Humanitarian Effectiveness: Reconsidering the Ethics of Community Engagement and the Role of Technology

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ABSTRACT

This position paper discusses the ongoing debate on the topic of humanitarian effectiveness and highlights the need to look at the structuring of the humanitarian system from an ethical point of view. The paper makes the argument that any community engagement with the affected population is a matter of ethics and dignity of those needs to be considered as a central focus to the discussion. The paper also discusses how the humanitarian system as a set of technology, tools & practises focusses on efficiency, and overshadows the issues of care by objectifying and turning the affected population into mere numbers. We discuss that technology and organisations are inter-twined and such a discussion of technology cannot be contemplated without considering the traditional institutional practises as a whole.

Keywords

Ethics of intercorporeal engagement, Humanitarian Effectiveness, World Humanitarian Summit

INTRODUCTION: HUMANITARIAN EFFECTIVENESS AND LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

The topic of humanitarian effectiveness has been highlighted in almost every major global evaluation report where the emphasis is on the need to focus on local actors as the key to the effectiveness of humanitarian action (CHS Alliance, 2015; GHA, 2015; IFRC, 2015; UNOCHA, 2015). Effectiveness is the key success metric for international relief and "a common framework for humanitarian effectiveness, designed to promote collective responsibility and mutual accountability, would ensure that each actor would be held accountable for their contribution to the same characteristics of effectiveness– based on what they can control, what they can influence and where they advocate– no matter who was assessing them. No doubt, a shared understanding of humanitarian effectiveness will also stimulate change in the design, tools and approaches, and results measurement, within the humanitarian system" (Scott, 2014). In the most current global discussion for the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), humanitarian effectiveness is one of the major themes in this global consultation process in defining the new agenda for humanitarian action which shows that the global community is working towards a new approach to the humanitarian system that includes and prioritises on the needs of, and leadership by, the local.

The humanitarian system can be broadly defined as "the network of interconnected institutional and operational entities through which humanitarian assistance is provided when local and national resources are insufficient to meet the needs of the affected population" (ALNAP, 2015, p. 18). Therefore, the humanitarian system is a network of entities that have different functions, roles and mandates along different resources they bring into the system to serve the larger goal of servicing the needs of the affected population. The affected population are the central entity in this system. In the WHS two, out of four, of the main priorities defined in the first consultation

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meeting (WHS Secretariat, 2015) talked about the centrality of the affected people and their collective engagement on one hand, and leadership by the local on the other. They emphasis on localising preparedness, response and letting the local manage the disaster risk and response themselves using their knowledge and expertise. This shows that effectiveness of global humanitarian action is dependent on the adoption of local knowledge and expertise and prioritising the needs of the affected people.

Further emphasis can be found in a 2006 evaluation report (Telford, Cosgrave, and Houghton, 2006) conducted on the international response for the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, where the authors suggest the need for better utilising and working alongside local structures which are already in place and the international community descends into crisis situations in large numbers with good intentions but too often leaving the communities on the side-lines. The way international community goes about providing relief and recovery assistance must actively strengthen and not undermine the local actors (Telford et al., 2006). Another report (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007) talks about ownership of the processes for response and long term restoration by the local and national structures in place which are rooted in concepts of sustainable disaster risk reduction and recovery as key to effectiveness and large scale impact of global humanitarian response. In the most recent case of Nepal Earthquake 2015, one of the major challenges for the global organisations was to ensure that the existing social and economic structures that systematically deprive the marginalised communities from lower castes, do not affect their overall mandate to deliver help to those in need. This requires the INGOs to make optimum use of the network of local NGOs and other actors already present in the area to help provide humanitarian assistance effectively. Nepalese NGOs have the knowledge that is necessary to improve the effectiveness of a response, but they often lack the resources to respond to emergencies. However the response has so far involved little coordination between local and international NGOs; as of June 19th 2015 only 0.8% of funding raised by UNOCHA's flash appeal will be directed to local NGOs (Troutman, 2015). As a result of pre-existing local societal structures and biases, the one-solution-fits-all approach followed by INGOs did not work. The INGOs were struggling to maintain their humanitarian principles to deliver aid on the basis of need alone without closer cooperation with the local stakeholders. As per a lessons paper aimed to assist operational agencies responding to the 25 April 2015 Nepal earthquake, the major priorities identified from past comparable disasters were working with and through local and national actors, structures and networks (Sanderson and Ramalingam, 2015). This has reduced the effectiveness of aid as the relief effort has not benefited from local knowledge neither will it create capacity building, which will be necessary in order to reduce the impact of any future natural disasters. In order to be effective, INGOs need to work with local actors in turn, local NGOs will benefit from closer cooperation with INGOs.

Apart from recognising the regional nature of the response and adapting operational strategy to match that with local NGO partners, ensuring that capacity development of the local communities is seen and used as vital form of aid was a key strategy that was advocated by the global agencies. Investment in local capacities has a direct relationship with the community's resilience building helping them cope with a disaster in a better way and reduce the extent of the damage. Community is always the first to respond in such a case, therefore, enhancing their capacity and skills is also very crucial. These lessons learned and findings conducted by independent evaluation committees of such projects are not new and they emerge after almost study conducted in order to learn from the past (Athukorala and Resosudarmo, 2005; Bilham, 2010; Lorch, 2005; Mulligan and Nadarajah, 2011; Sanderson and Ramalingam, 2015; Wiles, Selvester and Fidalgo, 2005). However, if lessons learned outlined in such studies keep reappearing one starts to think why do we repeat the same mistakes and not learn from the past? Therefore, it begs the question that maybe there is a need to look at the problem in a different way, and that the system itself is not self-reflective enough and we need a different way to understand the structuring of the system.

THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM & TECHNOLOGY[1]

The overwhelming majority of international humanitarian financing follows a bureaucratic pattern and continues to flow via international actors. In the quest of better accountability and transparency, particularly with respect to financial tracking and reporting, the system is designed in a way that promotes a certain technocratic way to assess quality and performance based on numbers. In many cases, international humanitarian response remains 'state avoiding' (Harvey, 2009), including in contexts where there is no operational necessity for maintaining an

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[1] Technology or techne i.e. is the collection of techniques, skills, methods and processes. (Brigham & Introna, 2007, p. 2)

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independent distance from governments. Local and national civil society actors too are often bypassed or marginalized in international responses. Indeed, approaches which assume that local and national capacity requires substitution have become the default response mode for the international response system which heavily influences their own culture and practices (Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2014). Aid organisations have diverse mandates, histories, capabilities and interests that result in multitude of standards on paper which leads to different information needs, processes, and priorities which tend to influence organisational assessments. This bias is reinforced by the design of information technology deployed by relief organisations. "This makes it difficult for organisations to agree on one overall narrative for any given common assessment approach and, in turn, to one common understanding of the problem. Without this basic shared understanding or framing of the problem, it is difficult to agree on shared priorities across (CHS Alliance, 2015, p. 28)." In this narrative the needs of the affected community is supposed to be the central focus, however the way the system is designed to operate, it takes away the attention from the people to processes and numbers. In the recent debates the topic of accountability towards "those we are trying to serve" i.e. the affected communities has been at the centre of attention. A study speaks of this phenomenon as the so-called best practice 'downwards accountability' by INGOs (Walsh, 2014).

Beyond the conceptual problem that NGOs hold almost all the power, and so cannot in practice be held accountable by their intended beneficiaries, there are a series of major practical obstacles. Research suggests that these obstacles range from the narrow focus of humanitarian agencies just supplying a limited range of goods and services to the operating practises similar to a 'contract culture' of winning and delivering grants where the voices of the affected people is limited in decision-making (Walsh, 2014). The problem becomes also evident because there is no mechanism to hold the humanitarian agencies accountable for their quality of work, which usually requires feedback from the affected population and the fact that there is no punishment for any agencies for not following a certain agreed upon standard.

After a disaster much of the country's infrastructure is damaged and much of the funding commitments can be seen as being influenced by the extent of global media attention (Flint and Goyder, 2006, p. 23), media-driven competition among donors and political considerations (Telford and Cosgrave, 2007, p. 4) and not just on the needs of the affected population alone. Organisations working towards aid delivery during emergency relief phase or in long term recovery and reconstruction seem to have distorted objectives driven by their donors' objectives rather than assessed needs on the ground (Collinson, Duffield and Berger, 2013, p. 7). Also in some cases, where there is high international exposure and the need to show performance and results, donors allocate funds quickly to support the organisations. However this might create unnecessary pressure on the organisations to spend money quickly just to show tangible results (Masyrafah and McKeon, 2008, p. 16).

In summary, for different reasons international assistance remains too supply-led, fragmented and paternalistic. Despite recent progress, community engagement can still be characterised as more of a voluntary activity, dependent on the goodwill of individual managers, than a consistent core practice. The way the humanitarian system is organised and dictated by processes aimed at measuring efficiency, promotes the risk of alienating the people most central to the cause, i.e. the affected communities. This makes one beg the question that whether the system is designed to function in a certain way and does not learn from itself. Lessons learned and recommendations from any report or recent debates highlight the need to increase this sensitivity. The notion of having different set of technical expertise and being available as a "global" service provider for a certain set of resources and capacities needed in the humanitarian crises like natural disasters in the world, also results in overshadowing the existing resources, skills and capacities of the "local". This form of technology and its structuring is a form of passive enforcement of certain way of working i.e. globalisation, which can also be seen as disrespecting, discrediting or sometimes completely ignoring the local values, skills, capacities and vulnerabilities. The INGOs "have been uncomfortably associated with a desire to impose a set of western humanitarian values on the world. There are also questions about the power differentials between INGOs and their local implementing partners, and between humanitarians and the recipients of aid. These differences are hidden under the rhetoric of partnership and participation, but they are being played out in the realities of everyday interaction" (Fernando and Hilhorst, 2006, p. 294). Hence, it can be argued that in order to understand the difficulties of making post-disaster recovery effective, there has to be an appreciation of the complexity of the humanitarian aid system that is shaping the endeavours of relating and engaging with the local actors and more importantly, the affected communities.

DISCUSSING THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

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The discrepancy between the ethical code as manifested in the main humanitarian values and the modus operandi of the humanitarian system premised on the technocratic and neoliberal principles calls for further discussion. We argue that this is a matter of difference between ethics-on-paper and ethics-in-practice. Max Weber (Kent, 1983) discussed the effects of the bureaucratic systems valuing the focus on instrumental rationality and its effect on alienating the society. Similarly, Kirkegaard discussed the role of technology and the distancing and displacing of local commitments that introduced nihilism (Dreyfus, 2001). The contemporary mode of operation of the humanitarian system resonates with these claims and match some of the contemporary voices that make similar claims (e.g. Collinson et al., 2013; Duffield, 1994, 2013). Hence, we argue that the humanitarian system has gradually moved away from its original values based on care and help towards an ethics premised on alienation and distancing that puts the survival and existence of the system in the centre of its operations. This 'ethics of alienation' favours the self rather than the 'other'. Important aspects about the primacy of the egocentric self over the 'other' can be gained from the work of Levinas (Brigham and Introna, 2007). In particular, his work deals with the domination of politics over ethics as represented in the tension between the 'said' and 'saying'. The 'said' relates to the voice of the one in charge and concerned with formalisability, calculability and programmability (Brigham and Introna, 2007). The violence of the 'egocentric' institution done through its practices of ordering, and thereby, neglecting and alienating the 'other' can be revealed through 'saying'. Thus, the responsibility for the other can be reminded. How can the care for the 'other' (i.e. affected communities) become more central to the politics of alienation and self-preservation of the humanitarian system?

Understanding the humanitarian system as an ecology of institutional practices (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002, 1996) we can attempt to disentangle the performative aspects of the ethics of alienation and seek to substitute it with the concern and care for the 'other'. Practice as a nexus of 'doings and sayings' (Schatzki, 1996) is constituted of the 'teleoaffective' dimension that designates the 'telos' or orientation towards goals and ends, and the 'affective' aspect or 'how others, things and selves' matter (Spinosa, Flores, and Dreyfus, 1999). Schatzki (1996) argues that these two dimensions are intrinsically bound together and performed and re-enacted in local practices. The concern for the 'self' or for the well-being of the humanitarian system can be understood as underpinned by its objective to seek the distribution of aid in efficient way by relying on various accountability metrics. In other words, the ethics of alienation is related to the practises that displace the concern for people and suffering to concerns of numbers and efficiency. Hence, the body has two sides sensible and sentient, we perceive but are also being perceived. Our identities or 'towards which' are built in this dialogue and premised on reversibility. We make sense of ourselves only in relation and through the ways the 'other' is perceiving us. By distancing and alienating itself from the 'affected population' the humanitarian system is gradually losing its relevance and an unstable and fragmented identity. Moving from a 'care for the self' to a 'care for the other' can happen through a matter of developing a different set of inter-corporeal practices. Care, however, is not a universal virtue, but rather a matter of personal devotion and sympathy (Todorov, 1997). Being distanced and substituting the 'face' for a 'number', and universalizing and standardizing the approach to the 'other' takes away the focus from the affected communities, their needs & dignity to performance. The alienation and distancing of the humanitarian system is similarly silencing the affected community and not recognising and acknowledging its voice.

How can we move away from an 'ethics of alienation' to an 'ethics of intercorporeal engagement'; or 'being-there-for-the-other' rather than 'being-here-for-the-self'?

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to take a stance on the ongoing discussion of humanitarian effectiveness and emphasized the role of the system premised on neoliberal ideals and principles and, thus, drifting from the humanitarian principles around care for the 'other'. In particular, we brought into light a marginalized discussion of the underlying ethics of the humanitarian aid provision practices. The alienation and distancing brought by technology and technocratic dispositions, have resulted in a concern for efficiency and self-preservation of the system. The concern of politics over ethics, and material goods over symbolic and ephemeral aspects of the notion of help and care. We argued that the institutional practices constituting the humanitarian system are self-absorbed and risk becoming even more irrelevant as shown in the ongoing World Humanitarian Summit. Importantly, we argued that this focus on self-preservation is not just neglecting and distancing the local, affected community, but also failing to treat them adequately with the dignity of autonomous human beings with voices and concerns. The identity of the humanitarian system is premised on the 'reversible' dialogue with the local community. The humanitarian system exists for the people in need and such distancing and alienation is

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becoming more detrimental.

We argue that the 'care for the other' is an embodied, local practice that needs the 'other'. Inter-corporeal ethical engagement is not necessarily about physical engagement but about meaningful involvement. Such a meaningful involvement should not reduce the notion of help and care to the automatic provision of goods. While, physical survival is of utmost importance, it is not just a matter of 'physical goods'. Offering symbolic goods such as being there for the other, showing a commitment and willingness to help and engaging the other should become equally institutionalized as the efficient provision of physical goods. Only by enlarging the notion of help beyond the efficient provision of material goods, to entail the symbolic goods of care, we can bring the 'other' or the local community into the centre of humanitarian system; and let them re-gain their dignity. We can speculate that such a process will give a primacy of the ethics over policy in Levinasian terms. The objectification of the local community into numbers and the politics of self-preservation disguised as universalization of care done through the alienated institutional technology can be 'undesigned' by pivoting the understanding that the care for the other is more than just the delivery of physical goods that can be calculated, shipped and accounted for. Hope and care in radical circumstances, as discussed by Todorov (1997), are cultivated through the acts of giving and not by the 'gift' per se. The focus on the physical goods and the technocratic operations around them are a form of alienation and disengagement that is destroying the opportunity for our 'ethical-being-together-in-the-world' upon which the humanitarian system can only remain relevant. There is a need to put the affected community back in the centre of the discussion in a genuine and caring way by having a discussion circled around their dignity, agency and mutual respect.

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