

# The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance

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## What does it mean to be a professional humanitarian?

Peter Walker ([peter.walker@tufts.edu](mailto:peter.walker@tufts.edu))  
Director, Feinstein International Famine Center  
Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, Tufts University  
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What does professionalism conjure up for you? The professional soldier, a lawyer or doctor? A skilled practitioner, an expert, or all of the above? The business of humanitarian action has become infinitely more complex over the past decade. This chapter will examine the environment within which humanitarians work, it will propose a framework for understanding the nature of professionalism and will then test humanitarianism against this model. Professionalism is not the only model or an exclusive one for organizing. As Dan Curran from the Humanitarian Leadership Program at Harvard University puts it “professionals need to be surrounded by good management”! But can humanitarianism thrive without professionalism?

### Three traditions

Humanitarianism has its roots not in one, but at least three traditions.

*First*, the tradition of private charity and caring for those who suffer. This tradition has given rise to most of the organisations which today we label NGOs.

*Second*, the tradition of politically directed relief. The provision of relief to alleviate hardship after and during war has been part of the political armoury of states and warring parties for as long as its antithesis - the city siege or the scorched earth policy.

*Third* is the strange hybrid tradition of the Red Cross and specifically the ICRC, coming as it does out of a deal cut between a concerned citizen Henri Dunant and a canny political leader, Napoleon III. In return for guaranteeing unimpeded access to the battlefield for his local volunteers, Henri Dunant agreed that they would act in a neutral way and not seek to affect the outcome of the fighting.

In each of these traditions the relationship between the practitioner and the beneficiary is radically different, ranging from a broad agenda to address and prevent suffering and injustice, through an explicit political agenda to a narrower “immediate alleviation of suffering” agenda.

Today the divisions between these three traditions have become blurred to the point that they are indistinguishable. Humanitarians do not know who they are.

## Why bother with professionalism?

As Johan Schaar, the Swedish government's top humanitarian aid official puts it:

"I like to think, and talk about, our work as the practical enactment of some very high and important principles, or ethics, as they are codified in IHL [International Humanitarian Law], or in the kind of customary law that regulates human social interaction. These ethics have no meaning other than when they are translated into action, which makes our task a very special one."[\[1\]](#)

That is the up side. The down side is cautioned against by Hugo Slim, one of today's key commentators on the ethics of aid.

"Professionalism also serves to exclude as well as include! And here is the ambiguity of professionalising. While some degree of exclusion is responsible (as with brain surgery for example!), professionalising certain activities can be self-serving, like the medieval artisan guilds that ensured that no one other than their mates or their heirs could ply their trade."[\[2\]](#)

Humanitarians, from all countries and cultures, seek to serve victims of crisis. Without some common understanding of necessary knowledge, skills and common standards, the disaster victim is at the mercy of the vagaries of personal whim, political expediency and well meaning, but possibly ineffectual, action. If humanitarianism is to respond across the globe with equal concern for every victim and with equal potential to alleviate suffering, then it needs a globally defining framework, to lock in the relationship between values and action, for now and the future.

## What environment do we operate in?

David Rieff in his expansive but profoundly depressing analysis of the course of humanitarianism over the past generation, *A Bed for the Night*, sees an idea run riot: "Humanitarianism as an ideal has achieved an authority and reach that would have been inconceivable even twenty years ago. Ironically, humanitarianism, at heart a radical philosophy that believes in the equality of all people, the unique and infinite value of the individual and the fundamental importance of solidarity between peoples around the world, has prospered in the 1990s and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it poses little threat to the status quo and offers a safe alternative to political action."[\[3\]](#) Humanitarianism has not championed radical political change in the countries where it operates or in the states that fund it. Humanitarianism has expanded to involve a wealth of new actors, military forces, defense contractors, logistics companies, all of whom can legitimately claim to provide service - but is it humanitarian? Humanitarianism has become public property!

Since the civil war in the Nigerian province of Biafra in 1967, images of suffering from around the globe enter the living rooms of just about every family in the west. It is true that there has been a "revolution of concern". People see the suffering and they respond. The figures for public giving to aid agencies bear this out - up from US\$800 million in 1970 to US\$4.6 billion in 1997. But this increasing breadth of coverage and concern has not been accompanied by any depth of analysis, any real understanding of

why there is such suffering in many parts of the world. The public image, which drives fund-raising, is one of instantly alleviated suffering of innocent victims. This driving image bears little resemblance to humanitarians' self-image of value-driven professionals. It sets up an ongoing tension between the public's expectations and the reality of our work which clever PR and media work cannot and should not cover over.

### The pressure of funding

Official funding of the humanitarian endeavor has also increased dramatically over the past decade, up from one billion dollars in 1990 to 3.5 billion dollars in 2000. Increasingly funds are tied to specific projects and outputs. As the head of disaster response for one major American NGO put it, "more and more funding from governments feels like contracts, not grants". This trend affects the UN agencies as well. By 2000 UNHCR received only 18 percent of its funding in unearmarked contributions.

Some agencies are wary of taking too much government funding and prefer instead the relative autonomy that comes with private donations. The British agency Christian Aid gets 75 percent of its funds from the general public, likewise MSF. In an endeavor that values independence of action, unearmarked funding is manna from heaven.

### The globalization of aid

The UN humanitarian agencies have always been global, but driven by this tremendous increase in resources, and the sheer ability today to work globally, many non-governmental humanitarian agencies sought to follow in the footsteps of the Red Cross and the UN and create global networks to maximize their ability to access resources and deliver assistance.

Lindenberg and Bryant show in their recent book, *Going Global*, how the major Northern-based humanitarian agencies - and all the big humanitarian NGOs are Northern - have responded to globalization by themselves becoming more and more global in their nature and outreach. They identify three stages agencies go through: national, multinational and transnational.

Most of the major well-known humanitarian NGOs fall into this third category. At the extreme end of the transnational NGOs are those that have made the leap to disbursing power and effectively become donors within their own systems. Meanwhile, as the number of NGOs at each level has multiplied many-fold in the past few decades, so the number of staff employed has mushroomed.

In following this course towards transnational status, many humanitarian organisations have looked to the corporate sector for inspiration and example on how to cope with change, or better still how to ride the crest of it and stay out in front. It has become hard to distinguish between the mission to alleviate suffering and the mission to ensure the organisation survives and prospers. Growth can be good, but growth can also fuel the tension between the value driven mission and the tools to achieve that mission. Insidiously a humanitarian global organization can shift from being value driven to organizational-survival driven.

## The globalization of power

Agencies worked harder, spent more and became more global at the same time as the globalization of economic interest, largely the interest of what British analyst Mark Duffield calls the Northern metropolitan states, ushered in a new era in foreign policy and development. No longer, in Duffield's view, is the aim to change the economy and structure of the Southern states. Today he believes aid - development and humanitarian - has become a far more significant tool of foreign policy, and its chief purpose is to change how people think. Call it spreading democracy, human rights or free enterprise. The goal is to directly influence a country's populace - *despite* its government. Aid agencies have unwittingly, and sometimes wittingly, become the deliverers of this new brand of rule-at-a-distance. Can humanitarians be part of this and be true to their values of independence and neutrality? Do all humanitarian efforts need to be neutral in the sense that neutrality is nowadays defined?

It is against this dilemma-ridden, complex and fast changing environment that we need to unpack our present day professionalism.

### What's the nature of professionalism?

Donald Schon, a leading social scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writing in the early 1980s and reflecting back on three decades over which professionals and the ideal of professionalism had shaped economic and social development, sees professionalism as "the application of expert knowledge to problem solving"[\[4\]](#). It is a service provided, and thus professionalism also includes a relationship to those who are served. Schon sees professionalism resting in the individual and in the organization. Individuals rarely work in isolation. Doctors need clinics and hospitals, lawyers need courts.

The roots of this view of professionalism, which had dominated for the past one hundred years, lie in the scientific and industrial revolution. Some professions, like medicine and law have an ancient tradition. They have established a proven body of knowledge to build on, a precedent of tried and tested skills and a set of commonly agreed values. The Hippocratic Oath, despite it being two and a half millennia in age, provides a wonderful example of this.

Other professions, like psychiatry, are younger and have not yet established such a solid foundation. Others like education are ancient but see their knowledge and skills base shift as society changes. Edgar Schien, a leading educationalist in the USA, in trying to add structure to his shaky profession sees three components underlying professionalism:[\[5\]](#)

- A set of attitudes or values that define how you relate to those for whom you provide service.
- An underlying basic body of scientific knowledge.
- Systems to apply this knowledge.

This same triumvirate of values, knowledge and systems is seen at the heart of almost all professions.

## A model of professionalism

Here then is our model for professionalism.

- First: Edgar Schien's three components: values, knowledge and systems.
- Second: an acknowledgement that these need to exist in the person and in the organisation of practitioners.
- Third: a research and education system which provides an ever-learning foundation for the practitioners
- Fourth: on the other side a dynamic and respectful relationship with the clients the profession is providing a service to.

Finally of course, professionalism is set in its environment. Context and adapting knowledge, skills and systems to the uniqueness of each problem is everything.

This is the model against which we need to test humanitarianism. Does it exhibit all of these qualities? Can gaps be filled and, in the end, does this approach add to or detract from the humanitarian endeavor?

### Professionalism unpacked: What are our values?

With more and more agencies, intergovernmental bodies and even government ministries claiming to be humanitarian, or to carry out humanitarian work, there is a real need for a clear understanding of just what the essence of humanitarian work is and what the key humanitarian values are.

What are our universal values?

- Humanity, the value that underlies all humanitarian action, is an article of faith - you can't prove it, you just have to believe it. All are equal, all aspire to and deserve a decent life and common bonds of need, emotion and psyche connect all. You either buy into this view of the world or you don't. "*We would define humanity as a sentiment of active goodwill towards mankind*" [6]. So writes Jean Pictet, a leading thinker in the Red Cross Movement. Interestingly Pictet moves straight from defining humanity to defining humanitarianism. "*Modern humanitarianism is an advanced and rational form of charity and justice. It is not only directed to fighting against the suffering of a given moment and of helping particular individuals, for it also has more positive aims, designed to attain the greatest possible measure of happiness for the greatest number of people. In addition, humanitarianism does not only act to cure but also to prevent suffering, to fight against evils, even over a long term of time.*" What a mixture we have here! The value of alleviating human suffering, the value of justice, the value of fighting for a better future. Above all though humanity implies solidarity with those who suffer.
- Secondly independence. Independence is the guarantee that humanity, as described above, can be practiced on all occasions. To paraphrase Pictet again, *humanitarians cannot let any class, pressure group or even public opinion turn them away from the path defined for them by their values. They cannot tolerate any interference resulting from financial pressure. Likewise they*

*cannot tolerate any interference resulting from political or religious pressure. Independence allows us to practice humanity.*

- Thirdly, humanitarians value impartiality. They take a holistic view on suffering and would, if they could, alleviate all suffering. But resources are finite, so they prioritize the most acute cases of suffering, regardless of the politics, religion, and ethnicity or otherwise of the sufferer and regardless of the cause of the suffering. Impartiality is the value that guards the equality of the individual victim.

I believe that all three of the above values are a necessary part of humanitarian action. Actions that do not demonstrate all three values are not humanitarian.

A fourth value often voiced but much less certain in its universality is the value of neutrality. Neutrality is a further refinement of impartiality, in that it is a value resting as much in people's *perceptions* of one's actions than in the actions themselves. Neutrality is about not taking sides in political or religious disputes. It is about being perceived as not judging the rightness or wrongness of actions connected with political and religious process.

The problem with neutrality is that it is a relative, not an absolute, value. Before the advent of the Geneva Conventions, to object to the inhuman treatment of prisoners of war would often have been perceived as a non-neutral act. Before the end of the Cold War, to air concerns over human rights violations would definitely have been a violation of neutrality. Today such a judgment is much less sure.

So, whilst many humanitarian agencies would hold neutrality to be one of their key values, it is a difficult one to square with a concern for justice issues. The value of neutrality lies in its efficiency as a way of gaining access to those who need assistance and protection. But for those who are also concerned with addressing the causes of crisis and injustice and ensuring that the perpetrators of injustice are exposed, neutrality is a double-edged sword.

Values lie in the individual but our collective practice can betray them: one little cameo by way of illustration.

Impartiality requires that all suffering be treated equally, with the proviso that in an imperfect world with limited resources, priority is given to those suffering most. Yet with African relief beneficiaries receiving on average less than US\$100 per person and Balkan beneficiaries more than US\$200 per person; and with some disasters virtually ignored (Afghanistan until 9-11) and others grossly oversubscribed (Hurricane Mitch in Central America) in terms of cash and agency interest, there is ample evidence that collectively we - or at least the finance providing part of our system - are failing to demonstrate our most basic of principles.[\[7\]](#)

## Responsibilities

Over the years many humanitarian groups have tried to express their values through charters, codes and statements. The Red Cross was one of the first to do this with their “fundamental Principles” laid down in 1965. In the early 1990’s there are a rash

of initiatives to develop common codes - The Mohonk Principles, the Providence Principles and the Code of Conduct to name but three. The Code of conduct survived and became embedded in the later Sphere standards. All of the basic values discussed above are captured in the Code, except neutrality which was left out at the behest of the more development oriented agencies involved in its drafting. Included as well are assertions as to the value of reducing future disaster vulnerability - echoes of Pictet's "*to prevent suffering, to fight against evils*". Many individual agencies have also established guiding codes. Médecins Sans Frontières has a four point charter which focuses in on humanity, independence and impartiality.

So, the value set is there. Humanity, independence and impartiality seem to be common to all. Neutrality, maybe being viewed as a means to an end, is valued by those who choose to work in conflict areas, but is seen as a possible hindrance to those who focus more on disaster prevention and justice. The values are there, but do individuals, the organizations they work in and the system as a whole consistently exhibit these values?

### Knowledge and skills

Humanitarianism involves a huge range of skills, and an enormously diverse body of knowledge. In effect it draws upon many other professions from medicine to engineering to law to political science. In the course of practicing humanitarianism, any combination of these skills may be called upon. Some, however, have developed specific bodies of knowledge and practice most relevant to the humanitarian situation, specifically with the professions most directly associated with the provision of assistance and protection.

Many individual agencies have developed guidelines and best practice. MSF and Oxfam guidance notes and standards are widely used, as are those from the main UN agencies, UNICEF, WFP, UNHCR and WHO. In the mid 1990s the interagency initiative "the sphere project" worked to rationalize this body of standards into one common set - the Sphere standards. The success of Sphere is manifest in its popularity. But it is not totally unquestioned. Agencies and individuals who place great emphasis on the values of human solidarity, on the intrinsic value of offering assistance and witnessing suffering, feel that Sphere may trivialize the act of assistance, turning it from a value driven to a cost effective driven enterprise. Again we come back to the tension between values and apparatus.

Fiona Terry in her critical publication "Condemned to Repeat?" [\[8\]](#), argues cogently that the Sphere standards and other proclaimed "universal" standards actually do little to address the three fundamental problems of humanitarian practice today, protection, the quality of humanitarian space and sufficient resources. Terry argues that by using a rights based approach to assistance, we risk portraying assistance *as* protection and thus betraying the very basis upon which humanitarianism is built. In handing over a tool to donors and governments to measure and judge aid agencies we risk giving them the means to "legitimately" exclude agencies on the grounds of unproven competence. If used malevolently or politically this severely reduces humanitarian space. Likewise many donors are now making funding contingent upon meeting the Sphere standards thus creating a double edged sword - to ratchet up aid quality or deliberately limit aid quantity.

Despite these exceptions, there is sufficient evidence, in the guidelines, standards and methodologies to suggest that there is a body of generally accepted humanitarian skills. It is a body that focuses around the assistance side of humanitarianism, and herein lies one of the key critiques of the standards based approach to date. By elevating technical knowledge and skills around assistance almost to the exclusion of other bodies of knowledge and skills, such as international law, human rights, developmental processes or disaster mitigation, the humanitarian endeavor risks shooting itself in the foot.

So, for our professional model we can be confident that there is a body of accepted knowledge and skills, but there is much doubt that this body is sufficiently broad and universally accepted to really act as a firm platform for action. “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing”, so the adage goes. Perhaps humanitarianism is proving it right.

### Systems to channel values and knowledge

Moving on in our model, does humanitarianism have the systems, the checks and balances, to allow individuals and organisations to consistently practice their skills and keep to their values or is “walking the talk” left up to the conscience of the individual?

The humanitarian community is something of a misnomer. There is no single tight-knit community. To be sure there are organizations that are consistently involved in almost every humanitarian crisis, by virtue of their size and diversity of action - the UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement, the big European and North American NGOs - but even they form more of a loose association than a community.

Despite this ambivalence over the nature of the community, attempts are being made to develop systems that promote the basic values and knowledge of humanitarianism.

### *Consolidated Appeal Process*

In the mid nineties, faced with mounting criticism that the UN was unable to act coherently in emergencies, the agencies developed the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP). This process requires the UN agencies to work together and produce one set of analysis leading to one appeal for each emergency they are involved in. It allows donor governments to allocate their funds more efficiently. Ironically, because it allocates funds to a specific country, donor money flowing this way gets categorized as bilateral, not multilateral. The CAP has its critics. The UN agencies do not have a consistent methodology for needs assessment. The “consolidated” part of the appeal may refer more to the editing exercise of putting individual agencies requests together than to a common assessment and analysis.

### *The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)*

Established in 1997 ALNAP is undoubtedly one of the success stories in humanitarian systems development<sup>[9]</sup>. ALNAP is clear about its purpose "ALNAP, as a unique sector wide active-learning membership network, is dedicated to improving the quality and

accountability of humanitarian action, by sharing lessons; identifying common problems; and, where appropriate, building consensus on approaches." The network involves individuals from donor governments, UN, Red Cross and NGO agencies and academia, with the shared aim of enhancing knowledge in programme evaluation and lesson learning. In many ways ALNAP is a technical network. Unlike many of the other "community wide" initiatives of the 90s ALNAP has managed to cut across donor and operational agency boundaries and, more recently, make significant advances in involving agencies and individuals from the South.

### *Sphere* [\[10\]](#)

Sphere, as well as being a knowledge exercise was also an attempt to introduce system. Since its inception the project has invested heavily in dissemination, training and institutionalizing Sphere. In its early days it explored the possibility of going further, of having some sort of registration for agencies who met Sphere standards but the profession proved too weak for this.

### *People in Aid* [\[11\]](#)

People in Aid started as an initiative from a collective of UK based agencies to provide common guidance and standards around the management of humanitarian workers. The human resource standards that are embodied in the People in Aid code were worked out in the early 1990's and in 1996 11 UK based agencies signed up to them. The material was field tested over a three-year period and in 2000 seven pilot agencies were subject to an external social audit to see if the code was making any real difference to how organizations treated their staff.

### Financial accountability

Ironically, the nearest thing the humanitarian community has to a supra-agency rests in the nature of its donors. Donor governments contributed around 2.5 billion dollars of humanitarian assistance in 2000 the vast majority of that flowing through the UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and a hand full of NGOs. Two donors, USAID (for the American government) and ECHO (for the European Commission) account in most years for fully 50% of these funds. The financial and narrative reporting requirements fixed between donors and the agencies represent a significant control system in the humanitarian community. By altering the criteria that project proposals need to meet, or the issues agencies must report upon, donors can significantly shape the way agencies do business. But the process is back-end loaded. Performance criteria may be laid down but there is no sign of a systematic commitment to ratchet up competences to meet these standards. There are real questions over the risks to agency independence involved in being driven by donor standards, no matter how well intentioned they are.

Humanitarianism has systems to help reinforce its value set, to aid workers and organizations in meeting performance standards and to ensure that its works effectively and efficiently, but the systems are patchy and self policed if policed at all. They look like the beginnings of a profession seeking shape, and perhaps that is what they are.

## Accountability and our relationship with our clients

Efforts like the Code of Conduct, the Sphere project and the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) have created a change in the way agencies and individuals view their responsibilities. All these efforts are part of a move to increase the accountability of humanitarian agencies and workers. But accountable to whom? Do they really make us more accountable to our clients? Who are the clients of the humanitarian?

The obvious answer is “those who benefit from their service”. The “beneficiaries” much measured and accounted for in project proposals. But with our credo of impartiality, our clients are potentially all those in need of assistance and protection, not just those we directly aid. Since we practice triage on a grand scale we have a duty to find ways of attuning ourselves to all our clients, those we actively choose not to assist as well as those we assist. This relationship is not just about accountability. Like a doctor with a good bedside manner or a lawyer who explains the complexities of litigation in language we can understand, our duty is to relate to our clients in their humanity, not just their physiology. They are not just statistics to generate food aid calculations. Every single person we work for has a history, a future, has aspirations and capacities and maybe has a dark side to their past.

One of the biggest challenges to humanitarians today is how to maintain an honest relationship with our clients when they number in the tens of thousands and we seek to provide aid in situations of chaos and fear.

### A more holistic approach

In parallel to the development of the Sphere standards and a focus on the technical skills of assistance has been a growing awareness of the complexity of the political and economic environments we intervene in and the potential for well-intentioned work to do harm. Two different analytical and skill sets have been developed over the past decade around these concerns: the Local Capacities for Peace (LCP) project and the Livelihoods approach. Both of these approaches see humanitarian aid not as something that is delivered, but as something that is derived. Derived from an intimate understanding of the perception of the disaster victim, the beneficiary, the client. In essence these approaches seek to add meat to the notion of a two-way relationship with those who are the clients of humanitarianism.

### *Local Capacities for Peace*[\[12\]](#)

To quote from their website: “The Project seeks to identify the ways in which international humanitarian and/or development assistance given in conflict settings may be provided so that, rather than exacerbating and worsening the conflict, it helps local people disengage from fighting and develop systems for settling the problems which prompt conflict within their societies.”

Using case study methodology and action research, the project has developed a raft of techniques and approaches for improving the delivery of assistance and understanding the local operating environment. The methodology developed is essentially optimistic.

It allows agencies to analyze their assistance in terms of its likely interaction with the causes and consequences of violence, adapting programming to guard against inadvertently adding to violence and to positively support local processes that promote normality. The projects premise is that there is always a way of connecting with warlords and such people; that they are not wholly evil. The challenge for the aid agency is to have the courage, patience and skills to make that connection.

### *Lives and Livelihoods*[\[13\]](#)

The LCP project is based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Two miles away is the campus of Tufts University where the Feinstein International Famine Center is located. There, Sue Lautze has been championing a different approach to assistance. Lautze has adapted the developmental Livelihoods approach to understanding just how local household and community economies work in crisis and hence how and why interventions are likely to affect present and future prosperity. Collaborating with DFID-funded research in the UK, Lautze has recently applied this approach to examining the potential for new approaches to humanitarian work in Afghanistan.

The Livelihoods approach seeks to understand all the capacities, assets, opportunities, limitations and relationships used by people to construct their livelihoods. Like LCP it is inherently holistic and detailed, focusing on process, on what people do, not just the outputs they produce. It is optimistic, always seeking opportunity. The Livelihoods approach to understanding stressed households and communities does not lead inevitably to a “livelihoods project”. Rather it provides a much greater depth of understanding against which to judge the likely effects, short and long term, of any aid intervention.

Both the Local Capacities for Peace and the Livelihoods approach to assistance take the Sphere project a step further. They are concerned not just with inputs and outputs, but also with process and systems. They build upon the necessity of interaction between the stressed community and the assistance agency.

Methodologies which help us know more about our clients, like the Local Capacities for Peace approach or the Livelihoods approach are helpful, but much more needs to be done.

Accountability is a particular sub-set of the relationship between the humanitarian and the victim. One initiative attempting to establish a methodology for accountability to victims is the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP). An interagency programme that started in 2001, HAP seeks “to strengthen accountability towards those affected by crisis situations, and to facilitate improved performance within the humanitarian sector.” The project is carrying out action-research in emergency operations to find ways of allowing for greater accountability to disaster victims. It is working with operating agencies to help them build field accountability into their programme design. It is early days yet and in many ways the project really belongs in the background research side of professionalism, not in the field of practitioners. In the summer of 2002 the project field tested its methodology in Afghanistan and is due to do its next round of research in Cambodia in early 2003.

The drive for accountability through systems not only raises issues of whom we are accountable to but also of the very nature of relationship between humanitarians, their supporters and their clients. The moral legitimacy of humanitarian agencies assumes trust in relationships. Humanitarians are asking that their competence and judgment be accepted with trust and that trust is an intrinsic part of “humanity”. Is the drive to document and systemize accountability eating away at the space left for trust and thus intrinsically altering the nature of the relationships in and around the endeavor?

Humanitarians certainly have a relationship with their clients, the victims of war and disaster, and that relationship is changing. It is more reflective and more interactive than it was a decade ago. Can it be developed further? Undoubtedly, particularly by smaller more local agencies that are able to practice humanitarianism in an environment with which there are familiar. The challenge today is to take the approaches pioneered in the Livelihoods and LCP programmes and the skills used in the HAP, and begin to apply them as standard, not exceptional, tools.

### Solid academic base?

Finally, in this tour of humanitarian professionalism, we need to say a word about the academic body that should underpin the profession. And it is here that we get the clearest indication that this is a young and fragile profession. Whilst there are many universities offering courses in disaster management, there are desperately few offering qualifications in the more politically fraught field of humanitarianism. In 1993 five universities in Europe, using funding from the European Union, developed the Network on Humanitarian Assistance<sup>[14]</sup> (NOHA) to produce a common master’s programme, allowing students to build up their degree from courses taken in the various contributing institutions. An Australian university has teamed up with a disaster management institute in the Philippines to offer a masters course that can be built up credit by credit through participating in local workshops and trainings. In the USA, a humanitarian specialization is now offered in a few public health masters and international studies degrees. A few institutions offer specific humanitarian assistance masters.

There are only a handful of academic journals devoted to the profession, although there is a growing body of informal publications capturing field experience, policy analysis and best practice, The Humanitarian Practitioners Network<sup>[15]</sup>, run out of the Overseas Development Institute in London is perhaps the most developed informal publisher. When one scans the academic literature it is frightening how few researchers are consistently working in this area. And when one compares the content of ‘humanitarian coursework’ offered around the world, there is little sense of an agreed basic body of knowledge. Engineering, international law, nutrition, public health, management, all may, or may not be there.

In this last area there are attempts to move things forward. University academics in North America and Europe got together for the first time in the spring of 2003 to review the content of the degrees they offer under the banner of humanitarianism and see if they could develop an agreed core curriculum. It’s a small start but a move in the right direction. To build a profession, academics as well as practitioners have to play their part<sup>[16]</sup>.

## And the future?

In holding humanitarianism up against this model of professionalism one comes away with the distinct impression of a young profession. There are successes, contradictions, gaps, experts and charlatans. Let us focus for a moment on the most blatant gaps and ask, are they fixable or are they so fundamental as to question the notion of humanitarianism as a profession?

1. The connection of academic study and education to practice is still very weak. Where academic qualifications do exist, there is not yet a common understanding within humanitarian organizations of the need for practitioners to have an expert education. All too often, aid agencies prefer to send their staff on MBA courses to acquire business skills rather than back to university to acquire humanitarian skills. Part of the reason for this is the separation, within many UN agencies and NGOs, of field and headquarters staff. How many managers at headquarters level really know how to interpret nutritional surveillance data or livelihoods economic data correctly? How frequently is this even seen as a necessary skill? Not so often I suspect. The good news is that universities are awake to the need to build a more solid academic basis for the subject, and, funding permitting, we can expect to see substantial consolidation over the next few years around course content and level.

2. There is a frightening lack of institutional learning in humanitarian agencies. Rapid staff turnover, low investment in training and little focus on knowledge management as a driving force for the organization mean that experience rests in the heads of a few long-term staff or in dusty filing cabinets. Few systems for institutional learning seem to be functional. Development here is critical if agencies are to remain innovative and able to balance local nuances against global standards.

3. The knowledge base of humanitarianism needs expanding. An understanding of rights and justice issues and the ability to articulate and operationalise these in humanitarian operations are essential. The idealism of humanitarian action was for many years expressed in charitable notions or concerns to bolster up state failings - appropriate sentiments for the time, but less so today. Today it is people, not states, which take centre stage. Humanitarians today need as in-depth an understanding of rights and justice issues as they do of nutrition and epidemiology.

4. Finally, humanitarianism has never coherently expressed how professionals and service-providers should relate to the clients, the victims of disaster, crisis and war. Are we accountable to them much as a company is accountable to its shareholders? Or, do we have a duty to inform them as a doctor or lawyer would do about a proposed procedure or action? I do not have an answer, but I do know that gaining a more coherent and thorough answer to this question is key to the future of humanitarianism.

All the above are adjustments that humanitarianism is well capable of making; they do not require any fundamental changes. So, is there a future for humanitarianism as a profession, in the particular or in the collective? I am not sure, or rather, I am not sure there is one future. Our endeavor - and I refuse to call it a business - is faced with some tough decisions.

Hard choices

The fundamental question is, can humanitarians continue to practice what they preach? Are humanitarian values compatible with a professional approach? Is the operating environment of humanitarianism sufficiently receptive that humanity, independence and impartiality can have any real meaning?

Humanitarians today have to make a choice. They can go with the move to actively promote peace, human rights and democracy - all worth working for, but impossible to do from a standpoint of neutrality and even without neutrality, horrendously difficult to do in an independent way when your supporters - state, public and private - have such a high stake in the outcome. Or, they can understand that the true fight for human rights, justice and democracy has to start with an understanding and commitment to those who suffer injustice, deprivation and oppression. The banner of justice and democracy will not stay flying in Somalia, Sierra Leone or Afghanistan if it is propped up only by outside intervention. If humanitarians truly want to make a difference on this wider stage then they have to stay true to their principles of independence and solidarity with the victims, even if this means accepting less cash from governments, and at times not running with the pack of the CNN SWOT teams. Let us be clear, humanitarianism *acts to cure but also to prevent suffering, to fight against evils, even over a long term of time. Through a focus on the causes of suffering, through programming that seeks to maximize disaster and war victims' ability to take control of their futures and build their livelihoods upon their terms, humanitarianism can and does add to efforts to support universal rights and justice. Such an approach is entirely compatible with values of humanity and impartiality, and absolutely requires the practice of independence.*

There is a third course that humanitarians can take. They can deliberately decide to limit themselves to channeling the moral purpose of compassion through the practical tools of impartiality, independence, and neutrality, in order, in the words of one ICRC delegate, "to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist". In other words they can turn the conservative into a virtue. The ability to alleviate great suffering in the moment of its happening. To reach victims of war when no one else can, and to be able to do that with trust and confidence now, tomorrow and across the globe, is no small feat and, in my view well worth preserving.

All these paths are available to humanitarianism but only the latter two are truly compatible with the value-set. My concern is that most humanitarian agencies have made neither of these choices - they are still running with the pack. The greatest danger we face today is that humanitarianism, loses its basis in universal values and becomes either a relief goods delivery system - almost a mini international welfare state - or a tied component in the highly politicized game of nation building and reconstruction. If this trend continues it is difficult to see how those agencies that stay determined to work within the rules of independence and impartiality can hope to retain their perceived credibility.

Larry Minear, from the Humanitarianism and War project at the Feinstein Center, closes his review of humanitarianism in the last decade with these words. "[After] a decade plus of research into post Cold-War complex emergencies, I fear for the future of the humanitarian enterprise. More basically still, I fear for the shared impulse to which organized humanitarian efforts attempt to give practical meaning. In my judgment the humanitarian enterprise is living on borrowed time. [\[17\]](#)"

Humanitarianism may be running on borrowed time, but there is a way out. I believe our endeavor needs both possible futures - the classic limited humanitarianism that allows victims of war the chance of survival, and the solidarity driven humanitarianism which seeks to affect the linkages between suffering and injustice but does so from an understanding of the victim and a sense of solidarity with them.

The future we do not need is the future of subservience to utilitarian foreign policy. It is difficult to serve two masters, particularly if one is a strong state and the other a frightened and impoverished family. So make your choice - to run with the pack or take the lonelier and more difficult road of principled action.

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