A sector reluctant to change

Key trends in the humanitarian sector and the changing role of INGOs

Introduction of Heba Aly to the CEO meeting of the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA)
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Cover photo: Heba Aly at the World Economic Forum

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Introduction

On Wednesday 12 June 2019, KUNO organized a CEO meeting of the Dutch Relief Alliance (DRA) in The Hague. Heba Aly provided the opening session for inspiration and reflection. Heba Aly is the director of The New Humanitarian (formerly IRIN News), a news platform that reports about crisis zones. They report about different topics concerning humanitarian action, amongst which conflict, disasters, climate change, and refugees. Moreover, they watch the humanitarian sector closely and report on issues of accountability and transparency within the sector. In 2015, IRIN News transformed from an UN project to an independent, non-profit news organization, and in 2019, it changed its name to *The New Humanitarian*.

Orchestra

As an independent observer of the sector, Heba Aly aims to inform the CEO's of some key trends in the sector, inspiring them to think about change in the sector and about the role of their own organization within this change.

Heba Aly compares the humanitarian sector to an orchestra, in which there are different players, with different instruments, making different contributions with different accents, but who are all working towards more or less the same tune or goal. She outlines the different actors involved and their different contributions to the humanitarian sector:

- Development actors are increasingly becoming important because fragile states are now such an important part of the humanitarian work, as 9 out of the 10 largest crises take place in fragile states. To deal with issues regarding fragile states, there is a need to get away from the short-term approach in protracted crises. Development actors will increasingly enter the scene. The value they add to the field is that they bring massive amounts of money, and they provide a longer-term approach.
- The private sector brings new technologies to the table. Humanitarians today are offering services that tomorrow, the private sector could potentially trade on the stock-market. This raises concerns around humanitarian principles. However, this innovation could lead to smarter and more sustainable ways of providing aid. Also, they can operate on a bigger scale. Moreover, the World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on the Humanitarian System is pushing for the humanitarian system to support and enable inclusive local markets as one of the best ways to get people in crises get back on their feet. So, the private sector brings technology, know-how, and skill.
- In the governance balance of international, national and local actors, municipalities are becoming more central players in humanitarian responses to, for instance, climate change and migration. Municipalities have the power to deal with issues at a local level, as they can bring a much more structured and service-oriented approach to responding to crises.

- There is also an increasing move towards stronger national governments. They are increasingly taking control over their own crises, for instance in Indonesia. This is an example of how all of the assumptions upon which the humanitarian sector is founded are being challenged and overturned in very tangible ways around the world.

- Citizen-led networks bring in a lot of solidarity and motivation. Activists in this network have frustration with formal humanitarian sector: Sometimes the sector has a formal approach that does not meet the needs that are present, whereas at the same time, activists are willing to address these needs but do not have the resources, experience or coordination.

- Faith-based organizations can bring credibility among local communities.

- Diaspora organization are useful for mobilizing resources and understanding cultural barriers to responses.

- Regional organizations may begin taking on coordination roles typically played by the UN, such as ASEAN's role in the Sulawesi earthquake response.

- "Non-traditional" donors introduce new ideas about how aid should be delivered, for instance the Gulf states' emphasis on dignity in refugee camps rather than per capita cost.

- Local NGOs. Localization is a big topic at the policy level, but at the field level, it is still quite a foreign concept. Some aid workers have never heard of the Grand Bargain. There is a disconnect between the narrative at the international level and reality at the local level. However, local organizations do express their frustration with dealing with international community. They see foreign aid as neo-colonialist or racist. In cases around the world, The New Humanitarian has reported on capacity of local people on the ground: local responses are happening, created out of need.

Trends & a sector reluctant to change

Heba Aly argues that in today's world, humanitarianism is quite different than when the humanitarian sector began engaging at a large scale. Some trends she identifies are:

- The changing landscape as described above: The humanitarian sector is no longer a monopoly of the United Nations, governments, NGOs and Western actors, everyone has a stake in the game now. More and more people are wondering what they can do to address a turbulent word – Heba Aly describes them as "new humanitarians".

- Geopolitics of today: There is a move away from multilateralism. Because of a move to the right in a lot of national governments, there is an increasing risk of funding cuts to multilateral organizations, such as UN organizations. Humanitarian organisations may be forced into the direction of different models of operating because of these changes.

- The people who are affected by crises have a different agency now as opposed to a decade or two ago. An example of an instrument causing this changed agency is social media: People who are affected by crisis have the ability to speak directly to the world, without intermediaries, and to see what is out there, and compare their aid to what others receive in crises around the world.

Based on reporting and analysis done by The New Humanitarian, Heba Aly is sceptical towards the ability of the humanitarian sector to change. Although the sector does recognize the change around them, Heba Aly still notices a reluctance amongst humanitarian actors to adapt to this change, even at high levels (see, for instance, [her interview](#) with former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Stephen O'Brien). New initiatives in the humanitarian sector, such as the Grand Bargain, have not proven able to deliver the change, at least not yet: They are top down and mostly useful to achieve consensus among different organizations. Real change is made through the leadership of individuals and the making of tough decisions within their own organizations. Organizations need to question whether they have gone far enough with change.

The reluctance towards change is supported by a couple of arguments, related to the localization agenda:

- INGOs fear that when they implement an agenda of localization, that this will harm some of the core humanitarian principles. However, Heba Aly argues that some of the principles should be revisited to ensure they remain relevant in the modern era (for instance, a local organisation must be impartial to deliver aid, but must it be neutral to its people's suffering?). Moreover, the Western humanitarian sector has no monopoly on principles and some Western professional aid organizations have questionable ties and alliances themselves.

- INGOs sometimes argue that there is no capacity within local organizations to take over humanitarian aid. However, there is an assumption in the humanitarian sector that international organizations are competent, whereas local organizations are saddled with the burden to prove their worth. In other words, international organizations have to fail spectacularly to have their capacity questioned, whereas local organizations have to overachieve in order to be considered competent. Moreover, concerns about capacity all of a sudden become less of an issue when there is no easy access for international organizations.

- Another objection used by INGOs is that individual donors will only give funds to organizations that they know: that at the very least, INGOs are a trusted intermediary to raise money in Western countries. However, organisations like Give Directly and Global Giving show that this is not necessarily the case. Moreover, in the wake of widespread accusations of sexual abuse in the aid sector, Western NGOs no longer have the credibility they once had.

- A fourth objection is that of humanitarian amateurism. Professional organizations argue that citizen volunteers do not know what they are doing, and therefore should not be in the field. Heba Aly responds to this by arguing that the humanitarian sector has always been about volunteering, but that it has professionalized. She acknowledges that with voluntarism, there is a risk of amateurism. However, over-professionalization is also a risk. With the over-professionalization of the sector, some of the motivation, soul and volunteer spirit is also lost, which is something that volunteers bring back into the field. The question is, thus, whether this professionalization has swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction.

Six models for humanitarian action

Heba Aly argues that, right now, the sector does not reflect the slogan of: "As local as possible, as international as necessary". She participated in a "design experiment" in 2017, convened by the Oversees Development Institute, called "Constructive Deconstruction". The purpose was to apply design thinking, which is typically used by the private sector, to assess who the end user is; how the end user experiences the "product"; and how the "product" can be designed to meet the needs of the end user. This strategy was applied to the humanitarian sector. The goal was to conceive of international humanitarian action in a way that was more adaptable and accountable, and that recognized people affected by crises as having agency to drive their own lives forward. Drawing from that work and wider discussions in the sector, Heba Aly presented six possible models for future humanitarian practice:

- Model 1: Back to basics. Right now, humanitarian agencies are assuming the role to provide everything that is needed, more than only live-saving aid. The question is whether humanitarian agencies are indeed the best actors to provide these needs. By going back to the basics, the humanitarian sector goes back to the minimalist approach, which Heba Aly refers to as the "firefighting" function. The humanitarian sector should thus establish a more limited version of what its function should be. As part of that, instead of needs assessment should be reframed as gap or capacity assessment: What is already happening and where are the gaps?

- Model 2: No-implementation approach. In this model, the functions of International NGOs are limited to technical support and advocacy. Local organizations should be responsible for the delivery and implementation in the field.

- Model 3: Networked humanitarianism. Society is moving towards a network approach, which is no longer top-down, but rather peer-to-peer. People have lost trust in the elite. In a network society, intermediaries are cut out, and needs are directly assessed through crowdsourcing. An AirBnB for humanitarian response would allow organizations (and others) to address the bespoke needs of the people, instead of projecting a template program of international organizations onto the local situation. There are already examples of this happening.

- Model 4: Consolidation and mergers. This is quite a controversial and debated approach. It concerns the proliferation of organizations in a crisis situation, which leads to unnecessary overhead costs, overlap and competition. A more coordinated response can save a lot of money which can be redirected towards localization. However, it does pose the risk of creating a massive bureaucracy.

- Model 5: Area-based approach. Right now, organizations are fragmented into different mandates: For example, food agencies go out to find food needs. This is based on mandate and supply, rather than on demand. An area-based approach can help solve this, by asking what the needs are in a certain area, and coordinate a response based on that.

- Model 6: Circular economy model/cooperative model. In such a model, for instance, refugees are involved in the production of the goods and services that aid agencies are typically procuring from elsewhere. This creates a local, circular economy that becomes self-sustaining.

The main question Heba Aly encourages INGOs to think about is whether their organizations still need to exist within the context of localization. Within the changing context, a lot of organizations are framing their strategies on their need to survive. Heba Aly critically asks whether the original purpose of international NGOs was to have a never-ending organization whose need is to survive no matter what?

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