

BRING 'HUMANITY' and 'DIGNITY' BACK INTO THE RELIEF INDUSTRY – 11 February 2019

Once again, a few thousand aid workers attended the annual Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week in Geneva. In many ways it was a reassuring display of the collective strength and experience (and money and power) of the international humanitarian sector – or relief industry. There is much to be proud of. However, there are also indications of persistent shortcomings.

On display were the impressive logistical and technological capabilities that now can support a large-scale international relief response. Listening to the conversations however and drawing on GMI's wider involvements with aspects of international relief work, including the comprehensive response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh since late 2017, the 'soft' skills remain the stunted sibling in the relief family. Yet that is precisely where the '*human*' aspect of '*humanitarianism*' and the commitment to the '*dignity*' of crisis-affected people comes in. Here some questions for collective reflection:

Does our humanitarian discourse disempower people?

The relief discourse is laced with references to the 'most vulnerable', 'extremely vulnerable', criteria to determine 'vulnerability' etc. The Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, for one, were constantly referred to as being '*vulnerable*', '*traumatised*' and '*illiterate*', and '*victims of gender-based violence*'. A year after their forced flight, they continue to be portrayed and treated as a people without agency. Twenty-five years ago, the aid community did '*vulnerabilities and capacities*' assessments: where has the appreciation for capacities gone?

Does our data revolution dehumanise people?

Evidence based decision-making is sensible. We do more surveys now of crisis-affected populations, at least in high-profile and better resourced crises responses. However, is there a risk that their involvement becomes reduced to answering survey questions determined by others, whose results are not shared back? Also for feedback and complaints mechanisms, technological solutions are being sought, that allow the quick determination of patterns and trends across messages received. But do we, as costumers, want our complaint only treated if it is part of a significant pattern? Would it make us feel noticed only as 'data' in a 'statistic'? And can we assume that people will communicate sensitive issues to someone they don't know at the other end of a hotline, or a passing aid worker who immediately enters their complaint into a tablet? The much-abused and highly dependent Rohingya don't. Would you?

Do we still make time, and show willingness, to listen with an open mind?

Focus group discussions allow a better quality of interaction and richer conversation. In them, crisis-affected persons can be somewhat fuller human beings rather than a number in a statistic. But how often do we as aid workers sit with people without a discussion topic and questions predetermined by us? Do we make the time, do we have the openness of mind, to be present with our shared humanity and empathy, and listen longer and deeper to how the crisis affects them and what they try to do to regain some control over their lives?

Is the 'humanity' principle part of everyone's mandate? We have repeatedly come across situations where an aid worker heard a major problem being expressed by crisis affected people, but argued they had no responsibility to do anything about it, even refer it onwards, when it was not within their organisation's mandate or related to its project. This is not in accordance with point 5.7 of the Common Humanitarian Standard. But we shouldn't need a sector standard to remind us of our responsibility here, if we acted from our core principle of 'humanity' and not just as employees of a individual organisation interested only in its narrower mandate and actions. Every concern of a crisis-affected person is worth our attention, even if the best we can do is refer it onwards to the concerned duty-holder.

Is 'communication' undermining 'participation'?

Commitment 6 of the Grand Bargain urges us to enable a 'participation revolution' i.e. "include people receiving aid in decisions which affect their lives". The Common Humanitarian Standard encourages us to create situations where "communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them." What we begin to observe in practice, however, is a reductionist trend.

There is growing confusion about 'communicating with communities' (CwC), 'accountability to affected populations' (AAP) and substantive participation.ⁱ CwC is taking prominence over the others. We hear experienced aid workers claim that consulting people in a needs assessment shows they are accountable and that there is participation. Many more believe that CwC and APP are different words for the same.

Communicating, being accountable and participating are not the same. There is a need to communicate key messages to people, in an effective manner. Consulting people on their needs and asking them to respond to survey questions can be a form of communicating with. But it is not because I communicate with, that I am also accountable to them. Commercial companies want to communicate with consumers all the time. Doesn't mean they are 'accountable'. 'Accountability' is also more than responding to feedback and complaints. Proper accountability is providing information and insight into how we as aid agencies work, what our key decisions were and why we took them, explaining why we included stakeholders or not, and taking active responsibility for the consequences.

Accountability must include some transparency about budgets and costs. Today, we see some surveys ask questions about whether crisis-affected populations prefer the services of local or of international relief providers. It's a valid question – but a bit manipulative if no information is provided about the different costs of each, and the fact that chronic crises after a few peak years get underfunded. The real choice for affected populations is how far that US \$ 100 will go: higher quality but more expensive assistance for a few years, or possibly medium-quality assistance over a much longer period? What would you choose? Here I encourage us to take note of ActionAid's work on alternative approaches to determine 'value-for-money', by involving the intended beneficiaries into the reflection on the spending choices made – and to be made.ⁱⁱ Why, for example, would a medical agency that runs 5 clinics in a refugee camp not involve the refugee population in the decision what to do, when a reduced budget is no longer enough to support all five as before? This of course takes us to a genuine level of participation, which is of a different order than mere 'communication' and somewhat mechanical 'accountability'.

Do people have concerns beyond aid and rights beyond their material entitlements?

In practice, feedback and complaints mechanisms and focus groups discussions concentrate on the provision of material aid and services. But once the threat to life and limb is reduced, affected people

have larger concerns related to their present and future. For example, they want some recognition of broader human and civil rights in their country of refuge, they want to have a timely and influential say in relocation and repatriation plans being discussed - all impactful decisions that go beyond life-saving and life-sustaining aid. Are our typical Feedback and Complaints mechanisms appropriate channels for the expression of and response to such concerns? Do technical aid agencies, e.g. providers of WASH services, take this up if it comes via such channel? I doubt it – but want to hear your experience in this regard.

Do we encourage crisis-affected people to organise and demand?

Restoring the ‘resilience’ of crisis-affected people is a new buzz word. In practice, it is often equated with projects to allow them to grow some food, and/or generate some income. But ‘*resilience*’ also comes from strong community-bonds and new or adapted forms of social organisation, to deal with difficult circumstances. A year after the Rohingya crisis-response, with the situation still precarious but stabilised (a great collective relief success which deserves to be celebrated!), not much support was visible for the revival or emergence of community-based groups and organisations among the refugees. On the contrary, a frequent remark from international aid workers was that, if any such existed or were created, they would not be ‘representative’: their legitimacy was already questioned before there was any interaction!?

Worse, international aid agencies had decided that Rohingya refugee representation needed to be changed, from ‘majhis’, appointed by the Bangladesh army at the time of mega-influx to help with the initial distributionsⁱⁱⁱ, to elected representatives or committees. A ‘*Governance Reform Working Group*’ was preparing the process, worrying also that some ‘majhis’ would become a spoiler force if they lost their power. Yet no Rohingya was involved in the conversations about changes to their own representational structure and a Rohingya-based organisation that asked, was refused participation in the Working Group. A more complex, but far more constructive approach would have been to encourage the Rohingya to have broad-based conversations about what type of representatives they needed in their current predicament, so that they would make thoughtful choices during any elections. It would also be an opportunity for them to reflect on their own ‘governance’, much affected already by years of interference by the Myanmar authorities in Rakhine state.^{iv} Admittedly most emergency relief workers don’t have the experience or expertise to organise broad-based community dialogues on issues like governance and representation. But other organisations, experienced in community development, participatory peacebuilding and citizen participation, do. It is very well possible.

Suppose we were assisting groups of forcibly displaced citizens of European or North American countries: would we portray them so systematically as ‘*vulnerable*’ and needing us to take all decisions for them? Would we decide changes in their representation without seeking their input and advice? Would we expect them to simply accept that?

People displaced by the fighting in Marawi, Mindanao, supported by local CSOs, took the position ‘*Nothing for us without us!*’. In Cox’s Bazar district by contrast, it was distressing to hear one Rohingya say “*we are much safer here, but in terms of control over our lives, it is not really different from our situation in Myanmar*”. That is not only due to restrictive policies of the Bangladesh government. The lack of participation in the relief decisions also contributes to this. For some serious issues Rohingya have been compelled to organise large demonstrations to make their assistance providers pay some attention, because when they were flagged up less dramatically, there was no response.

If you, dear reader, were a refugee or displaced person (and perhaps one day you will): will you remain satisfied that people only save and sustain your physical existence, but don't make time and have limited interest in listening to you and engaging with you as a fuller human being? Would you remain comfortable if every time you raised a topic that was not directly related to their specific goods or service provision, they would answer that, unfortunately, they couldn't help? Would you not wish to take back some control over your life and the decisions that affect it?

There are personal and structural issues here:

On a personal level, every aid worker can choose to consider and treat every crisis-affected person as a fellow human being, with basic respect, attention and dignity.

As for professional competencies, you wouldn't ask a social scientist to design and install a clean water system or set up a nutrition programme. Similarly, we can't expect that all our much-needed technical experts will be equally good at inclusive and participatory ways of working. So why don't we deploy, from the very outset of a crisis response, sufficient numbers of professionals with various social engagement and social development skills? Apparently because there isn't much funding for this, not within organisations and alliances, nor from institutional donors. What would become possible if we chose less expensive ways of operating? At the same time, we need to counter the well-known reflex that 'accountability' and 'participation' then are the sole responsibility of dedicated units and organisations, just like e.g. 'security', 'gender' and 'inclusion' of e.g. the less abled.^v

Across organisations, we hear admissions that the gap continues between our policies and our practices.^{vi} We continue to hear how difficult it is to *mainstream* these more sophisticated ways of working, such as with conflict sensitivity and with accountability, let alone in a more participatory manner.

'Do No Harm' dates from the mid-1990s; the first Humanitarian Accountability Standard was published in 2007. What does it tell us, if one or two decades later, we still claim organisational difficulties in making this part of our normal practice? Should we then not look at our deeper organisational incentives? Is it because there is more money and visibility to be gained from fast 'delivery' of assistance and at scale, than from slower people-centred approaches? Is it because goods distributed, patients seen, training provided etc. are easier to measure and report on than the quality of participation, and the effectiveness of our conflict-sensitivity or accountability? Is the level of spending and hence the pressure to spend, a more important consideration than the level of participation and the pressure (?) to be responsive and accountable?

Professionalisation of relief work was needed and has brought many benefits. But if we only pay attention to our *savoir faire* (knowing what to do) and lose sight of our *savoir être* (knowing how to be) and become more interested in data and figures (and money) than in real people, then we have lost our soul.

Join us to bring *'humanity'* and *'dignity'* back into the relief industry. Come and explore with us new approaches to knowing how to be, at [Human Potential Forum in Geneva](#), March 20 and 21st 2019.

ⁱ Fortunately, the 2018 ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System focuses squarely on accountability and participation (pp. 155 ff)

ⁱⁱ ActionAid 2017: Value for Money in ActionAid – Creating an alternative.

https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid_value_for_money_creating_an_alternative.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ It is quite astonishing how many aid agencies referred to these ‘majhis’ as ‘*traditional*’ community leaders. They are not. They are a fairly recent creation by outsiders, which has prevented the identification of more deeply respected individuals in the Rohingya community.

^{iv} In a similar vein, protection workers were trying to expand their capacity to deal with the high number of cases of gender-based violence. As most of these happen in the refugee camp and are presumably committed by Rohingya against fellow-Rohingya, surely a sensible complementary strategy should be to mobilise genuine Rohingya leaders to drive broad-based internal community conversations to reaffirm their community norms and values? Yet this was not considered or at best as a belated afterthought.

^v “*a repeated concern that participation was becoming a professionalised, technical exercise rather than a value or commitment*” ALNAP 2018: State of the Humanitarian System p. 160

^{vi} There is no shortage of diagnoses and recommendations, see also ICRC and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative 2018: Engaging with People Affected by Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence.

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