

Humanitarian aid in a riskier world

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A view of the Protection of Civilians site in Bentiu, South Sudan. Photo by: [World Humanitarian Summit /CC BY-ND](#)

The global order is under stress and undergoing significant realignment. There are many reasons for this. But the result is that established political mechanisms are not prepared to address crises — and the human suffering they cause. In many areas of the world, those mechanisms are having a difficult time containing the disorientation, social strife and violence unleashed by these centrifugal forces.

The result is a riskier and more dangerous world for humanitarian aid groups. This heightened risk makes it even more difficult to assist vulnerable and suffering people and meet the expectations of donors and the wider public.

At the same time, there are certain positive trends within the global humanitarian sector — new ways of thinking and acting that are making global humanitarian groups more effective in a challenging geopolitical environment. A large part of this new thinking involves looking beyond the humanitarian community for partnerships and innovation. Humanitarian crises cannot be the domain of humanitarian actors alone.

Localization

Donors and global humanitarian groups are now acting more coherently to acknowledge that affected people have the expectation and right to exercise ever-more decision-making power, control, influence and autonomy over the development process. Support for women's leadership at all levels is central to this significant and necessary shift in the humanitarian universe.

To gain further momentum, humanitarian groups need to better understand the contexts in which they are working. This could be achieved through longer-term commitments to particular areas, rather than sudden arrivals at the onset of crisis. It may also require rethinking the standard approach of frequently rotating short-term staff.

A longer-term presence enables groups to better identify appropriate local partners. Ideally, these partners are supported by (and not displaced or ignored by) global groups as they take the lead on developing and implementing initiatives.

Partnerships

When community and national partners do take the lead, it forces a rethinking of and changes to the entire global-local relationship. This is particularly so when women are in leadership roles. Local leaders don't simply fit into an existing structure; their actions change it.

Part of this change includes more effective ways for global humanitarian groups to determine when they should leave. Here too, long-term commitment is necessary to learn a context, establish effective relationships and help catalyze sustainable change. It's about accompanying local and national actors on a journey that they themselves determine. Staying too long — and, given a particular situation, too long might be not very long at all — can impede that change. As difficult as it is to accept, sometimes the best assistance is no assistance at all.

Innovation

Global humanitarian groups will only benefit from structural change if they are open to and engage in innovation. This focus on new approaches and practices is necessary and even overdue, given the many complex and rapidly evolving situations faced by humanitarian groups. In addition to the challenges to and even breakdown of long-held global norms, numerous hazards and vulnerabilities confront humanitarians, who are often ill-equipped to address them.

Among the challenges are: the promotion of real gender equity; the reach and power of new media; the impacts of climate change; rapid urbanization; large-scale displacement; technological risks to employment; the adverse effects of globalized financial and economic markets; widening disparities between the rich and poor; and weak governance, among others.

By themselves, each of these realities can be daunting. Together, they represent the kind of deep and rapid change that qualitatively alters the way large numbers of people live.

Applying the “same old” humanitarian tools amid this kind of disruptive change is a recipe for failure. The future is not one of mere adaptation. It is about fundamental changes in knowledge, approach, organization and partnerships.

This good news is that change is already underway.

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