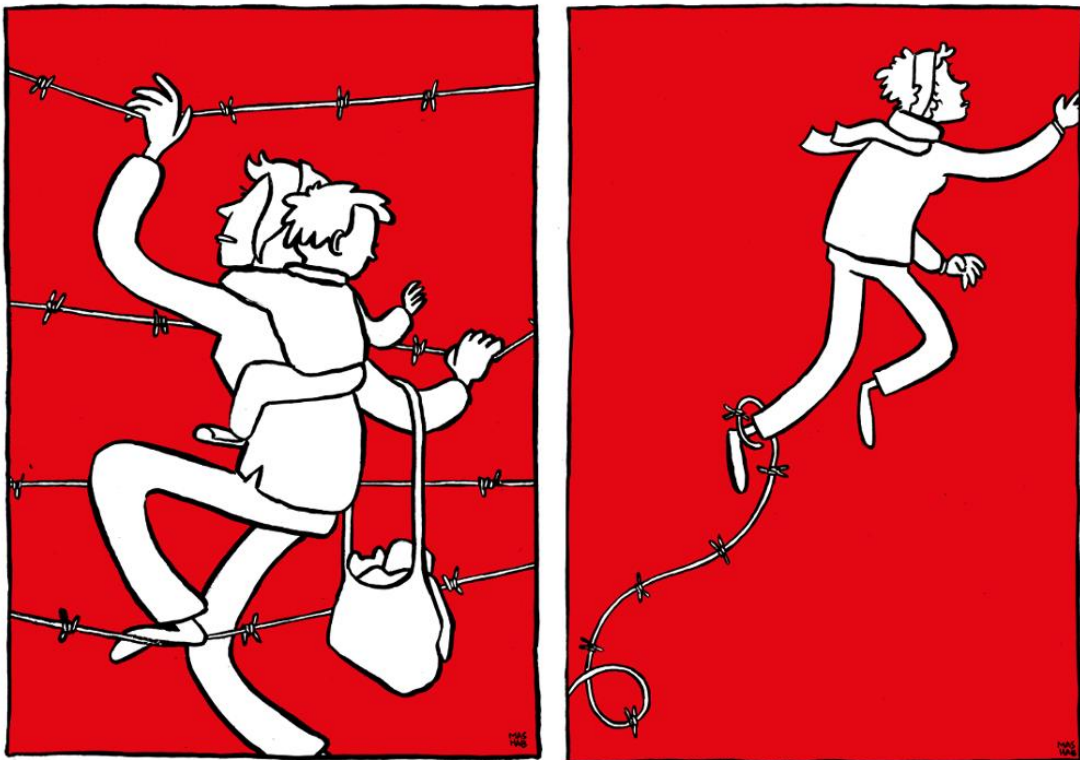


What do practitioners really need from academics?

Panel IHSA Conference 2018



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kuno



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Cover photo: Postcards created for KUNO by Dutch artist MasHab

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1. Introduction

On August 27, 2018, within the context of the fifth bi-annual IHSA Conference, the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) and KUNO organized a panel discussion on the relation between humanitarian practitioners and academics. Two academics (Einav Levy and Reline Reiffers), one action researcher (Addy Adelaine) and one practitioner (Rezaul Chowdhury) sat in the panel, moderated by Peter Heintze (KUNO). Martin Quack (CHA) provided conclusive remarks. This paper summarizes their main points on this topic. Below each description is a link to their respective study. The second part of this report focuses on questions that were asked by the public and the responses from the panelists.

“You shouldn’t be afraid of theory: it is an amazing tool for transformation.”

2. Panelist introductions

Einav Levy is the founding director of the Israeli School of Humanitarian Aid. He presented the audience with three case studies based on interventions related to Female Genital Mutilation, abortion services provided by humanitarian agencies, and a follow-up programme for pregnant women from the Sub Sahara in a clinic. These cases show the added value of academics to humanitarian practitioners, when it comes to importing solutions from other disciplines and addressing taboos using cultural competency within validated protocols and assessed models. Furthermore, Levy proposed some next steps: creating think tanks in organizations, conducting a meta-analysis of lessons learned, and translating academic terminology into the terminology of the field. Finally, Levy affirmed the importance of leadership and the need to be assertive.

[Click here to read the paper.](#)

Relinde Reiffers is a senior researcher at the War Trauma Foundation. Her presentation centred on an impact evaluation of psychological first aid intervention during the Ebola crises in Sierra Leone and Liberia (2014-2016). The research was jointly performed by academics and practitioners. The impact evaluation showed a continuous cycle between practitioners and researchers. First, practitioners provide knowledge and data in the research context. The findings of researchers then feed back to practitioners and the community level, which enhances the preparedness to respond. Finally, practitioners ask for feedback from the researchers during the response. Like Einav Levy, she highlighted the importance of communication and language. Furthermore, there should be a balance between advancing knowledge and addressing real problems: the focus should be on making a social difference. In the concluding remarks, Reiffers stated that practitioners and academics need to know each other's contexts and needs, where researchers have the advantage of an outsider's perspective and practitioners the advantage of a deep understanding of the context. Other points of learning related to the need for supervision, the use of language, planning, and the flow of information.

[Click here to read the paper.](#)

Addy Adelaine is the founding director and CEO of Ladders4Action and was engaged in action research (both research and practice simultaneously) that focused on the relevance of theories of change for her PhD. For this, Adelaine got involved in a UK-based NGO working on youth development in Uganda. In her presentation, she focused mainly on the use of theory in real-life experiences. Adelaine stated a belief that knowledge can only be generated through action as the world is too complex for 'grand theories' and blueprints for change. Adopting Dewey's assertion against armchair philosophy, she proposed that theories should not be used to 'reflect reality', but that instead we should utilize theory in our exploration of work and research to 'change reality'. She showed how she achieved this: after creating her own model, she stepped into the role of practitioner for an NGO to see whether this model fit. As a result, she saw the complexities in a way that were not previously visible. This form of action research shows how practitioners and academics can

work together to use research as a tool for transformation, but it also shows the complexities that arise during this process.

[Click here to read the paper.](#)

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Rezaul Karim Chowdhury is executive director of the NGO COAST Trust in Bangladesh. His presentation focused on what practitioners expect from academics and was based on his broad experiences with (organizational) learning, the daily reality for CSOs in Bangladesh and his recent experiences related to the new narrative of localization (a prominent commitment of the Grand Bargain). He argued that the relationship between academics and practitioners is fundamental for advocacy. All advocacies are based on strong policy research with systematic and analysis-based communication with policy makers aimed at creating critical mass. Finally, Chowdhury proposed some aspects on which academics could create a knowledge base: the fact that the power of knowledge, not money dictates, a focus on facilitation rather than direction; and a respect for a local, open culture, rather than imposing one's own, closed culture.

[Click here to read the paper.](#)

3. Public debate

a. Selection of comments/questions from the floor

The first question came from a practitioner, academic and consultant. He remarked that consultancy means to “tell things people already know”, and that academics “tell things people already know in a language they don’t understand”. He made a strong plea for the use of normal language by academics.

Smruti Patel, founder and co-director of Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) wondered about accountability within the academic-practitioner nexus. Since researchers collect most information, (how) are they held accountable? How do ethics play a role in this? And how do you make sure that the data you collect is fed

back to practitioners to verify? This question was somewhat repeated by a Bangladeshi lady, who focused in her question on the link between NGOs, academics and policy-makers. How and with whom is data and information shared?

A representative from Academics Now mentioned that she has noticed multiple incongruencies when linking the academic world with practitioners. For example, the incentive system for academics focuses on a PhD within ten years. It is a well-known fact that this does not fit in well with practitioners and the long-term commitments that are required in the field. Furthermore, what is required for publications often differs enormously with what is required for practitioners. Finally, humanitarian studies are very interdisciplinary and thus do not fit into a certain box. In turn, it is hard to find out how to incentivize other academics to engage in this cross-disciplinary study. How can these challenges be managed?

b. Responses from the panel

Addy Adelaine identified one overarching theme in the questions: the decolonization of knowledge. For example, the questions relate to not letting dominant power define the language that is used. Furthermore, the questions relate to being ethical, which is not about feedback, but about the involvement of all actors throughout the entire project (from start to finish). Herein, academics are poor and there is discrimination about engagement. However, the privileges and power that are imbedded within academia are not going to change with the current role of academics. It is important that both academics and practitioners are critically aware of this narrative and that both actively work for inclusion throughout the research.

Reza Chowdhury focused on the question concerning the inclusion of policy-makers in institutions. He argued that there are many policy options in institutions. Equally, there are many practitioners in the field. The link between these must be established by academics. In order to achieve this, there is a need for communication. Communication is necessary at an increasing speed, but we should be careful about the audience correctly understanding the language. This entails that we should not look at root causes, but at small, local people. He related this to Rwanda: the genocide would not have happened if we had looked at the root

causes. Convincing academics and practitioners to address the root causes in communication strategies should be central.

Relinde Reiffers argued that the language question can be addressed in two ways: by giving feedback, and by writing together. This collection of input from different people (universities and NGOs in different places) facilitates a search for a common language. She highlighted the presence of a journal, “Intervention, Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas”, which provides journal provides a platform for academics and practitioners to arrange for this common ground. On the question of accountability, she argued that it is indeed very crucial to get data and results back to the field: it should be part of our everyday work. As the War Trauma Foundation did in its research, going back to the workers and hearing their opinions not only enhances the quality of the research, but also improves the relationship between researcher and practitioners. It should be a standard procedure.

“We need leadership! We need to be assertive, we need to be blunt in our approach. What we think needs to be done in the field”

Einav Levy took a different approach to the language question. He argued that the nature of humanitarian action is interdisciplinary. As a result, it is impossible to create one common language. We should not see different languages as a challenge, but instead embrace the fact that there is no chance that all humanitarians will speak the same language. Furthermore, he did not think that there is one “common sense”: What makes sense for one person does not have to make sense for the other. Academics should look at these common senses and put in what is reasonable. Researchers and practitioners would waste a lot of time trying to find a common language. What is needed instead is that a balance must be found to see how much effort we should put in understanding each other better (and where the limits are). We can only do what we can do, which includes going to the

field, cultural competency, forming think tanks and doing practical things. It, however, does not include the making of a general dictionary.

4. Conclusion and wrap up

The wrap-up was provided by **Martin Quack**. From the Centre for Humanitarian Action. “There is nothing so practical as a good theory”, as the action researcher Kurt Lewin put it. Martin highlighted the value of the different forms of presentations and the way each presentation (and underlying paper) showed another way of understanding from another perspective with other instruments. An interesting and recurrent factor is the continuous loop between practitioners and academics, which is ongoing: a lot more insight is needed in order to make this relationship more effective.

The future of the relationship between practitioners and academics depends greatly on people that are doing this kind of work. Kurt Lewin’s quote does not become true by itself, it needs committed people like those in this panel discussion. So far, not many institutions are doing the kind of accountable action research that was discussed in this panel. The panel showed that a link between academics and practitioners is present, and that they can positively influence each other. Yet, more could be structured in order to make this happen.

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