Changing the Humanitarian Community

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> `That's the reason they're called lessons,' the Gryphon remarked:
> `because they lessen from day to day.'
> Alice in Wonderland

The subject I have been given is "changing the humanitarian community". The underlying assumption is that we know what the problems are but we are somehow incapacitated in delivering necessary change. I am sure there are very good internal reasons why the hum community is not reforming itself and some will be discussed later today. But perhaps there are external structural reasons why change is so difficult.

I will deal with three issues, and for each I will pose a challenge to you:

- the structural dimension, or the "pesanteurs sociologiques" as the French say.
- the perils of institutionalization
- are we equipped for the crises of the future?

First: the structural or fundamental issues.
The concept of humanitarianism is fraught with ambiguities. It connotes three separate but overlapping realities: an ideology, a movement and a profession. What unites them is a broad commitment to alleviating the suffering and protecting civilians caught up in conflict or crisis. But beneath this common goal, the ideology, the movement and the profession are themselves deeply fractured.

Like other "isms" - communism and Catholicism come to mind – humanitarianism propounds lofty goals which serve to hide deep contradictions, conflicting alignments and power plays, manipulations and instrumentalizations, personality cults, struggles over resources and, sometimes, shady financial transactions. It includes soviet-style card-carrying defenders of orthodoxy, heretics, fellow-travelers, revisionists and extremist fringes. It even has for profit and military wings. De-frocked agitators and apostates abound. Mercifully, burnings at the stake, torture and disappearances are rare.

Moreover, and to complicate things, there is **not one humanitarianism, but several**. The northern/western humanitarian enterprise, rooted as it is in various traditions of charity and

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philanthropy and in the civilizing impulses of the Enlightenment, missionary zeal and colonization, constitutes the dominant multi-billion visible face of humanitarianism. It dictates the language and calls the shots of humanitarian action. But in parallel, or in its shadow, other humanitarianisms – Islamic, in particular, but not only – also save and protect lives, as do governments, communities and a variety of formal and non formal institutions that are in the front lines when disaster strikes. The blindness of the dominant discourse to the workings of this informal humanitarian sector is a telling indicator of its isomorphism: **'you' can join 'us' on our terms** but don't expect any consideration if you don't.

Humanitarian action functions as **a safety net for the most vulnerable** in times of disaster, whether man-made or not, which takes a variety of forms. As such it deserves to be protected and nurtured despite its obvious limitations and imperfections. At the same time, before one gets carried away by unrealistic expectations or delusions of grandeur, it is useful to start unpacking and unscrambling the multiple realities that hide behind the benevolent façade of humanitarianism. In other words, we need to do some **"behindology"** here.

In addition to being an ideology, a movement, a profession and a compassionate endeavor to provide assistance and protection to populations at risk, humanitarianism is also a **set of institutions, a business and an industry** that employs hundreds of thousands of individuals and in which actors compete **for market share**. Humanitarianism, in its various facets, has seen dramatic growth and transformation in the last two decades of the 20th century. Much of this growth is related to the diminished inhibitions on waging war and the privatization of social services that have accompanied the end of the Cold War.

From a **marginal and non-intrusive** activity—its effectiveness being a function of its acceptability to primarily interstate belligerents—it has become **central** in North-South discourse and practice. As the world moved out of Cold War strictures, humanitarian action has also expanded accordion-style into new territories (development, human rights, advocacy, and peace-building) further complicating the task of circumscribing the realm and scope of its activities.

From annual disbursements of **less than \$1billion** and a percentage share of less than 4% of overall official overseas development assistance (ODA) ten years ago, disbursements for humanitarian action from private and public sources have multiplied ten fold, even in have peaked at \$18 billion in 2005, or roughly **15% of ODA**. So, we are talking **big business** here. And this is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to reform the enterprise: there are so many vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

The official humanitarian enterprise remains **a select club** in which the rules of the game are set by a rather peculiar set of players who are generally far-removed from the realities of the people they purport to help. While much good is done by the enterprise, its functioning is dictated by the interests of actors who sit in government, International Organizations and civil society in the North, including, increasingly, the boardrooms of the private sector and the situation rooms of the military.

Like it or not, **humanitarian action is part of global governance**, if not of global government. Even when it is not instrumentalized for political purposes, humanitarianism remains a dominant discourse. It lives in parallel with, and is sometimes subordinated to, processes of economic governance, political containment strategies, and military action that are functional to the

interests of the "global North". And this despite the fact that the vast majority of aid workers and many humanitarian agencies are not of the North.

Of course, there are important variations in the level of alignment of humanitarian actors with political designs – after all the system also exports its antibodies – but the fact remains: power, money, the ability to make strategic choices affecting the lives of others are essentially in northern hands. Not a monopoly, but an **oligopoly of the North**.

Unlike the United Nations where all countries have a vote, there is **no such "democracy"** in the humanitarian realm. At the UN, countries that do not belong to the established donor club have little opportunity to influence the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise and even less to scrutinize the destination of its funds. In the international NGO world – and this is going to make me very popular here – there is not much democracy either: **market share is skewed in favour of the big players**, the large federations of INGOs that control much of what goes on and have a voice in, for example, the IASC and the hum reform process. To a large extent, the NGO world is controlled by no-one: it is self referential and self mandated. It does good, but on its own terms.

To a greater or lesser extent, the public in the North has an opportunity to influence government aid policy through elections, public hearings and the like. But much of the private (and private sector) aid escapes such scrutiny. The workings of militarized "relief" are even more obscure.

Furthermore, the contributions of **non-Northern humanitarian** players don't normally make it to the ODA donor hit-parade. Yes, we now recognize India and China as players and some of the Gulf States, but the contributions of the informal humanitarian sector – *zakat* and other tithes, remittances from diasporas, the contributions of affected countries and communities – are nowhere recorded. We are even more loath to recognize the life-saving contributions of elected entities such as Hamas or Hezbollah who practice their own varieties of succour to the most vulnerable.

But there is a bigger issue here. If we agree that humanitarian action is linked to processes of global governance, we should ask '**what are the functions that HA wittingly or unwittingly performs** in support of GG'? There has been a lot of talk about the instrumentalization of HA in places like AFG and Iraq in support of political agendas. We have been asked to be and accused of being "force multipliers". But even when we claim we are neutral, impartial and independent, are we not at the same time the capillary vessels of globalization? Some would say that we are the oil in the capitalist machinery that contains crises in the south from spinning out of control. I was struck by a frequent criticism one hears in Palestine, but now also in AFG or in Colombia: why are you here? Are you here to 'normalize' us? Note that in AFG all donors are belligerents.

Challenge: How can we make the humanitarian enterprise "of the world" rather than "of the North?" Can we envision an enterprise that is more mindful of other humanitarian traditions and cultures, less top-down and expat-driven? Can we envision an enterprise that is more democratic in nature and truly independent from imperial or world-ordering interests? What would it look like?

Second, the perils of institutionalization. Some of you may recall with nostalgia those pre-email and pre-satphone halcyon days when important messages from remote field outposts were passed through crackling radios and unreliable telex machines. When neither worked, which

was often the case, communication was dependent on hand-written notes entrusted to a truck driver. For all the advances in technology, all the training in management, 360 degree exercises, and contingency planning workshops, how well has the **massive institutionalization** that has taken place over the past 15 years of conflict and crisis served the needs of the most vulnerable? Are the 250,000 humanitarian aid workers of today doing a better job than the few who battled for access and space in Biafra?

Undoubtedly, the unprecedented growth of the enterprise and the development of standards, procedures and techniques have allowed us to respond more promptly and effectively. The institutions of coordination, good donorship and complementarity of action, - even clusters - have served the system well: there is more predictability and automaticity in emergency response, though problems remain in terms of proportionality and timeliness. But hasn't some of the **flexibility and spontaneity that the enterprise was famous for been lost in the process**? Has the quality of our mercy improved?

Institutionalization has resulted in strong pressures on NGOs to "act like a business" and "act like a government" (Cooley and Ron, 2004). Not surprisingly, senior staff and CEOs of INGOs increasingly rotate between government, business and civil society organizations.

Our FIC research shows that the programming of humanitarian assistance has become less flexible, less able to address the unexpected. There is an intense pressure to programme according to the deliverables defined in grants and in timeframes that are often unrealistic. As organizations have grown and resources mushroomed, controls have become more tight and decision-making is increasingly distant from the field. Humanitarian work used to have a connotation of "voluntariness" – indeed this remains a key Red Cross principle – it has now become a career. It is defined by management objectives, standard operating procedures, human resource development tools – necessary as they are in any "business" – that create **structures and organizational patterns that tend to stifle innovation** and the **questioning of the status quo**. Indeed, promotion itself means that the most highly experienced, respected, trained (and paid) aid workers are removed from the frontlines and are hunkered down in meeting rooms!

Challenge: what are we going to do about it? Again, is a more inclusive, community-friendly humanitarian enterprise possible or are we locked into the current top down system? And again, what can we do to develop partnerships at the local level including in places where northern values and agendas are unwelcome or suspect?

Third, are we equipped for the future? Definition: Black Swans are "outliers" i.e., unpredictable and therefore unknowable events with (potential) severe impact on lives, livelihoods and even the survival of large population groups or entire civilizations. The consequences of a Black Swan can be serendipitous and positive (penicillin, lasers, the internet); but it is, of course, the negatives that are of concern. Chernobyl, the unexpected consequences of the breakup of former Yugoslavia and the demise of the USSR, the devastation wreaked by HIV/AIDS in Africa, Katrina.., all these are Black Swans.
We are not very good at predicting the future. In the1950s IBM predicted that only some 50 of the clunky computer machines it was building would be required for the entire US for the forseeable future (Taleb, 2007). The point about Black Swans is precisely this: they are unknowable – unknown unknowns - and may have devastating (humanitarian) consequences.

This has implications for the scope and shape of a humanitarian enterprise that is still based on Cold War and post-Cold War assumptions of what constitutes a crisis. It is essentially **backward-looking**. We are getting better at addressing last year's crises and perhaps today's. But is the enterprise adapted to the challenges that are likely to come our way in the coming decades? There are two areas where we are particularly ill-equipped and where urgent adaptation is required:

- the new **asymmetrical wars** à la Iraq and Afghanistan (but also now Somalia, Lebanon and perhaps tomorrow Chad or Nigeria or Pakistan) where humanitarian action has itself become asymmetrical and is perceived as taking sides;
- the **emergence of catastrophic events or unending chronic situations** where the system has to deal with compounded threats and vulnerabilities framed, in some cases, by conflict but also by natural hazard events, climate change, technological disasters, environmental displacement, pandemics, etc. Any combination of these could lead to frightening "civilization-changing events", i.e. unpredictable and possibly deadly Black Swans.

Conflict, in fact, may well be a lesser source of vulnerability than we are accustomed to... In Zimbabwe today, about 3,500 people are dying every week of HIV/AIDS, not to mention cholera, in the midst of a deepening economic, social and political crisis. In many parts of the world threats of old and new varieties tend to combine and compound. Our traditional humanitarian approach is inadequate in such settings.

Chance favours those who are prepared, or as Yogi Berra put it: "you got to be very careful if you don't know where you are going, because you might not get there". Trying to predict the crises of tomorrow is not a very useful exercise. Investing in **preparedness**, is. Especially if it is preparedness of the indigenous variety. Making communities and organizations more adaptable to shocks, strengthening partnerships at all levels, including with groups who have different (read: "non-western") agendas to help the marginalized and the oppressed, thinking outside our humanitarian box may be our best protection against the Black Swan.

Challenge: what can we do to prepare for events that, by definition, are unpredictable and may have widespread humanitarian consequences? Do we need to look for less hierarchical and decentralized structures that are likely to prove more resilient in times of crisis? Should we break up large organizations into more independent franchises? Do we need to rethink how HA is funded? (more independently from govt?). Is the balance of investment between preparedness and emergency response right?

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In closing, while we can certainly applaud the improvements in the functioning of the humanitarian machine, there is **no cause for resting on our laurels**. The shadows of Afghanistan and Iraq are deep and wide. The pale sun of humanitarianism no longer shines through the fog of war. Aid workers become fair game when they are seen as taking sides.

Failure to address and reverse present trends will result in the **demise of an international assistance and protection regime** which, despite the limitations I have tried to describe, still functions as a crucial safety net for the most vulnerable.

Moreover, if the **disconnect** between the perceived needs of intended beneficiaries and the assistance and protection actually provided continues to grow, humanitarianism as a compassionate endeavor to bring succor to people in extremis may become increasingly alien and suspect to those it purports to help. Humanitarianism may go the way of other "isms".

As I see it, the humanitarian project is in more serious trouble than is widely understood or acknowledged. I am doubtful that the **current love affair** of the international community with humanitarian action will continue deep into the 21st century. This love affair is currently based on two notions:
- that humanitarian action is **functional to the security interests** of the countries that are its traditional major contributors and therefore shape the humanitarian enterprise;
- that the current political economy of humanitarian action – the humanitarian marketplace – will continue to be **dominated by like-minded** northern and western-driven values, behaviours and styles of management.

Should either of these assumptions prove to be untrue, either because climate change or other risks force a **paradigm shift** in the North's security concerns or because the Northern humanitarian monopoly is challenged by other players who **do not accept "our" rules** of the game, the current humanitarian enterprise may find itself in dire straits.

Over the past decade and a half, the humanitarian agenda has expanded to encompass activities such as advocacy, rehabilitation and peace-building, and development. Some would say that it has **drifted away from its traditional humanitarian moorings**. This has led to a number of unsavory developments in places like AFG and Iraq where aid agencies have taken sides or have been perceived as such. **Principles vs. institutional survival**, especially multi mandate NGOs. They cannot have their cake and eat it: they cannot cloak themselves in the mantle of principled humanitarianism while simultaneously being hand maidens to the PRTs. This trend needs to be reversed. Distinction is key. Pink vehicles? Maybe.

I would suggest that in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, it should be possible to agree that narrowly-defined humanitarian action – saving and protecting the lives of civilians caught up in crisis and conflict – can and should be kept separate from partisan or politically-driven operations that may be legitimate in their own right but that are not humanitarian. **A space needs to be reserved for card-carrying certified humanitarians** working according to time-tested principles (and engaging with all sets of belligerents – not just one side). I know that this comes across as humanitarian fundamentalism. But too often so-called humanitarians have compromised. We need to inject a serious dose of classical humanitarianism – where actors are held accountable to humanitarian values and humanitarian outcomes – in how we operate on the ground. Donors, those who have subscribed to GHD, should agree to fund such certified humanitarians with no strings attached (as they do for the ICRC).

An evolution toward **a more modest** humanitarianism, limited in scope, objectives, and actors, - separate from other, more political or partisan forms of engagement in conflict - would not be an entirely negative development. It would reflect a realization that current global trends and forces that generate a need for humanitarian action can be neither redirected nor significantly contained by the humanitarian enterprise itself.

In sum, is it change or die? In my view, yes. If we want to be effective in addressing the challenges and vulnerabilities of the future, the hum enterprise needs to become:

- more nimble,
- more focused on principles,
- more universal in intent
- more free from politics and donor conditionalities and
- more democratic in its inner workings.

This does not mean that humanitarians are uncommitted to a more secure, just and compassionate world but rather that they are realistic in recognizing that their first obligation is to be effective in saving and protecting lives that are in imminent danger.