

The Illusion of Neutrality: An Analysis of l'Armée du Salut in France

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For those who come to the Armée du Salut each morning - those I had the privilege of meeting, and all of the others.

For Gilbert.

Abstract

In France, precarity is deepening, affecting an increasingly diverse population, from undocumented migrants to seniors. In this context, the humanitarian associative sector has expanded considerably, with an increasing number of associations, and a diversification of actions. The academic literature is under a stark debate on whether humanitarian aid should be political, and question the neutral stance that most of them adopt. Yet, practical applications of this topic, especially at the street-level, are lacking. This project aims at investigating the implications of neutrality in humanitarian organizations, in the politicized context of precarity. It does so by focusing on one specific organization, l'Armée du Salut, and one of its specific sites, Ramponeau. Specifically, it asks: *How do food distribution sites reveal the contradictions inherent to institutional neutrality within the context of precarity in humanitarian aid in France?*

While the academic literature has extensively theorized neutrality as a foundational principle of humanitarian action, it has largely underexplored the conditions in which this neutrality is produced, performed, and contested, especially through daily operational decisions and interactions. This research aims to address this gap by focusing on one case study to investigate neutrality as an empirical object, at the street level of a food distribution site. To do so, it employs qualitative interpretative research methods combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews analyzed through thematic and discourse analysis, and primary document analysis. This research demonstrates that institutional neutrality at Ramponeau is a doubly performed posture: maintained as a survival strategy, and as a public façade.

Keywords: Neutrality, precarity, political, migration, humanitarian aid, blurred line, agency, food aid, volunteers, beneficiaries.

“While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight; while there is a drunkard left, while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight-I'll fight to the very end!”

General William Booth, Pastor and Co-Founder of the
Salvation Army, 1912.

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List of Participants

All names used in this research are pseudonyms, assigned to protect the anonymity of my participants.¹

Pseudonym	Role Within the Armée du Salut
Victoria	Ramponeau Coordinator.
Paul	Operations Manager.
Jeanne	Volunteer.
David	Volunteer.
Chloe	Volunteer.
Désiré	Recipient.
Martin	Recipient.

¹ See Section 4.3: Ethics and Reflexivity.

1. Introduction

In France, in the 1970s, humanitarian organizations such as Secours Populaire shifted toward an “apolitical solidarity,” a turn that has been defining much of the French associative sector since then.² Indeed, coming from the influence of Swiss political ideology built in the 19th century, the neutral humanitarian model has grown to become the dominant international norm.³ Decades later, the question of whether humanitarianism and politics can truly be separated remains unresolved. As Didier Fassin - renowned anthropologist and sociologist - put it, our society is characterized by the assumed “separation between humanitarianism and politics.”⁴ However, this separation seems hard to maintain in practice, particularly in the context of food distribution. In the country, the provision of food aid to individuals in need is well developed, but embedded in a highly contested political environment where humanitarian imperatives are continuously challenged.⁵ This is true especially since social NGOs providing food aid have expanded and increasingly mobilized in notably supporting refugees, minors, and seniors, although continuing to claim a neutral stance.⁶ It is from this very contradiction between the politicization of social aid in the face of precarity, and the discourse of political neutrality, that this research stems from.

The definition of neutrality is often contested, notably as it is rarely defined by organizations which themselves invoke it.⁷ In the context of this research, neutrality refers to a negative form of politics, the deliberate refusal to engage with political and militant positions regarding the highly politicized context in which NGOs navigate, particularly precarity,

² Brodiez, cited by Hanrieder in “Domestic Humanitarianism,” 137.

³ Slim, “You Don’t Have to be Neutral.”

⁴ Fassin, “Compassion and Repression,” 367.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 362-268.

⁷ Redfield, *Problem of Neutrality*.

migration, and policies.⁸ Precarity, here, is a crucial concept that can be understood as a politically induced and unequally distributed condition of vulnerability, as defined by Judith Butler.⁹

This research aims to investigate the specific role of food aid as a lens through which to examine the profound gaps that exist within food distribution sites between institutional discourse and local realities, under the condition of precarity. It will do so through a case study of the Armée du Salut - or Salvation Army - (AdS), an association founded in 1865 by two British anglicans who established it in France in 1881.¹⁰ The AdS characterizes itself as “politically neutral,” as laid out in a position statement.¹¹ More specifically, this research will focus on one of its food distribution sites located in the 20th arrondissement: Ramponeau.¹² This location is all the more important as it provides aid in a large majority to young West African migrants, a group often caught in bureaucratic processes regarding age assessment and legal status as unaccompanied minors.¹³ Thus, the AdS’s food distributions find themselves in an ambiguous zone between being apolitical acts of charity and simultaneously deeply embedded in a highly politicized field. This research will use local humanitarian practice as a scale of analysis for understanding the broader governance of migration in France and in Europe. Building on my direct volunteer experience with the AdS in Paris, this research will ask: *how do food distribution sites reveal the contradictions inherent to institutional neutrality within the context of precarity in humanitarian aid in France?* The Armée du Salut and their Ramponeau site in Paris serve as the primary case through which I explore this question empirically.

⁸ Radice, “Humanitarianism as a civic practice,” 156.

⁹ Butler, “Precarity and Sexual Politics,” ii.

¹⁰ Armée du Salut, “Qui Sommes-Nous?”

¹¹ Armée du Salut, “Prise de Position.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ FADS, *Rapport d’Activité*, 18.

Following this introductory section, the next chapter presents a background of the political situation of France. The third chapter assesses the academic literature that has been published on the subject. Then, the fourth chapter outlines the methodological framework used. Thereafter, the analysis is divided in four sections: it examines the distribution site as a complex social space, interrogates how neutrality is performed from within, before revealing how neutrality conceals shared precarity, and ultimately how it functions as a facade. This research ends with a discussion, and a conclusion detailing broader implications and future avenues for research.

2. Political background

This section outlines the French political context in which the Armée du Salut operates, especially regarding immigration and poverty. It provides the necessary background for the subsequent empirical analysis, by framing the AdS's operations within a shifting political landscape. Today's France is characterized by deepening ideological divisions: as of 2025, the country ranks eighth in Europe on the political polarization index.¹⁴ This discord has crystallized primarily on the intersecting issues of immigration, secularism - particularly vis-à-vis Islam, and France's position in the EU.¹⁵ Moreover, France's deepening political polarization is inseparable from the fact that it faces a broad context of material precarity. Indeed, as of 2025, 16% of the French population is considered food insecure.¹⁶ In 2023, INSEE revealed that the poverty rate is the worst the country has known since 1996, as it rose to 15.4%.¹⁷ Amongst people living below the poverty line, 300,000 of them are homeless,

¹⁴ Our World in Data, "Political Polarization Score".

¹⁵ Li, "Populism and Political Polarization", 171-174.

¹⁶ DILA, "Précarité Alimentaire."

¹⁷ INSEE, "L'Essentiel sur... la Pauvreté."

including 100,000 relying on emergency housing system.¹⁸ It is within this context of widespread precarity that the question of foreign migration must be situated.

Historically a land of immigration, particularly in the post-war decades, France now counts immigrants as approximately 11% of its population, thus around 2.9% more than in 2010; yet, the political and legislative framework governing their presence has evolved to be stricter over recent years.¹⁹ This is due to what became known as the 2015 European “migrant crisis,” which refers to the period during which Europe faced a significant increase in migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, driven largely by instability and conflict in the Middle East.²⁰ While France was initially prone to welcoming migrants, the situation quickly got more complex.²¹ Living conditions in makeshift camps, the biggest one being Calais, were severely precarious, raising serious human rights concerns, while the growing visibility of migrant populations fuelled a rise of xenophobic sentiment and political polarization.²² In Paris, undocumented migrants concentrated primarily in the northeastern arrondissements (see Fig.1), where they faced a dual reality: receiving support from local NGOs while being subjected to repeated and often forceful police interventions and evictions.²³ The 2019 resurgence of undocumented migrants was met with intensified enforcement.²⁴ Defending a camp clearance at Place de la République, Minister of Interior Gerald Darmanin labeled the violent intervention as “completely legitimate” because the occupants were “mostly without papers.”²⁵ This rhetoric illustrates a governmental framing that sometimes uses the irregular administrative status as a justification for suspending humanitarian protection.

¹⁸ Observatoire des Inégalités, “Personnes à la Rue”; Pascual, “Les Sans-Domicile.”

¹⁹ INSEE, “Immigrés et Descendants d’Immigrés.”

²⁰ Goldmeier, “European migrant crisis.”

²¹ Goldmeier, “European migrant crisis”; Gattinara and Zamponi, “Politicizing Support,” 630.

²² Gattinara and Zamponi, “Politicizing Support,” 630.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Byrne, “Displacement Migrants and Refugees,” 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

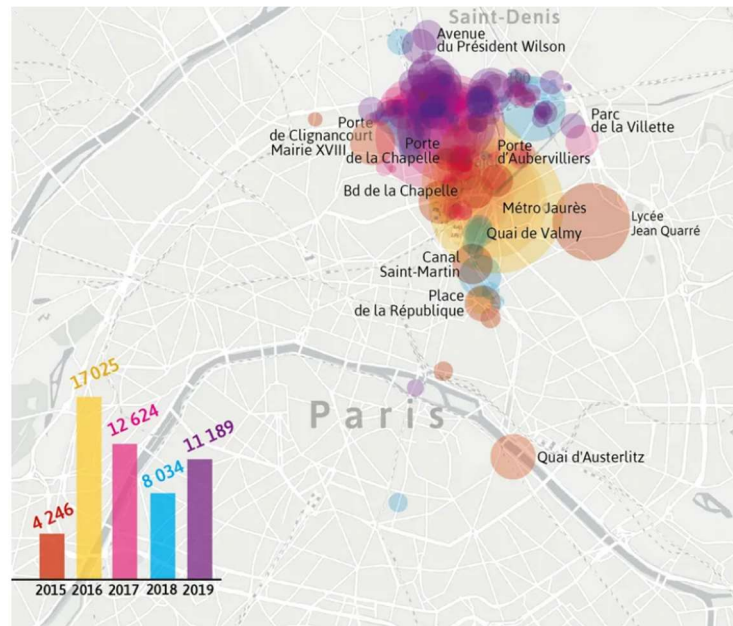


Figure 1 Map of makeshift camps in Paris between 2015 and 2019. Source: France Culture report, Paris Town Hall.

The presidency of Emmanuel Macron (2017 - present) has codified this stance. The 2018 immigration law (*loi pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d’asile effectif et une intégration réussie*), which reduced asylum assessment time, and increased detention limit, is considered as one of the toughest legislation since right-wing led governments of Sarkozy or Pasqua.²⁶ Moreover, the 2024 immigration law passed during his second term further tightened this framework.²⁷ The law notably enacted new provisions concerning unaccompanied minors (MNAs), including the creation of a database registering MNAs suspected of offences, and the removal of state’s care obligation toward young people under expulsion order.²⁸ However, France’s action is less coherent and harsh than its rhetoric suggests: while 140,000 expulsion orders were delivered in 2025 alone, the French Court of Accounts revealed that only 12% of them are usually executed.²⁹ It also highlighted the fact that undocumented migrants account

²⁶ Byrne, “Displacement of Migrants and Refugees,” 11.

²⁷ DILA, “Immigration Act.”

²⁸ DILA, “Immigration Act”; France Terre d’Asile, *Loi Asile et Immigration*, 19.

²⁹ Cour des comptes, *Immigration Irrégulière*, 98.

for 40 to 60% of the people using the state-run emergency housing system.³⁰ Thus, France's reality in practice seem complex and contradictory: it administratively marginalizes individuals while maintaining to provide material aid to them.

As this population is the one that Ramponeau serves, the AdS is operating in a highly politicized space where the State simultaneously rejects administratively and sustains the same population. It is within this paradox that the AdS is claiming neutrality, which is worth examining. Understanding this tension requires assessing how scholars have theorized the relationship between humanitarian aid and political neutrality.

3. Literature Review

This literature review will focus on three interconnected bodies of scholarship: the academic debate around institutional neutrality as a norm in humanitarian action, the politics of neutrality, and street-level humanitarian aid.

3.1 Institutional Neutrality as a Norm

The principle of neutrality has been treated in the academic literature as a cornerstone of humanitarianism and humanitarian aid. For instance, Jean Pictet of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) identified seven core principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.³¹ His identification has been used across academic literature since 1965.³² This posits neutrality as a foundational basis of the work of humanitarianism. Slim (2020) details the historical institutionalization of neutrality, revealing that it was not an initial humanitarian value but rather a political and cultural

³⁰ Ibid., 122.

³¹ Pictet, cited by Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism," 3.

³² Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism," 3.

inheritance from Swiss internationalism.³³ Other scholars, such as Barnett and Weiss (2008), challenge this normative construction directly, arguing that the apolitical claim of humanitarian organizations is a “convenient fiction” that can be only sustained through rhetoric and discursive work.³⁴ Anderson (2004) adds a further dimension to the critique, arguing that humanitarian neutrality is best understood as a “justified suspension of moral judgement,” only defensible within the narrow field of immediate crisis relief, but which becomes more complex once an organization’s activity extends.³⁵ Both contributions are essential to understand how neutrality is framed in humanitarian contexts; yet, they are only structured around international humanitarian operations, especially in Iraq, and Afghanistan.³⁶ Their frameworks have been developed almost exclusively through the lens of international conflict-zone operations, leaving domestic and street-level organizations outside of the frame of reference. A parallel body of scholarship explored the political dimensions of neutrality.

3.2 The Politics of Neutrality

Academic literature has extensively written on the topic of the politics of humanitarian aid, taking neutrality as a default organizational position. For instance, some examine the widespread assumption that all aid is inherently politicized. Building on the work of Gattinara and Zamponi (2020), a strong current in the literature posits that social actions serve, at its core, a “double function”: material relief and political contestation.³⁷ In the French context specifically, Fassin (2005) demonstrates that this politicization operates through a moral economy in which humanitarian compassion systematically displaces political recognition of human rights.³⁸ Yet, those assumptions are undertested in contexts of institutionalized, and

³³ Slim, “You Don’t Have to be Neutral.”

³⁴ Barnett and Weiss, “Humanitarianism,” 38.

³⁵ Anderson, “Humanitarian Inviolability in Crisis,” 71.

³⁶ Barnett and Weiss, “Humanitarianism”, and Anderson, “Humanitarian Inviolability in Crisis.”

³⁷ Gattinara and Zamponi, “Politicizing Support and Opposition.”

³⁸ Fassin, “Compassion and Repression,” 376.

service-provision NGOs with an apparent political neutrality, like the Armée du Salut. Unpacking this therefore entails examining the paradox whereby organizations present themselves as apolitical actors, although service provision inevitably positions them within political struggles over immigration and material precarity.

Furthermore, scholars like Barnett (2011) or Rubenstein (2015) have theorized the politics of neutrality in aid, but their frameworks have not been applied to traditional charitable organizations working at the street level.³⁹ This presents a core tension: the assumption that politicization is an inherent or automatic outcome. The literature has not sufficiently explored whether this neutrality is instead a variable outcome, a strategic choice that organizations may actively manage, mute or defer. Redfield (2011) moves closest to this reflection, arguing that neutrality can be identified as a strategy, to some extent.⁴⁰ He explains that the danger of speaking out is to restrain individuals' access to help, while the danger of too much neutrality is instead to reproduce structural injustices that humanitarian action aims to address.⁴¹ Yet, Redfield's framework was developed specifically for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), an organization which actively negotiates the boundary between political engagement and silence.⁴² It does not account for entities which do not negotiate this dilemma but instead for which neutrality is an unquestioned organizational given. Slim (2020) extends Redfield's critique further, arguing that neutrality is neither ethically nor legally required, but rather a historically contingent choice that organizations may or may not decide to adopt.⁴³ Both arguments leave under-examined why certain domestic NGOs maintain neutrality as a default position.

³⁹ Barnett, "Empire of Humanity" and Rubenstein, "Between Samaritans and States."

⁴⁰ Redfield, "Problem of Neutrality," 34-35.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Slim, "You Don't Have to be Neutral."

3.3 Street-level Humanitarianism and the Politics of Everyday Aid

Finally, a further overlooked dimension of this debate concerns the politics of nearby suffering. As Fassin (2019) observes, most fieldwork studies concentrate on the “the politics of distant tragedies” such as wars, rather than on the “poor” and “immigrants” in domestic contexts.⁴⁴ Moreover, in these contexts, food aid is usually mentioned as a background condition in migrant studies, especially emergency food distribution, remaining an empirical oversight. Yet, food is the most immediate, visceral, and non-negotiable need, appearing initially as apolitical. Poppendieck (1998) explored the political paradoxes of charitable food provision by demonstrating that the act of feeding individuals in need could simultaneously be framed as apolitical and serve as a stark indictment of systemic policy failures.⁴⁵ While her critical framework is highly relevant, it is North American and has not been applied to the European migration context, especially post-2015.⁴⁶

Karakayli (2018) serves as a partial bridge, by offering a post-2015 European empirical anchor, in which he explains how German society was marked by a transformation of refugee support from a radical, and explicitly political solidarity movement into a broad volunteering phenomenon that presents itself as apolitical and humanitarian.⁴⁷ He further claims that when organizations embrace an apolitical framing, it hinders them from becoming a political force.⁴⁸ Radice (2022) suggests a counterpoint at the level of agency. Indeed, by introducing the concept of humanitarian activist, he argues that humanitarian action constitutes an inherently political practice even when it presents otherwise, notably through it exists in civic agency.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Fassin, “Humanitarian Reason,” 11.

⁴⁵ Poppendieck, *Emergency Food*.

⁴⁶ Poppendieck, *Emergency Food*; Goldmeier, “European migrant crisis.”

⁴⁷ Karakayli, “The Welcomers”, 208-223.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 223.

⁴⁹ Radice, “Humanitarianism as a civic practice”, 147-157.

Neither, however, addresses the topic of food aid directly, where this tension plays out in a banal form.

This points to a significant gap in the literature: the connection between these macro-level political dynamics and the micro-sociological and mundane practices of day-to-day food service remains largely unmade. Scholarship still overlooks how ordinary routine practices of food aid: the line, the tickets, the stock management, function as spaces where abstract legal categories such as “unaccompanied minor” are translated into practice.⁵⁰ It is precisely at this level that the relationship between institutional neutrality and precarity - both material and legal - becomes the most interesting, which is a level that existing literature has yet to examine more deeply. Michael Lipsky’s theory of “Street-Level Bureaucracy” is also essential in this context, as it can be used to decode the daily practices and decisions of AdS employees.⁵¹ He indeed argues that public policies are not only made by lawmakers and government officials, but also and very effectively by frontline workers in everyday practice.⁵² Additionally, the concept of precarity, especially Butler’s (2009), understood as politically produced, has not been linked to these micro-practices of distribution and remain absent from scholarship on humanitarian NGOs.⁵³ This research aims at addressing this gap by treating a single food distribution site in Paris as the revealing frontline of power dynamics.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This qualitative interpretative research employs a mixed-methods approach. Indeed, it combines participant observation, semi-structured interviews analyzed through thematic and

⁵⁰ Ministère de la Justice, “Mineurs Non-Accompagnés.”

⁵¹ Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Butler, “Precarity and Sexual Politics,” ii.

discourse analysis, and primary document analysis. The main method is semi-structured interviews, for which target groups were the following: 2 members of AdS staff coordination management, 3 long-term volunteers at AdS food distribution points, and 3 long-term beneficiaries of AdS's food aid. The participants were selected using a purposeful sampling method, drawing from the network I created since I have been a volunteer in the AdS.⁵⁴ The interviews were conducted between February and March 2026, two online and the rest at Ramponeau. The focus was to understand institutional challenges, perceptions of politicization, decision-making processes, and relationships between the various actors of this system. Building on my prior volunteering inside Armée du Salut, I also conducted a fieldwork participant observation at the Ramponeau AdS food distribution site in Paris, on the 26th of February 2026. It lasted for the entire morning during which Ramponeau is opened, which is approximately 3 hours. This was focused on interactions between volunteers and beneficiaries, the use of space, informal rules, and the handling of sensitive situations (e.g, disputes). I also looked at various documents: AdS's internal material such as annual reports and public communications (website, press releases), policy documents, for instance, relevant French national and Parisian municipal policies on immigration, social aid, and associative subventions, and some media content, including a short documentary made on Ramponeau. Four main analytical themes emerged from these data sets: the social complexities of the site, the vulnerability of minors, the shared precarity of volunteers and beneficiaries, and neutrality as an institutional facade. In the next chapters, a discussion of these will follow.

⁵⁴ Durdella, *Research Design and Methods*.

4.2 Coding and Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed with Turboscribe, an AI transcription software, as allowed by the Capstone Handbook.⁵⁵ All of them were conducted in French, which I then translated into English, using the Microsoft translation tool.⁵⁶ It is important to note, for good practice, that some nuance may have been lost in translation. This is particularly true in the context of Victoria's interview. Indeed, the interview could not be audio-transcribed as the recording was lost. Analysis of the interview therefore relies on detailed handwritten notes taken during the session, including direct quotations recorded at the time. Moreover, the transcript of Martin's interview does not appear in the Appendix, given that he made specific mention to exclude it in the final paper, for privacy reasons, whilst allowing part of his statements to be included. Additionally, the appendix only includes the English transcript (see Appendix A). The data was subsequently coded using the combination of thematic and discourse analysis.⁵⁷ This method enabled me to unpack the implicit dimensions of discourse while identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning.⁵⁸

The analysis is theoretically grounded in scholarship - introduced in the literature review - on humanitarianism, especially in concepts of agency and of endogenous solidarity.⁵⁹ This allows a comprehension of food aid as embedded in broader social, legal, and political dynamics. It further draws on Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy, to decode how politicization works through everyday decisions of frontline workers.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Capstone Handbook, 15.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Gibbs, "Thematic Coding".

⁵⁸ Alejandro and Zao, "Multi-Method Qualitative Text".

⁵⁹ Radice, "Humanitarianism as Civic Practice."

⁶⁰ Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*.

4.3 Ethics and Reflexivity

I submitted an Ethics Work Plan to the Ethics Advisory Board on the 29th of January 2026. I was given positive feedback by the Board on the 16th of February 2026. Prior to the interviews I undertook, I obtained the consent of my respondents. Indeed, I provided a consent form detailing my identity and the one of my supervisor, the purpose of my research, and information on the interviewees' rights, such as the possibility to withdraw at any point throughout the process. This was done following the best practices of qualitative research methods, and the French legal framework surrounding research.⁶¹ Indeed, this framework, codified by the Law Jardé, outlines key ethical principles, including respect for the dignity of all human participants, free and informed consent and honesty and transparency regarding the research.⁶² I notably tried to conduct the interviews following ethical guidelines outlined by various scholars, such as Al Ajlan, or Kostet & Verschraegen.⁶³

Given the vulnerability of my participants, I took several precautions. As requested by the Ethics Board, I did not interview minors. Victoria had informed beneficiaries of my presence beforehand, and two of them volunteered to be interviewed; they were the only ones I approached, as I wanted to make sure that no conversation was imposed on anyone. Moreover, I ensured complete anonymization throughout the research, by assigning pseudonyms and removing any identifying information. As I used an AI transcription software, I cut the part of each audio-recording where participants stated their names before uploading it into the software, to protect their personal data. Considering that I interviewed individuals in precarity who had found refuge in France, I was careful not to discuss sensitive topics such as their families, violence, or the experience of their journey, and tried to be aware of any sign of

⁶¹ Blaikie and Priest, *Designing Social Research: The Logic of Anticipation*, 68-69; Journal Officiel de la République Française, “Loi n° 2012-300.”

⁶² Journal Officiel de la République Française, “Loi n° 2012-300.”

⁶³ Al Ajlan, “Interviewing Refugees”; Kostet and Verschraegen, “(Un)doing reflexivity.”

emotional vulnerability or distress to prevent re-traumatization.⁶⁴ To reduce anxiety, I asked them to choose a place in Ramponeau they felt comfortable in, to do the interviews.⁶⁵

Several methodological limitations also need to be acknowledged. First of all, conducting this research, I had the positionality of a volunteer within the organization. This means that beneficiaries may have acted differently as they briefly knew me, and staff could have been more responsive for similar reasons. This is a limitation inherent to participant observation. Similar shortcomings can be mentioned for the interviews, as I drew participants from my network within the AdS. It could be interesting for a future research such as this one to be conducted by someone entirely external to the AdS. Thereafter, my case study is specific to one site. While it allows rich findings to be uncovered, it is essential not to take this account for a generalization of the broader French humanitarian sector.

Finally, my positionality as a White European female researcher equally needs to be recognized, as it likely influenced both my access to sources I was granted, and the dynamics of the interviews themselves. I acknowledge that, despite my intentions to make this research reflexive, it can still produce arguments and knowledge that are structured by Western epistemologies.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the fact that I am White and have never suffered from ethnic discrimination restricts my legitimacy to represent the voices of my interviewees and to talk about experiences which I did not undergo.⁶⁷ Additionally, it may have influenced my questions' framing and my participants' responses. To limit this, I asked my participants to confirm what they meant, and to privilege long quotes in the analysis, to be as close as possible to their own words. Nonetheless, I am aware that this does not eliminate my influence as a

⁶⁴ Al Ajlan, "Interviewing Refugees," 3804.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3814.

⁶⁶ Greedharry et al, and Moosavi, cited by Kostet and Verschraegen, "(Un)doing reflexivity," 4.

⁶⁷ Kostet and Verschraegen, "(Un)doing reflexivity," 10.

researcher as I am the one who ultimately codes and contextualizes their voices.⁶⁸ With these limitations in mind, the following analysis can be read properly.

5. Analysis

5.1 More Than a Distribution Site: Ramponeau as a Complex Social Space

To assess how neutrality plays a crucial role inside the AdS, and specifically Ramponeau, it is necessary to comprehend the structure and nature of this distribution site. This is why this chapter explores the functioning of Ramponeau and how it acts as a space where informal social networks are not only produced and reproduced, but also a space in which various contradictions play out.

The Social Architecture of Ramponeau

The AdS is a “very large organization that works on many different themes and projects related to combating poverty, providing shelters, housing, health issues, food aid, and support services.”⁶⁹ On their official website, it is indicated that the association “welcomes more than 50,000 people per day and provides nearly 3 million days of shelter per year.”⁷⁰ The AdS’s food assistance programs, which is the focus of this research, are diverse and include: “breakfasts, the morning outreach program, the Saint-Blaise program (which is like the breakfasts but in the evenings), cooking workshops, fruit and vegetable distribution, and food drives at stores,” as a member of the management explained.⁷¹ Ramponeau is the breakfast distribution site located in the 20th arrondissement; it operates through a clear hierarchy in which each role plays a distinct and crucial part. Paul, who I interviewed, is the department

⁶⁸ Kostet and Verschraegen, “(Un)doing reflexivity”, 11.

⁶⁹ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 19, 2026.

⁷⁰ Armée du Salut, “Qui Sommes-Nous?”

⁷¹ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 19, 2026.

head: he is in charge of “coordinating different food assistance programs”, managing “budgets, teams, and projects”, and making sure that “everything runs smoothly”, as he explained.⁷² Paul is not always at the distribution site. There, Victoria, coordinator of the breakfast distribution, is the one in charge. She described her work as “logistics agent”, saying that she mainly manages “the creation of time slots for volunteers and their missions”, and oversees the implementation of the food distribution system.”⁷³ While Paul and Victoria are crucial to the functioning of the organization, and especially of the breakfast distribution, the core of the AdS are the volunteers. The AdS counts approximately 9,000 of them across France, though data is not available for Paris alone.⁷⁴ Volunteers are described as people who give their time and “use their experience to help people in socially vulnerable situations.”⁷⁵ In order to participate as a volunteer in the AdS’ programs, individuals must register via the “Benenova or PAM platforms”, as Victoria mentioned.⁷⁶ The beneficiaries, on the other hand, all are individuals receiving help from the Armée du Salut.⁷⁷ There are five different categories of beneficiaries in the AdS: people living in precarity, children and youth, seniors, handicapped adults, and people in recovery.⁷⁸

Human Connection, Informal Social Networks, and Dignity

What is essential to understand about Ramponeau is that it is way more than a simple food distribution site: it is a space where social interactions are created, and where people facing precarity find comfort. When I asked Désiré if he felt good there, and respected, he automatically responded “yes (...) I feel good here.”⁷⁹ He even explained to me that although

⁷² Paul, Interviewed by author, March 19, 2026.

⁷³ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

⁷⁴ Armée du Salut, “Qui Sommes-Nous?”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

⁷⁷ Armée du Salut, “Qui Sommes-Nous?”

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Désiré, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

he was fasting, coming to Ramponeau was a reflex: “I do Ramadan but even if I don't eat, I still come.”⁸⁰ Martin developed further, as he said: “I come here to have my coffee and meet interesting people. So really for the social aspect, you know,” then repeated: “That's it. For the social aspect.”⁸¹ Those statements are crucial as they reveal that Ramponeau enables beneficiaries to create human connections. As Ticktin argues, citing de Torrente, the creation of the humanitarian organization Médecin sans Frontières highlighted the “most important principles of humanitarian action,” including “humanity, which posits the conviction that all people have equal dignity by virtue of their membership in humanity.”⁸² This helps understanding why beneficiaries feel so welcomed in Ramponeau: it reinforces their dignity and allows them to feel accepted in contrast to the marginalization they experience elsewhere.⁸³

Moreover, many people whom I interviewed underlined how the Armée du Salut differentiates itself from other humanitarian associations present in Paris, such as Aurore, Emaeus, or the Red Cross, in terms of human treatment and social interactions. For instance, as Victoria highlighted: “unlike many distributions, the breakfast that we serve is an unconditional welcome.”⁸⁴ Beyond this, Ramponeau is also open for the entire morning from 9:30am to 11:30am, and this every day of the week, sometimes even on Saturdays.⁸⁵ This is crucial as it gives people more time to come, and to socialize freely without fearing the closing of the space. Booth et al. accordingly claim that locations which offer unconditional welcome and which are open to any individual “contribute to a relief from an identification as food aid receiver.”⁸⁶

⁸⁰ Désiré, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

⁸¹ Martin, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

⁸² Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 70.

⁸³ See 2. Political Background.

⁸⁴ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

⁸⁵ DSOL, *Guide Solidarité Paris*, 28.

⁸⁶ Andriessen and van der Velde, “Social Dignity of Recipients,” 372.

What is also important to mention is that Ramponeau, housed in a former public school, serves not only as a food distribution site but also as a space for “art and language classes,” as Victoria explained.⁸⁷ Thus, the site is a multi-purpose environment. This aligns directly with Bruce et al, and Haapanen who find that locations which are “not only used for the distribution of food aid” and which are “peaceful and well-kept”, reduce the “sense of alienation” and “protects the dignity of people (...) in terms of social status.”⁸⁸ Thus, Ramponeau actively functions as a space which preserves the dignity of its beneficiaries, notably by creating a sense of community that seems to reduce the stigma associated with food insecurity. This good atmosphere proper to Ramponeau is also reinforced by the fact that its layout is very flexible.⁸⁹ I observed that many beneficiaries were indeed moving the chairs to sometimes create bigger tables so that everyone could sit together and have a conversation.⁹⁰ Edwards’, and Smith & Harvey’s framework helps understanding the meaning of this. They notably explain that spatial organization that “can be reconstituted within public social eating initiatives” create “environments that are constructed as intimate, customizable and participative,” stirring a “respectful atmosphere.”⁹¹

Issues of the Complexity of the Social Space

While not discarding the considerations made above, it is important to address that inherent social and political complexities exist in Ramponeau due to explicit but unwritten rules about the distribution. Throughout my observation and research, I noticed that some existing physical boundaries between volunteers and beneficiaries could be considered harmful to one of the parties. For instance, Victoria explained during the morning brief to all of the volunteers, that

⁸⁷ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Field Observation, February 26, 2026.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

the beneficiaries were never allowed to touch the food, and that if they did, they automatically had to eat it. This is exactly what Andriessen and van der Veldedraw showcase. Building on May et al et Möller, they argue that the “point but not touch” rule inside food distributions “accentuates a powerless position of food aid receivers.”⁹² This situation is reinforced by the fact that most volunteers have to wear gloves for hygiene purposes - notably not to contaminate the food itself (see Fig.2). As visible in a news report broadcast by France 3 channel on the AdS’s breakfast distribution, this practice builds an additional physical barrier between volunteers and beneficiaries.⁹³ This creates a power asymmetry that cements the beneficiaries’ status of dependence.⁹⁴ The same news report also exposes that many beneficiaries appear to be very young, which is a reality that the following chapter examines, exploring how the AdS navigates this specific challenge of feeding minors.



Figure 2 Picture of a beneficiary receiving food from a volunteer in Ramponeau. Source: France 3.

⁹² Andriessen and van der Velde, “Social Dignity of Recipients,” 372.

⁹³ France 3, “Petits-Déjeuners Solidaires.”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

5.2 Performing Neutrality: Feeding Minors at the Armée du Salut

By focusing on minors, this chapter provides a concrete exploration of how humanitarian action is shaped by both politics and practical considerations, and how neutrality is performed.

At Ramponeau, approximately 100-150 people come everyday to the food distributions, depending on the season.⁹⁵ There, around 60% of them are migrants for North-Western Africa, such as Cameroon, Senegal, and Mali, most of them waiting for their “unaccompanied minor” status.⁹⁶ In France, an unaccompanied minor (MNA), is a “young person below 18 years old who does not hold French nationality and is separated from his/her parents or legal representative on French territory.”⁹⁷ Thus, the political and territorial context shapes not only who comes to receive aid, but also the ways in which staff and volunteers engage with beneficiaries. Understanding a specific population of the food distributions is crucial to examine the perception and practices of the NGO, highlighting how humanitarian work is both structured by and responsive to the broader political and legal context of unaccompanied minors in France.

Young migrants seeking minor status in Paris

While the Armée du Salut presents itself as politically neutral, staff and volunteers seem overly conscientious of the living conditions of minors, and the administrative processes that they have to go through. For instance, Victoria explained that many migrants were applying to be recognized legally as a minor in France, in order to have access to aid: “once they are recognized minors, they can have access to almost anything, especially housing.”⁹⁸ Both Victoria and Paul describe the process of age assessment as long, complex, and inconsistent,

⁹⁵ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ France terre d’asile, “Who are the unaccompanied children?”

⁹⁸ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

recalling the case of a young boy who claimed to be 15 and had travelled through several countries, including Greece and Turkey, before arriving in France.⁹⁹ Despite his account, “the judge determined that, because he had managed to travel through all those countries, he was not eligible to be recognized as a minor.”¹⁰⁰ This example reveals how access to protection is not only conditional but is also shaped by subjective and sometimes arbitrary criteria. The idea of subjective criteria is highlighted by various reports, including some conducted by Utopia 56 or Human Rights Watch, which all criticize the “shortness of interviews, sometimes without an interpreter,” and the fact that assessments are almost always based solely on physical appearance.¹⁰¹ Beyond the arbitrariness of assessment, two main problems of precarity appear. The most immediate is accommodation. Indeed, Article R22-11 of the law provides only five days or emergency provisional housing for anyone declaring themselves a minor.¹⁰² After this period, they are left alone at night. As Désiré explained: “there are many places where you are not allowed to sleep (...) at 6pm, they kick you out.”¹⁰³ The second problem is the care void created by the waiting period itself. As Paul noted: “while they (migrants) wait for their court date, they receive no support. This can last up to 18 months, and as a result, they find themselves in extremely precarious situations.”¹⁰⁴ The inadequate care of unaccompanied minors was recognized judicially. Indeed, in *A.C. v. France*, the European Court of Human Rights found that France had deprived a young Guinean of the requisite minimum safeguards the legal framework is supposed to guarantee, thus finding a violation of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Paul and Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 2026.

¹⁰⁰ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

¹⁰¹ Cluzel, “Foreign Minors Care.”

¹⁰² Journal Officiel de la République Française, “Code de l'Action Sociale et des Familles.”

¹⁰³ Désiré, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹⁰⁴ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 9, 2026.

¹⁰⁵ ECHR, “Reception of unaccompanied minors.”

Until unaccompanied minors obtain the legal recognition they seek, the AdS is largely restricted to providing food aid. Once their status is approved, however, staff are able to expand their interventions, directing beneficiaries to housing, medical care, and other social services. Paul emphasized this capacity, noting that members of the AdS can lead them “to the right support services, food distributions, and medical care facilities, among others.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Victoria highlighted the organizational arrangements that facilitate this work, pointing out that the AdS operates “with two day centers, including one exclusively for minors and (...) one for recognized minors.”¹⁰⁷ These accounts clearly reveal a profound link between legal recognition and staff agency: while members of the Armée du Salut have the knowledge and willingness to assist minors more broadly, their ability to act is contingent on formal status. At the same time, beneficiaries experience this mix of both support and constraint. Désiré indeed told me that the staff was very helpful even outside of their own food distributions: “they give us tickets for evening meals in other locations, for example.”¹⁰⁸ What came across most interviews is that the staff consistently tries to extend support to beneficiaries beyond what the organization formally allows, finding creative ways to meet minors’ needs waiting for their legal status, despite structural limitations.

Neutrality as a political stance and a strategy

While AdS’s practices are implicitly political, especially given that they are serving minors, most volunteers refused to take a political stance about this particular topic. Indeed, most of them told me that they did not want to talk about politics, and they did not think it was important. Even more, both the staff and the volunteers defended that the AdS was an organization that had nothing to do with political issues. For instance, Jeanne said: “Personally,

¹⁰⁶ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 9, 2026.

¹⁰⁷ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

¹⁰⁸ Désiré, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

I think it has nothing to do with politics.”¹⁰⁹ Chloe gave a more nuanced answer, specifying the difference between her role and the organization itself, telling me that the AdS was: “an organization that decided to help. It's not necessarily political”, but also that maybe it “has a political dimension coming from the aid itself, but that's not my role.”¹¹⁰ David went even further, saying that it had “nothing to do with politics” neither the Armée du Salut, nor food aid in general.¹¹¹ This apparent refusal to engage with politics and belief that humanitarian work is fundamentally separated from politics, even when facing political precarity, reveals a central paradox in the practices of the Armée du Salut. While staff and volunteers operate in a highly politicized environment, and their actions directly interact with immigration policies and legal categories, they consistently frame their work as non-political and purely humanitarian.

Additionally, the AdS is not entirely silent on the political situation of minors. In their 2024 Report of activity, in which is described their local work, goals, and present some statistics, a section is dedicated to exiled minors.¹¹² It notably references the “Call of the 201”, publicly issued by Uniopss - of which the AdS is a founding member - warning that the new immigration law fails to address “the root causes of the forced exile of men, women, and children fleeing wars or climate change, nor the challenges of dignified reception and human integration.”¹¹³ While this is quite a powerful statement, the AdS chose to speak through Uniopss rather than with its own voice, signaling political awareness while preserving institutional neutrality and distance. The analytical implications of this managed communication are examined more carefully in chapter 5.4.

¹⁰⁹ Jeanne, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹¹⁰ Chloe, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹¹¹ David, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹¹² FADS, *Rapport d'Activité*, 18.

¹¹³ FADS, *Rapport d'Activité*, 18; See 2. Political Background.

Hence, there is a clear tension arising between the institutional neutrality that the AdS chose, and the inherent politically charged act that feeding minors entails. Yet, this neutrality can be perceived completely otherwise as it can serve as a protective strategy. Indeed, Victoria importantly mentioned that highlighting migrants and minors by taking a public stance would “put them in the spotlight, which is something they did not ask for,” adding that it could be “dangerous for them,” especially “if the far right was to win.”¹¹⁴ This clearly echoes Ticktin’s theory of humanitarianism in which she cites Redfield, arguing that neutrality can indeed be a strategy as “the danger of speaking out too forcefully is that one can be seen to be taking a side - a political position - and thereby can lose access to those who need help.”¹¹⁵ Moreover, Victoria’s stance describes quite perfectly what Fassin diagnosed about French society: “for the French government and parliament, the legitimacy of the suffering body has become greater than that of the threatened body, and the right to life is being displaced from the political sphere to that of compassion.”¹¹⁶ Thus, it seems like the moment the AdS politicizes its work, it risks pulling the migrant beneficiaries out of the compassion zone and onto the political sphere, where they are far more vulnerable. All of this suggests that neutrality is not simply a characteristic of the organization, but an actively maintained stance, notably to protect vulnerable populations like minors from backlash.

5.3 The Blurred Line: When Volunteers and Beneficiaries Share the Same Fragility

We learnt that neutrality is performed at Ramponeau by the navigation of a highly politicized context, notably used as a strategy to protect the recipients. However, this chapter explores how

¹¹⁴ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

¹¹⁵ Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, 83.

¹¹⁶ Fassin, “Compassion and Repression,” 371.

this apparent strategic neutrality also conceals other elements such as the shared precarity internal to the AdS. Indeed, one of the most striking observations from my fieldwork at Ramponeau was the fluidity of roles within the distribution space. Indeed, many beneficiaries were also volunteers, sometimes depending on the day, and most volunteers were themselves living in conditions of precarity - blurring a crucial boundary on which the organization implicitly relies upon.

The overlapping roles of Ramponeau's participants

When I raised the question of this blurred line with volunteers, the prevailing response was that it was normal. They centered their discourses around altruism, motivation and generosity.¹¹⁷ Jeanne dismissed any tension saying: “I don’t see any problem with that,” explaining that “beneficiaries, if they become volunteers, it’s perhaps because the work we do appeals to them. That’s why they too decide to offer their help.”¹¹⁸ Chloe echoed this logic, through more nuance: “Personally, I don’t think it’s easy, but I think it comes from their hearts. Maybe they want to help. They definitely want to do something, contribute, you know, do something good.”¹¹⁹ In both responses, the causes that produce the impulse to give while facing precarity seem surprisingly unquestioned by the respondents. Victoria, coordinator of Ramponeau, commented on that saying: “this is something that management doesn’t really see.”¹²⁰ This highlights a gap within the AdS: the realities on the ground are far more complex than the institutional framework through which management understands and governs the breakfast distribution space. Radice’s theory of humanitarianism as a civic practice helps make sense of this empirical argument as he notes that humanitarian actors “may themselves be both providers and recipients of aid,” a duality he identifies as “crucial to deconstructing the inherently

¹¹⁷ Jeanne, Chloe, and David, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹¹⁸ Jeanne, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

othering parameters of the humanitarian encounter.”¹²¹ In this context, the humanitarian encounter stops being a one-directional service provision, and becomes something more ambiguous, restructuring power dynamics within Ramponeau.

The precarity of volunteers and its consequences

Moreover, many of the volunteers I interviewed or worked alongside were themselves facing significant vulnerabilities such as uncertain administrative status, precarious housing, and food insecurity. My initial assumption, before conducting the interviews, was that the different positions people held in the Armée du Salut were clearly delineated. Yet, when Jeanne laughed and said “Well, I myself am an immigrant. I am from the Côte d’Ivoire,” and “I don’t have papers,” I quickly realized that the boundary I had assumed was incorrect, and that volunteers and beneficiaries were, in many cases, navigating the same conditions of precarity.¹²² When I raised the question of the blurred line with her, she said: “seeing myself wasting my time at home is pointless. For me, it’s better to go out and also support my brothers who are in the same situation as me.”¹²³ Here, the term ‘brother’ is very significant as it signals that her motivation also comes from helping people that she identifies herself with. This is precisely what Radice argues using Khaldi’s term of “endogenous solidarity”: care is often generated from within an affected community, and humanitarian aid sites are used as spaces to practice this care.¹²⁴ Chloe confirmed this, explaining: “it’s true that many volunteers (...) aren’t in a regular situation. So, why not give your time to those who need it?” She also added: “That’s my job, even if it’s unpaid.”¹²⁵ As an undocumented volunteer herself, this statement carries particular weight as it reveals that the administrative exclusion that many respondents face can

¹²¹ Feldman, cited by Radice in “Humanitarianism as a civic practice?,” 154.

¹²² Jeanne, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Khaldi, cited by Radice in “Humanitarianism as a Civic Practice?,” 145.

¹²⁵ Chloe, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

become the source of a solidaristic response, here found in aid. Victoria pointed out that she sometimes learnt that some volunteers were “homeless, in shelters, emergency accommodations; (...) a very difficult situation”, and that once again, it was a reality quite unknown by the management team.¹²⁶ This is exemplified by Pascucci who analyses workers within humanitarian spaces; talking about Syrian refugees and humanitarian workers, she argues that: “boundaries separating and uniting them are far from straightforward.”¹²⁷ Hence, in contexts of political and precarious humanitarian aid, it seems like divisions between roles are blurry.

Yet, the gap between the ground and the AdS’ fundamental framework is extremely consequential as it notably affects the agency of the staff. For instance, during my time at Ramponeau, I observed that many volunteers were requesting extra food at the end of their shift to take home, a practice that the institution does not have provision for.¹²⁸ Regarding this, Victoria said that when someone tells her that they are in a difficult situation, she gives “by default”.¹²⁹ However, she also explained that “when they come several times and eat a lot, that becomes strange, and in that case, it becomes a problem.”¹³⁰ This is particularly true as she confessed that officially, “volunteers may never take from the stock”, and that she completely disagreed with this rule: “it is the least you can do as they are giving their time, especially given that some are in a precarious situation themselves.”¹³¹ Thus, this creates a practical dilemma that falls entirely on the coordinator: where is the line drawn between a volunteer taking little food for themselves, and taking too much from stock intended for beneficiaries? The absence of any institutional guidance on the question means that the decision rests solely on her individual discretion. This is precisely what Lipsky describes, as he argues that street-level

¹²⁶ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

¹²⁷ Pascucci, “Precarious work.”

¹²⁸ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

bureaucrats “must develop shortcuts and simplifications to cope with the press of responsibilities.”¹³² Thus, staff’s agency can be perceived as a coping mechanism for the inadequate guidance of Ramponeau.

Moreover, this agency falling on the discretion of volunteers also creates conflicts. During my observation, I noticed volunteers taking from the stock for their own needs, as they suffer from precarity, making other volunteers upset. They notably accused them of “stealing” and “profiting” from the organization.¹³³ This was resolved by Victoria intervening and explaining to the angered volunteer that this was acceptable as it was her decision, made with the legitimate authority. Beurois’ analysis of solidarity food stores allows to understand that this is in this precise moment that the organizational fiction of pure disinterest begins to crack down: “deviations from various rules of distribution, while they may offer the possibility ‘helping’ beyond what the rules provide for, can also generate conflict among those doing the distributing: practices of ‘favoritism’, of ‘taking for oneself’, of being ‘self-interested’, and so on, become objects of suspicion.”¹³⁴ This is why the blurred line between volunteers and beneficiaries is crucial to understand: it affects the stock, the management of resources, the relationships between the various roles of the organization, and overall the well-functioning of the distribution site. It also threatens the precarity of the volunteers looking for food sustainment while trying to insert themselves.

More importantly, volunteers’ open acknowledgement of their own precarity constitutes a form of political speech, although not recognized like it at Ramponeau. As Radice notes, “humanitarians find themselves speaking and acting for others - they have a power of voice to share”; here, volunteers are speaking directly about their own condition.¹³⁵ Volunteers’ speech interrogates the own condition of the precarity they articulate, and even becomes of

¹³² Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 18.

¹³³ Field Observation, February 26, 2026.

¹³⁴ Beurois, “Aide Alimentaire Apolitique?,” 51.

¹³⁵ Radice, “Humanitarianism as a Civic Practice?,” 153.

critique of the latter, as Arendt describes about men and justice.¹³⁶ This fundamentally destabilizes the neutrality and apolitical claims that the AdS makes. Thus, it seems like the precarity which is shared by both recipients and volunteers represents a limit to the neutrality stance that the AdS decides to make. This is the primary and most visible layer of a deeper institutional fiction; the following chapter examines how neutrality is utilized as a facade.

5.4 Neutrality as a Facade for Ramponeau

This final chapter investigates neutrality as a facade in the context of food aid, and the way it is perceived by members of the management of the AdS. More importantly, it argues that neutrality in the context of the AdS is not a stable institutional position, but that instead it is a facade maintained simultaneously via multiple directions: from above, as the management indulge themselves in it, from the side, as the staff disagrees with it, and from below, as some operational choices undermine it completely.

A contested and compromised neutrality

Firstly, the neutrality of the management is highly visible in official declarations, reports, or other public documents such as the FADS report of 2024. In it, Françoise Scoffier was asked the question: “which actions carried out for the people you receive would you particularly highlight?,” to which she answered: “the young minor migrants (...) the distress, but also their strength, moved and impressed me.”¹³⁷ Many different words could have been used to describe the extreme precarity in which the MNA find themselves, and out of all of them, she used “distress” and strength.” This is a clear example of hedging; she tries to be politically correct and acknowledge them, while avoids taking a proper stance. Moreover, the wording of some other sentences, especially in the section on MNAs, such as “particularly unfavorable broader

¹³⁶ Arendt, cited by Butler in “Bodies in Alliance”, 76.

¹³⁷ FADS, *Rapport d'Activité*, 3.

context,” and “systemic risks of discrimination” when talking about young exiled migrants, are very light terms to describe such elements.¹³⁸ Here, neutrality is performed through language. Indeed, according to Edelman, language is usage is always “strategic,” and is part of a practice that enables people to “marshall support for causes,” without having to say too much.¹³⁹ Thus, the AdS preserves an appearance of neutrality.

Secondly, when I raised the issue of political engagement with Paul, he answered with passion, saying that the AdS was a “structure that is neither militant nor politically engaged,” adding that “there is a rather worrying kind of neutrality. There’s a complete inability (from the higher management) to take a stand on issues that upset us - department heads and teams. There’s a minimum standard. The AdS is incredibly weak-kneed on all of this.”¹⁴⁰ This statement reflects a strong opposition between the visions of the management and the staff, as the latter believes that the AdS should be more courageous in assuming political and societal positions. Moreover, I asked Paul about whether they had suffered from pressures stemming from the fact that the AdS was not political enough, to which he answered: “no, I think the pressure is coming from headquarters to keep it from being political, to avoid getting mixed up with this structure.”¹⁴¹ This importantly reveals that institutional neutrality is imposed by the management - sometimes through a form of coercion - on the rest of the organization, instead of being genuinely shared by all. Lipsky’s framework enables us to understand this better, as he argues that: “street-level bureaucrats may consider legitimate the right of managers to provide directives, but they may consider their managers’ policy objectives illegitimate.”¹⁴² Hence, Paul’s stance reveals a legitimacy gap as the headquarters’ position is viewed as an obstacle to the social and moral mission that the AdS should carry. Yet, this tension is not felt

¹³⁸ FADS, *Rapport d’Activité*, 3; see Section 5.2 Feeding Minors.

¹³⁹ Edelman, “Political Language”, 13.

¹⁴⁰ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 9, 2026.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, 18.

uniformly within the AdS. Indeed, on this similar question, Victoria argued that solidarity and commitment, in general, were “not the theme of the time”, thus giving a potential reason for the non-engagement of the AdS in public.¹⁴³ Yet, she also told me that “other associations are more politically engaged, so it helps to balance things out.”¹⁴⁴ This challenges the idea that the AdS should be more politically involved, as, according to her, other humanitarian organizations are doing it already. Hence, it seems like there is not one specific stance that was adopted by everyone working for the AdS, as even two close members of the staff care to disagree fundamentally on their vision of the organization’s political engagement.

Thirdly, if neutrality is contested, even internally, a lot of the operational choices that the AdS make cannot be framed as apolitical or neutral, they are inherently politically positioned. For instance, I asked Paul if the AdS had any specific location planned for the street outreach that the organization does every day, he answered: “yes, it’s mainly in the northeast of Paris, where the camps for exiled people are located.”¹⁴⁵ The ‘exiled people’ he is talking about, are migrants, and more particularly undocumented migrants. Indeed, data shows a significantly higher concentration of the migrant population in the Northeast Parisian arrondissements: 18th, 19th, and 20th (see Fig.1).¹⁴⁶ This operational choice to direct emergency food aid toward a specific population is inherently a political one, whether or not officially framed as such. As Warner argues in his ICRC practice analysis, humanitarian organizations constantly take decisions which “place certain priorities above others,” and which showcase the “limitations of the political/humanitarian divide and the politics of humanitarian activities.”¹⁴⁷ Moreover, Paul explained that “historically, food distributions were mostly for people who were homeless, now there are many people in shelters who are still

¹⁴³ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 25, 2026.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 9, 2026.

¹⁴⁶ OECD, *Local Integration of Migrants*.

¹⁴⁷ Warner, “Political/Humanitarian Divide,” 117.

struggling. We accept them.”¹⁴⁸ Many organizations in Paris do not accept them, as they cannot accept everyone. Once again, the choice itself of allowing people who are in a less precarious situation is inherently political: it completely eliminates the distinction between thresholds of precarity and of people by assuming that individuals who come, either way, need help. David reinforced the notion of an unconditional welcome, noting that the absence of intrusive questioning leads to the AdS “also accepting people who are not in a situation of complete precarity.”¹⁴⁹ Choosing to serve everyone is a political stance and can be perceived as an ordinary form of politicization unfolding within a food aid context.¹⁵⁰

The muting of racism and other forms of discrimination

Moreover, as Ramponeau functions as a social space where there are only a few explicit rules, many tensions arise between individuals, especially regarding ethnicities. The most striking observation that this section addresses is the muting of racism, and the institutional silence surrounding it. Indeed, when I was a volunteer, I experienced cases of beneficiaries who said racist comments to other beneficiaries, or even to the volunteers. During my observation, I notably saw a senior beneficiary with whom the staff already had various issues complaining about the food distribution, saying that the volunteers were not giving her enough, even though there are rules in terms of quantities.¹⁵¹ Her actual statement in French was “les étrangers d’abord,” which can be literally translated to “the foreigners first.”¹⁵² Yet, in French, the term “étranger” is extremely negatively connotated, and often refers to migrants or people of color.¹⁵³ This case is not isolated, as the same day, a beneficiary yelled saying that this site was

¹⁴⁸ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 9, 2026.

¹⁴⁹ David, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹⁵⁰ Beurois, “Aide Alimentaire Apolitique?,”³⁴.

¹⁵¹ Field Observation, February 26, 2026.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Pedreira and Diaz, “Désigner l’Étranger.”

like being in “Africa.”¹⁵⁴ Although approximately 60% of the beneficiaries in Ramponeau are indeed West African migrants, this statement nonetheless carries racist undertones and implicitly frames immigration as a problem.¹⁵⁵ These xenophobic and racist comments reveal that Ramponeau is not a uniquely harmonious space, but one shaped by the same social complexities found in many spaces of human interaction. More importantly, it tells us that the distribution site is navigating a highly politicized context where immigration has clear consequences on the site’s well-functioning and efficiency. When I asked Victoria how such situations were handled, she told me that discriminating beneficiaries could be barred, and volunteers sent away, but that management usually kept out of the loop. This was confirmed by Paul who stated: “so as soon as there’s a problem, we report it and it goes up to headquarters, but never the cause.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, the AdS does respond publicly to these issues, but rather manages it privately. In this context, neutrality can be understood as the silent management of politics.

When questioned about discriminatory remarks or jokes within the space, the consensus among both volunteers and recipients was a form of denial, or muting of racism. For instance, Martin responded with an empathic: “Here? no. No, never,” a sentiment echoed by Chloe and Jeanne’s answers, who appeared surprised by the inquiry.¹⁵⁷ David similarly asserted that: “as far as racism is concerned, there is none.”¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, this statement was made the exact same day that another regular beneficiary made the xenophobic comment of “foreigners first,” in the presence of David. This disconnect suggests a form of collective muting or a protective denial. More importantly, it suggests a practiced internal neutrality, where individuals ignore the existing tensions within the community. Overall, neutrality is a facade that hides institutional silence and disagreements, and which is undermined by various choices.

¹⁵⁴ Field Observation, February 26, 2026.

¹⁵⁵ Victoria, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹⁵⁶ Paul, Interviewed by author, March 9, 2026.

¹⁵⁷ Martin, Chloe, and Jeanne, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

¹⁵⁸ David, Interviewed by author, February 27, 2026.

6. Discussion

All of the arguments and observations explored above reveal an extreme precarity characteristic of Ramponeau, and visible on different levels. The individuals who come to Ramponeau share, first and foremost, a condition of material precarity. Yet, for a significant portion of them, this is compounded with legal, administrative, and political vulnerability. Migrants waiting for their unaccompanied minor status to be approved, or whose MNA has just been recognized, represent a substantial share of those who are being served at Ramponeau; although it is a population for which access to protection is contingent to judicial, and sometimes arbitrary, determination. Moreover, this research highlighted that volunteers themselves face extreme precarity, using the site as a form of social and professional reinsertion. The case of Jeanne is the most striking: she is undocumented and volunteering at Ramponeau, even if she herself is eligible to receive aid there. Similar cases lead to members of the staff, in particular Victoria, redistributing, often without formal authorization, food to precarious volunteers. Those examples of internal precarity challenge the architecture on which the distribution site is initially built, notably on a clear distinction between receiver and giver. Data places the question of neutrality at the center of what happens in Ramponeau. It notably reveals a striking convergence of denials: both volunteers and beneficiaries refuse any link between food aid and politics, the AdS's public stance rests on an explicit claim of neutrality, and yet, staff members themselves claim that neutrality is imposed. The core argument put forward by the interviews on the purpose of this neutrality is the protection of beneficiaries, especially of migrants and minors. Yet, this protective logic sits in tension with internal conflicts generated by shared precarity, and blurry roles that quietly challenge the organization's own framework. More importantly, the political neutrality that is being performed by the AdS is constantly undermined by the precarity of its own organization.

Overall, this research finds that neutrality is doubly performed at Ramponeau: both used as a facade and as a protective strategy.

However, this research acknowledges that neutral humanitarian action is not the only legitimate form of aid, as it comes with consequences. Slim argues that: “applying this standard to everyone excludes many humanitarians - especially local organizations - who may not have those kinds of resources.”¹⁵⁹ Does that mean that neutrality is costly? He goes even further by asking the following question: “Is it moral for humanitarians to stay neutral in the face of injustice (...)?”¹⁶⁰ When humanitarians are confronted everyday with material, administrative, and political precarity, especially regarding migrants, and refuse to challenge the system that produces it, the ethical foundations of institutional neutrality itself come into question. Thus, neutrality is perilous as it is the choice to remain silent in the face of conditions of precarity.

Additionally, the AdS is subjected to financial precarity, as openly acknowledged by Françoise Scoffier and Eric Leonard, part of the administrative council of the AdS, in the 2024 report mentioned previously.¹⁶¹ In it, they identify financing as one of the organization’s main challenges, noting that it operates “in a context of tightening public funding, economic and geopolitical uncertainties.”¹⁶² This acknowledgement matters as it reveals that the AdS’s institutional survival depends largely on maintaining access to public funding. Article 12 of the Council of Paris’ 2025 DPE 10 associative subsidy decision awards a grant of 25,000 € to the Armée du Salut.¹⁶³ By contrast, Utopia 56, one of the most explicitly politically militant organizations operating in Paris, receives no funding from either the city of Paris or the French state.¹⁶⁴ Although causality cannot be established with certainty from these sources alone, the contrast is striking. It raises the question of whether political engagement is structurally

¹⁵⁹ Slim, “You Don’t Have to be Neutral.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ FADS, *Rapport d’Activité*, 3.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Conseil de Paris, “2025 DPE 10 Subventions.”

¹⁶⁴ Utopia 56, “Notre Financement.”

penalized within the French humanitarian architecture, and thus, if the AdS maintains a neutral stance to sustain its financing.

Ultimately, this discussion can be linked to the broader debate on the various forms of humanitarianism. Fassin, analysing a refugee camp in France, argues that the treatment that the refugees receive “does not rest on the separation of the ‘humanitarian’ from the ‘political’, but on the increasing confusion between the two, which consequently redefines the contemporary signification” of a site.¹⁶⁵ It is the precise confusion between the humanitarian and the political that is the condition this research has documented.

7. Conclusion

This research has examined the inherent contradictions to institutional neutrality as performed by the Armée du Salut, through a close study of its Ramponeau food distribution site in Paris. By combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, it has demonstrated that neutrality is neither a stable organizational position, nor a true ideological choice, but rather a protective strategy, institutional imposition, and ultimately, a public facade. It is precisely because food distribution sites appear so banal and apolitical that they can make the politics of humanitarian aid and the contradictions of neutrality more visible. More importantly, the revealed precarity of the beneficiaries, volunteers, and of the organization itself, is what makes the neutrality of the AdS inherently contradictory.

Slim writes that “there is still a place for formal, neutral humanitarian action.”¹⁶⁶ This research does not dispute this argument. However, it argues that neutrality should be understood as a contingent choice that comes with many consequences, not as a natural and inherent feature of humanitarian work. Indeed, its protective function, notably shielding

¹⁶⁵ Fassin, “Compassion and Repression.”

¹⁶⁶ Slim, “You Don’t Have to be Neutral.”

vulnerable populations from political backlash, comes at the price of internal contradictions: staff dissent that goes unacknowledged, shared precarity that remains invisible, and discriminatory incidents that are collectively muted instead of addressed. It could be interesting for future research to investigate institutional neutrality in food aid within the broader debate on the shift from classical humanitarianism to a transformative humanitarianism, the latter aimed notably at addressing the causes of crises.¹⁶⁷

Finally, this research matters because the people at its center matter, and because its findings carry broader relevance. As France approaches the 2027 presidential election, in which migration will once again become a crucial issue, the question of whether humanitarian organizations can afford to remain silent and apolitical grows more pressing. Giving careful attention to the Ramponeau distribution site, however partial in its representativeness, is a contribution to a debate that urgently needs more voices. In a highly politicized world where information is manipulated, one could and should ponder on the ethical implications of neutrality.

¹⁶⁷ Bradley, “Variants of ‘Political Humanitarianism’.”

AI Disclosure Statement

AI was used as a tool for this capstone, as allowed by the Capstone Handbook. ClaudeAI was used to search for and find literature. Additionally, Turboscribe was also used to transcribe the interviews which were conducted and translate them. Finally, the free version of Grammarly was used throughout the writing process to help with spelling, grammar and punctuation.

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