HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS THINK TANK

PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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The author is solely responsible for the views presented here, which do not necessarily reflect the positions of the organisation for which he works.

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Responding to four simultaneous level 3 emergencies at the same time, to a global health emergency, and to a significant increase in the numbers of refugees and internally displaced people has certainly put the humanitarian system to the test. Hundreds of reports, evaluations and workshops analyse what works and what doesn't work from an individual and collective perspective, but this effort is constrained by the very factors that frame how humanitarian action - its successes and failures - is perceived. As this article describes, several factors explain why humanitarian organisations tend to transform failures into promises of change, and to set inappropriate success targets, perpetuating artificial structures and unfair power relations, and limiting the effectiveness of the assistance we provide to those in need[1].

The following is an explanation of some of these factors.

FAITH IN RATIONAL PLANNING

In October 2014, the head of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) team in Sierra Leone admitted the 'defeat' of the international strategy to tackle the Ebola outbreak and opened the door 'out of necessity' to home care as an acceptable alternative to treatment in clinics[2]. In September, Margaret Chan, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Director General had defined the Ebola epidemic in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone as "the largest, most complex and most severe we've ever seen",[3] only days before the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the Security Council approved resolutions creating the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response, the first UN-led public health emergency mission ever. These decisions came three months after Médecins Sans Frontières declared the outbreak was out of control,[4] and only days after the long-requested financial, technical and human resources started flowing to West Africa. If the CDC, the WHO and other international actors considered the Ebola response strategy a failure in October 2014, it is fair to assume they expected to be able to control the outbreak only weeks before when

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[1] I thank Alexandre Le Cuziat and Kristin B. Sandvik for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.
[2] The New York Times. 2014. 'Officials Admit A 'Defeat' By Ebola In Sierra Leone'.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/11/world/africa/officials-admit-a-defeat-by-ebola-in-sierra-leone.html
[3] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/ebola-response-needs/en/
[4] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-27953155

they started working in West Africa. Public health considerations aside, that expectation seemed more based on preconceptions that are common in the humanitarian sector rather than the result of a realistic context-specific calculation. Considering that, as Margaret Chan said, the Ebola emergency in West Africa was "unprecedented in its size, severity, and complexity"[5] and that the global response arrived seven months after the virus spread to three countries with extremely weak national health systems, what could justify the confidence in the ability of the international response to tackle the epidemic 'according to the strategy'?

This faith in rational planning as an appropriate tool to respond to humanitarian crises seems to be imported from domains "with large inventories of tested technologies derived from rich legacies of scientifically derived knowledge",[6] that rely on the existence of a consensus about goals (for example, in the relationship between doctor and patient) and on the availability of the required technology. The fact that such a level of consensus between state authorities, international organisations and local communities couldn't be taken for granted (popular denial of the Ebola outbreak was a common problem during the first months of the outbreak) or that the technology required (treatment centres, laboratories, or generalised access to thermometers, medical gloves and clean water) for a health intervention of a regional scale was extremely limited until the last quarter of 2014 did not lead to questions about the validity of rational planning until the data about infection rates spoke for themselves.

MODERNITY AS HUMANITARIAN PROMISE

Every year United Nations agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement produce glossy annual reports in which they proudly present the results of their work with an interesting combination of aspirational, managerial and military-like terminology. Pictures of satisfied beneficiaries usually accompany the account of how much the organisation achieved in twelve months. These 'facts' are scattered with

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[5] http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/ethics-panel-discussion/en/
[6] Webber, M M. 1983. 'The Myth Of Rationality: Development Planning Reconsidered'. Environment And Planning B: Planning And Design 10 (1): 89-99.

calls for more support (i.e. money) because although much has been achieved there is much more to be done. Moreover, marketing departments in aid organisations often use the 'now or never' argument, stressing the idea that we live in extraordinary times and that now, for the first time in history, we have the opportunity to end whatever problem is on the organisation's priority list. The evidence and possibility of success of committed, modern, professional and technically proficient organisations that, with enough financial resources and space, can respond to the worst humanitarian crises strengthens the promise of a better future. A promise that, as Richard Norgaard explained two decades ago in his book *Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Co-Evolutionary Revisioning*, is deeply entrenched in the collective imaginary of Western culture:

> "Modernity promised control over nature through science, material abundance through technology and effective government through rational, social organization. Modernity also promised peace and justice through a higher individual morality and superior collective culture to which all, free of material want, would ascend. Modernity, in short, promised to transform the heretofore slow and precarious course of human progress onto a fast track. Belief in progress facilitated Western and westernised patterns of development for several centuries throughout much of the world."[7]

It is easy to read Norgaard's quote and conclude that reality no longer allows us to believe in the promises of modernity. Climate change, the proliferation of conflicts, the financial crisis, the persistence of extreme poverty and rising inequality seem to contradict the very idea of progress. Yet, the discourse of international humanitarian action continues to be built on the idea of success and, therefore, coherent with the promise of modernity ingrained in the development. This is nothing to be surprised about, since most humanitarian organisations are, in fact, multi-mandate organisations with development programmes as a priority. In fact, Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, mentioned modernity as one of the four challenges for the humanitarian system in her recent speech[8] at the 'Global Forum on Improving Humanitarian Action'. Again the message seems to be that if humanitarian organisations made a better and more strategic use of modern solutions

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[7] Norgaard, Richard B. 1994. *Development Betrayed*. London: Routledge.
[8] http://usun.state.gov/briefing/statements/243180.htm

(i.e. technology), they would be able to help more people in a more efficient way. Ms. Power went on, quoting Sergio Vieira de Mello, to say that the most urgent task for the humanitarian system is "inventing the future."[9] As Kristin Sandvik explains "as ideas about progress and inevitability dominate the field, technology is seen not as something we use to get closer to a better humanitarianism but something which, once deployed, is itself a better, more accountable and transparent humanitarianism."[10]

INDIVIDUAL HEROES AND THE COLLECTIVE EVIL

The language used by the CDC official, as well as by many others directly or indirectly involved in the Ebola response, exemplifies a way of understanding failure and success of humanitarian action that overestimates the capacity of aid organisations to reverse crisis situations and, therefore, ends up exaggerating the shortcomings of the humanitarian work. Of course, the response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa is neither the first, nor the last or even the worst case of the failure (real and perceived) of the humanitarian system to fulfil its mission: to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity. In fact, numerous examples of failure come to mind and only few of success. Physical and virtual shelves are crammed with books and reports that, with more or less objectivity, detail how and why humanitarian action failed to help those in need in places such as Haiti, Darfur, Somalia or Syria.

At the same time, humanitarian workers are often represented as heroes even when the collective response is criticised as a failure. Time Magazine chose the 'Ebola fighters' as persons of the year in 2014, because "the rest of the world can sleep at night because a group of men and women are willing to stand and fight".[11] In direct contradiction with the faith in rational planning and modernity, heroic individuals performing "tireless acts of courage and mercy"[12] were fighting a war "that is waged with bleach and a prayer"[13]. Even the UN decided to promote the idea that "the world needs more humanitarian heroes" as a

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Sandvik, Kristin Bergtora (2014) "Humanitarian Innovation, Humanitarian Renewal". *Forced Migration Review,* Supplement September 2014. Available at: http://www.fmreview.org/innovation/sandvik
[11] http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-ebola-fighters-choice/
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

key message for World Humanitarian Day 2014 - a date "to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives in humanitarian service, we celebrate the spirit of survivors and we salute the humanitarians who bring relief to fellow human beings across the world".[14] So even if humanitarian organisations fail to deliver timely and appropriate assistance, 'front-line heroes' wearing vests with their logos win the war that seemed already lost. The individual hero prevails over the collective evil.

CONSTRUCTING PROBLEMS, DELIVERING SOLUTIONS

In spite of the professionalisation of the aid sector, the multi-billion budgets and the donor-led value-for-money trend, humanitarian organisations are still "valued for what they represent rather than for what they do and do not compete with other organisations on the basis of output."[15] Coherently, aid organisations use specific codes when dealing, internally or externally, with ideas of success or failure. An interesting example of that dissociative process in the humanitarian sector was the creation of the 'complex emergency' concept or, according to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee "a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing United Nations country program."

Nine out of the top ten recipients of international humanitarian assistance in 2014 (Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Sudan, the occupied Palestinian territories, Somalia, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Yemen) may be characterised as 'complex emergencies'. In fact, these countries together have appeared more than sixty times in the top ten humanitarian list during the last decade. These 'too-complicated-to-be-solved' crises, in which success needs to be carefully presented not to be risible, account for most of the growth in the humanitarian sector, both in terms of number of actors and budget, and its integration with the development and peace-keeping (i.e. security) agendas.

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[14] http://www.who.int/hac/whd_gva_2014/en/
[15] Barnett, Michael N., and Martha Finnemore. 1999. 'The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations'. *International Organization* 53 (04): 723.

Complex emergencies, as representations of the threat of the ungoverned space[16], are the environment where international actors try to close the sovereign gap left by fragile states lacking the will, the capacity or both required to fulfil the promise of modernity. According to this view, their very nature as threats, not just to themselves but to the world, make complex emergencies 'impossible projects' that require a compassionate but firm trusteeship by the World Bank, regional development banks, donors, UN agencies and international NGOs. As a result, the length of humanitarian responses has also expanded indefinitely as has the range of activities that are now tagged as humanitarian.

The 'international system', including humanitarian organisations, constructs a world where their organisational abilities can solve problems irrespective of the realities of those living in complex emergencies. As James Ferguson explained in his classic book *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Domination in Lesotho*, this recreation of the reality is not only the result of deficient knowledge by experts or scholars, but a way of making the reality intelligible, manageable and measurable by international actors. The complexity of the task requires a high degree of professionalisation that, with few exceptions, insulates international experts (i.e. humanitarian actors) from external feedback and, within humanitarian agencies, leads to the development of "internal cultures and worldviews that do not promote the goals and expectations of those outside the organisation who created it and whom it serves."[17] Coherently, 'non-dissociated' realities, those that would question the foundations of international aid discourse, are excluded from the narrative.

GROWTH AS PRINCIPLE

The idea of progress in Western countries, where the largest humanitarian organisations were created and continue to be based, is typically linked to growth, and growth is what best defines the recent evolution of humanitarian assistance. The latest United Nations consolidated appeals have targeted fifty to seventy million people each year, two times the figure from only ten years ago. Coherently, funding requirements are now close to $20

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[16] Duffield, Mark R. 2007. *Development, Security and Unending War*. Cambridge: Polity: 170.
[17] Barnett, Michael N., and Martha Finnemore. 1999: 722.

billion per year. That is three times the amount requested in 2010. Of course, more funding for a higher number of potential beneficiaries doesn't necessarily mean that the real needs have increased compared to previous years, but that donor governments are more willing to fund the needs assessed by humanitarian organisations. Or, perhaps, it means that humanitarian organisations have improved their capacity to identify and respond to the needs that donor governments, still the main source of resources, are willing to fund.

Should this exponential growth be understood as a positive evolution for the humanitarian system? Presumably, chief executives of aid organisations and even the donor agencies signing the checks would reply affirmatively, but others would disagree. Fiona Terry wrote in 2003, "the popularity of humanitarian action as a remedy for human suffering has created a veritable aid industry which increasingly responds to a market logic rather than a humanitarian logic."[18] According to Terry, for this shift to happen, a sense of omnipotence progressively "distorted and eroded the concept of humanitarian action to a point where it has lost sight of its original objectives".[19] While a quasi-romantic idealisation of original humanitarian action has little historical basis, the dichotomy between market and humanitarian logic helps frame the failure-success pendulum from which aid organisations and workers see, assess and communicate their work.

DISTANTLY CLOSE

Coherently with the requirement to insulate their work from other realities, humanitarian workers have strengthened their ability to dissociate themselves from the ethical dilemmas that appear in their everyday work and to cope with feelings of unfulfilled purpose, impotence, and powerlessness. As Mark Walkup explained in a widely cited work, aid workers' coping strategies typically present four stages: overwork, detachment, transference, and reality distortion.[20] Moreover, Walkup linked individual and organisational attitudes:

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[18] Terry, Fiona. 2015. *Humanitarian Action Victim of Its Own Success*. Papers. Crash MSF: 4.
[19] Terry, Fiona. 2015: 3.
[20] Walkup, Mark. 1997. 'Policy Dysfunction In Humanitarian Organizations: The Role Of Coping Strategies, Institutions, And Organizational Culture'. *Journal Of Refugee Studies* 10 (1): 44.

"If it appears that the fundamental coping strategies of individual humanitarian organisation personnel are rooted in psychological processes tending toward denial and rationalisation, then these attitudes and the resulting behaviours are bound to shape organisational culture accordingly. At the macro-institutional level, these individual responses to psychological stress result in two general dynamics within humanitarian organisations culture: *delusion* and *defensiveness.*"[21]

'Mediatory myths' of expertise, knowledge and, finally, success compensate the often-unavoidable perception of failure. Messages of failure are quickly contested by political and technical assessments that end up diluting alternative views with promises of improvement and lessons learned. As important as the threat of failure is the impossibility of success for humanitarian workers that see the scope, ambition, timeframe and meaning of their work continuously stretched to match the ambition of their organisations and donors, as well as the expectations of the public opinion.

THE INEVITABLE HUMANITARIAN ARCHITECTURE

In April 2015, when the Ebola outbreak seemed finally controlled, the Board of Directors of the WHO issued a statement[22] on the Ebola response and the WHO reforms in which they highlighted the lessons learned and outlined measures to improve the organisation's capacity to respond to similar crises in the future. Interestingly, according to the New York Times[23] a first version of the statement echoed the calls for a new body to take over WHO's responsibility to respond to health crises: "Some have said the world needs a new organisation to be created. We agree, and we want WHO to be that organisation." A second version of the statement released a day after omitted that part, as well as a reference to the 'lessons of humility' learned by WHO.

WHO directors probably honestly believe the organisation can be transformed and lead the transformation at the same time. A typical reaction of an organisation in 'crisis management

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[21] Walkup, Mark. 1997: 47
[22] http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/joint-statement-ebola/en/
[23] http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/world/africa/who-promises-reform-after-criticism-over-ebola-response.html

mode', this belief is also coherent with idea of failure as opportunity for improvement and of change as a promise of success so prevalent in the humanitarian system. Thus, no reality could ever delegitimise UN agencies, international NGOs or donor agencies because they will always keep the promise to learn and change, to reinvent themselves and the future. The Humanitarian Reform Process in 2005 promised "an ambitious effort by the international humanitarian community to reach more beneficiaries, with more comprehensive, needs-based relief and protection, in a more effective and timely manner."[24] A few years later, "in light of the growing recognition of the weaknesses in the multilateral humanitarian response, the IASC Principals decided to review the current approach to humanitarian response and make adjustments, building on the lessons learned in 2010 and 2011."[25] The World Humanitarian Summit, an UN-led initiative, promises "to propose solutions to our most pressing challenges and set an agenda to keep humanitarian action fit for the future."[26] By creating the perception that the system is open to constant reform and improvement, the system perpetuates itself. Any change is possible, as long as the current humanitarian architecture remains.

SO WHAT?

This article presents several problems but doesn't provide any answer to them. As such, it might be easily seen as another useless critique. Nevertheless, it is a call for and contribution to an alternative debate about the present limitations of humanitarian action and the possibility of a more appropriate framing of the work of humanitarian organisations. The points presented in this article refer to more than vague intellectual constructions but to factors with implications in how humanitarian responses are designed, funded, implemented on the ground and assessed.

If we agree that humanitarian organisations are stretched to the limit and that innovative solutions are more necessary than ever, it seems fair to demand from key actors in the humanitarian sector a debate that is not limited to technical solutions or easy political

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[24] http://www.unocha.org/annualreport/2006/html/part1_humanitarian.html
[25] https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-transformative-agenda
[26] https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/whs_about

answers to what are complex processes. As long as the humanitarian system remains closed to an in-depth constructive critique, it will continue to run in circles.■

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