of 'exceptional human beings' that prevails in official narratives of the delegate highlights a habitus consciously cultivated within the organisation. This habitus is characterised by a repertoire of comportments and meanings that come to adhere to individuals as they are socialised to enact accountability (Carr 2010) through trainings and everyday coaching by their more experienced peers. Conformism is generally seen as an important personal skill to develop prior to being officially deployed in a specific location. One can detect in such representations the deployment of an implicit 'racial vernacular' (Pierre 2020) which inscribes notions of whiteness as the discursive scaffolding of the relationship between delegates and their interlocutors from the 'global south'. Whiteness is not meant here to describe a skin colour but rather a symbolic value derived from the legacy of the 'civilising mission' which positions whiteness (and maleness) as unmarked, unremarkable or as the norm and therefore as standing for 'humanity'. As Jemima Pierre argues, the vocabulary of 'exception' used by international development and humanitarian organisations serves to construct and maintain 'whiteness and the West as symbols of authority, expertise and knowledge' (Pierre 2020: 88) while relegating the 'rest' to its inherent lack.

But let's now return to San Sombrero and examine how delegates sought to build trust with their beneficiaries. From 2010 to 2015, the ICRC worked in close collaboration with Maguadoran Red Cross volunteers in six 'priority zones', that is, 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, notably health and education. Taking inspiration from a similar programme implemented in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the programme 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 emergency preparedness training and violence prevention education in schools and 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 and sensitisation 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. This tactic was delicate and time consuming as some interlocutors were sometimes murdered during settlings of accounts between competing gangs, rendering established relationships always shaky, evanescent and fragile. To add to this social complexity, delegates were confronted to the 'law of silence' that dominated in *barrios* where victims often lived in close proximity to their aggressors. Families were therefore reluctant to discuss their problems with ICRC delegates and naturalised violence so as to survive in a context of generalised precarity.

Delegates' patience and temerity were constantly tested as *combos* sought to evaluate their trustworthiness. '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 programme in San Sombrero told me. Time spent socialising in the *barrios* made her realise the central importance of 'mothers' as authority figures in communities. She understood that better sensitisation outcomes could be expected when female delegates spoke with gangs' members because women could speak as 'mothers' or 'sisters' and hit a sensitive chord among men who attached, in spite of their involvement in violent illegal actions, great importance to the family.

Links of trust and proximity carefully established over time enabled delegates to discuss certain rules with *combos* coordinators who had the power and authority to enforce them on the territories under their control. Through regular interactions, delegates managed to negotiate a number of principles, such as making sure that drug dealing did not take place close to schools or avoiding exchange of gunshots at the end of the school day when children returned home. Delegates encouraged gang members to consider the international humanitarian law principle of distinction according to which certain people (unarmed civilians) and objects (churches, hospitals, schools, parks) enjoy protection because of their civilian status. While sensitising them to the importance of respecting a 'humanitarian space' within their neighbourhoods, they also occasionally intervened higher up in *combos*' hierarchy to alert top chiefs of some coordinators' abusive behaviours. *Combos*' leaders eventually accepted to adopt a 'zero minor killed' policy and to transfer or punish coordinators who terrified populations under their responsibility.

To engage with an international organisation like the ICRC was also a means for *combos* to improve their reputation and credibility in the *barrios* where their

emergence had been initially triggered by the absence of public services, violent policing and state repression and as a reaction to economic and social exclusion. While until the 1990s militias were seen as legitimate authorities in their communities, some had begun to abuse their power as regulators of social action and were attracted to the 'easy money' of narco-trafficking, leading to the increasing blurring of the militia/criminal dichotomy in the city. Showing trust in the ICRC by accepting to receive its guidance challenged dominant representations of *bandas* as primarily concerned with wealth accumulation and criminal activities. By restraining their use of force, *bandas* simultaneously demonstrated their ability to exercise a 'localised form of sovereign power' (Rodgers and Baird 2015).

But dialogue with armed groups was not the only means to achieve the objective of protection. 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 contributed to this goal to some extent) 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 programme, the ICRC struggled to find a renewed position of relevance in the *barrios* of 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 programme.

To deal with these new dynamics and institutional constraints, 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. The thematic approach consisted in supporting community-based initiatives established to address these specific problems as well as the risk management trainings ran by the Maguadoran Red Cross. If this method was partially justified by long periods of relative calm—'calm' being equated with absence of homicides—in some *barrios*, it simultaneously made the ICRC lose essential contacts with gangs as well as its operational anchorage in communities. It also demonstrated the organisation's primary focus on visible and direct forms of violence and its limited concern for more structural and systemic forms such as repression and deprival of basic human needs and rights.

Because generating 'evidence' for reporting purposes became an institutional priority, delegates had to focus their attention on information collection and entry instead of activities of a more social nature. Demands for quantitative data that could be easily used for comparison and impact measurement meant that the kind of qualitative knowledge that delegates were able to generate during the first phase of the project was no longer considered as useful. Ironically, accountability was ensured through an accounting mode of thinking deemed to offer a more objective and solid representation of reality through the use of numbers. 'Accountability trust' functioned as a rationalising machine whose purpose was to ensure continuous reporting based on up-to-date data.

Meanwhile, the increased distance between delegates and 'victims' (such as sexual violence survivors or families of the disappeared) deeply transformed their relationship. ICRC delegates were no longer able to devote time to socialising in the communities they served and their ability to nurture trusting relationships decreased as a result. As for victims, by contrast to the first period of the UV programme when delegates were regularly present in the *barrios,* they now had to travel to the ICRC office in the city centre to receive support. There, they were treated as clients and were confronted to 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. While this depersonalised approach ensured a more effective centralisation of information—an institutional requirement made more urgent by donors' pressure to prove programmes' efficiency—the intimate knowledge of individuals and families that delegates were able to develop through everyday exchanges with *barrios* inhabitants was not seen as relevant anymore. Demands for 'evidence-based' humanitarian action required a more systematic method of data management and contributed to an inflation of administrative tasks in protection teams' ordinary work. The intensive labour involved in maintaining the database up to date so as to be able to derive trends and statistics used for reporting to the headquarters and ultimately to donors was symptomatic of the bureaucratisation of delegates' profession (Billaud and Cowan 2020). 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 humanitarian action where 'humanity' was measured according to quantifiable benchmarks. From frontline mediators in charge of discussing humanitarian principles with weapon bearers, delegates were gradually turned into portfolio managers responsible for recording and following-up cases of abuses and overseeing the activities subcontracted to its local partners.

Indeed, in the *comunas* where the presence of the ICRC became more periodic, the day-to-day enactment of risk management happened mostly in the absence of humanitarian workers as communities were made responsible for their own security through resilience-building activities. The idiom of 'resilience', which became more prevalent in the aid sector in the 2010s, marks a shift away from needs-based to resilience-based humanitarian action (Scott-Smith 2018). According to this

new framework, humanitarian organisations should enable people to bounce back from shocks and stresses. Fundamentally pessimistic, the idiom of resilience marks a retreat from the older ideals of perfect knowledge and modernist control and assumes that the social determinants of vulnerabilities are unavoidable. It simultaneously transfers responsibility for protection onto individuals who are counselled to be constantly vigilant against possible threats.

This mode of thinking is reflected in ICRC policies pertaining to 'accountability toward affected populations' whereby affected people are no longer considered as mere beneficiaries or victims, but also as 'agents in their own protection' (ICRC 2016). To meet this new requirement, the Maguadoran Red Cross, with the ICRC acting as an adviser, was given the task to empower the youth in schools and detention centres to find alternatives to violence using a methodology internally called *la metodologia*. Self-protection programmes ran in the *barrios* consisted in risk education awareness as well as technical support to community-based self-organisation and social cohesion initiatives. As explained in a public communication, the purpose of the programme 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 team work; (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 programme 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 first place. 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 operationalised through 'self-help' programmes whereby *barrios* inhabitants were trained in the art of 'self-protection' and violence was turned into an object of management (Silva Rocha Lima 2022).

In a situation where violence had become a chronic problem, the ICRC's intervention remained minimalist not only in the biopolitical sense of 'preserving life at its threshold' but in the sense of 'preserving it at a distance' (Silva Rocha Lima 2022: 291). 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. In such circumstances, humanitari-

anism no longer consisted in bringing emergency relief to alleviate the suffering of populations but was transformed into a neoliberal management technology for containing violence and making it an acceptable and unavoidable condition.

Conclusion

I have examined mandate-based, operational and accountability trust one after the other in this article, giving the impression that they succeeded each other in a neat chronological order. But in reality, these three technologies of trust, far from being mutually exclusive, are rather complementary and used strategically by ICRC employees depending on circumstances and interlocutors. Yet, the bureaucratisation processes triggered by the growing importance of accountability trust have 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 rationalisation 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.

More generally, the example of the UV programme run by the ICRC in San Sombrero highlights the 'institutionalization of trust' which started to occur at the turn of the century (Corsín Jiménez 2005) and which continues to manifest itself through the pervasive discourse of transparency (Strathern 2000a) and practices of audit (Strathern 2000b). The institutional framework of 'community-based protection' established so as to meet the requirements of 'accountability toward affected populations' (ICRC 2019b), while making populations responsible for their own security through risk management and other capacity building activities, simultaneously enabled the ICRC to devote more resources to the establishment and consolidation of its 'information infrastructure'. This reinforced capacity to produce evidence of programmes' efficiency simultaneously strengthened the organisation's compliance with the corporate imperative of immediately available data abstracted from their original context (Corsín Jiménez 2011: 181). The paradigm of 'resilience' that guides community-based protection activities in the *barrios* of San Sombrero is grounded in the idea that affected populations should be self-confident and trust their capacity to overcome their condition, simultaneously rendering obsolete the problem of trust between the ICRC and its beneficiaries and turning humanitarianism into a management technique consisting in technocratic oversight.

In his essay on *Mistrust*, Mathew Carey argues that 'in an increasingly disembodied and dislocated world, in which traditional forms of social control no longer apply and risk is the order of the day, trust becomes *the* central social technology' (2017: 22). He goes on to explain that trust becomes a pressing need in complex modern societies where individuals are free to choose with whom to associate, by contrast to small-scale 'traditional' societies where trust can be

taken for granted and is therefore unnecessary. The technologies described in this article, which seek to make trust tangible through various bureaucratic procedures, can help us push Carey's argument further by showing how power and inequalities always lurk behind organisational concerns about trust. As Cal Biruk also demonstrates in her examination of the assumptions guiding the establishment of bureaucratic infrastructures in global health (this issue and see also Biruk 2022), trust becomes an issue to be handled especially in postcolonial situations that bear the traces of racial hierarchies and labour exploitation. The turn to 'resilience' in humanitarian action should therefore be seen not only as a social technology as Carey suggests but also as a governing technology whose aim is to bypass mistrust, not through coercive means but through the normalisation of the neoliberal model of the self-disciplined subject responsible for her own destiny.

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Note

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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