

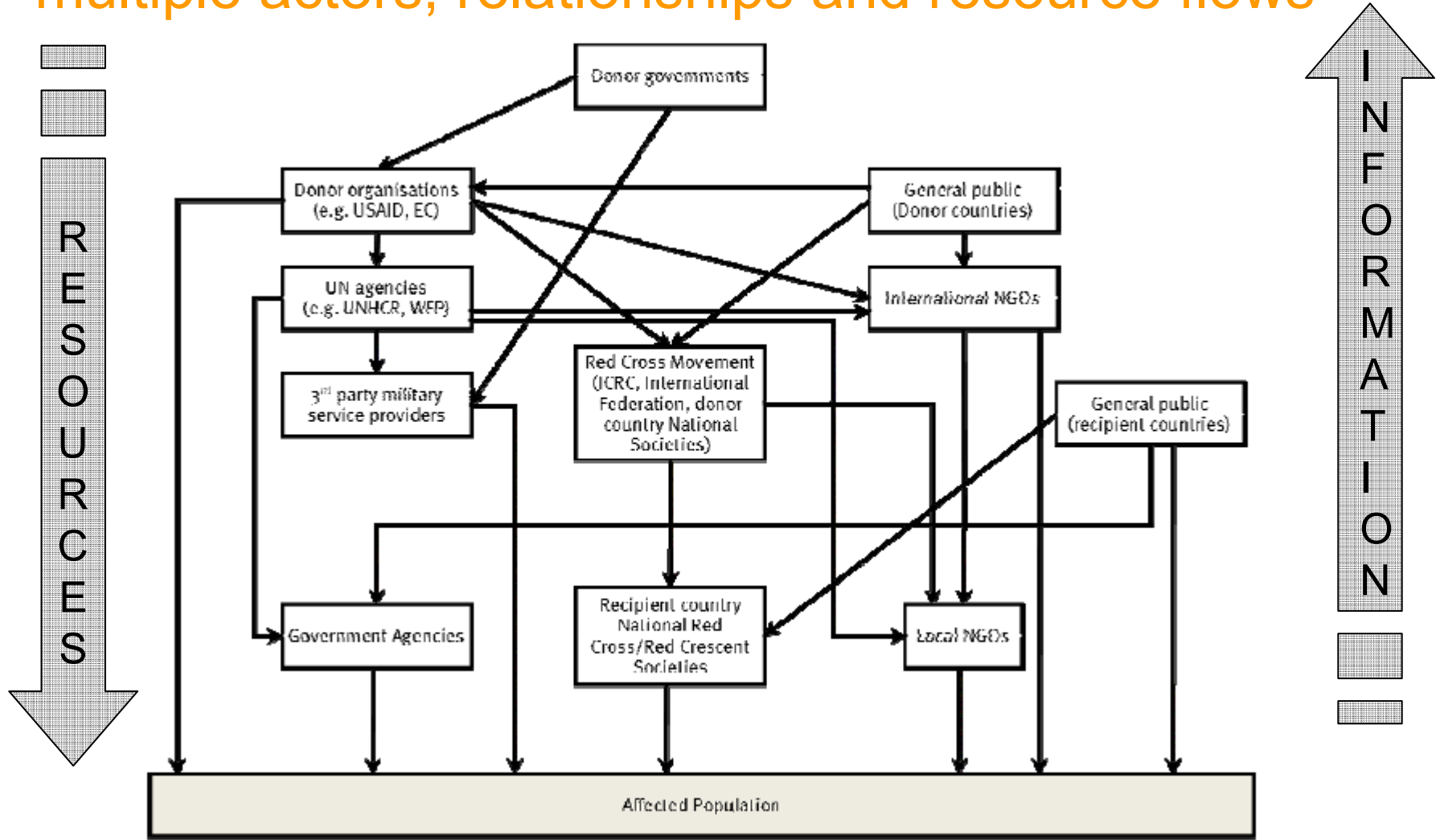
‘The Humanitarians Dilemma’: Unpacking the Moral Arguments for Changing the System



Agenda


- The humanitarian system
- Change and reforms: key lessons
- The Humanitarians' Dilemma

The formal humanitarian system is made up of multiple actors, relationships and resource flows





There is no lack of principles or ideas for changing this growing system



In 1994, The Red Cross-Red Crescent-NGO Code of Conduct presented a principled, value-based vision for how agencies, and by extension, the system should work and therefore how it might need to change

1. The humanitarian imperative comes first
2. Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients
3. Aid will not be used for further a particular political or religious standpoint
4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy
5. We shall respect culture and custom
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities
7. Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid
8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs
9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and those from whom we accept resources
10. In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognise disaster victims as dignified human beings



There is no lack of change and reform initiatives to help implement different elements of this broad vision (non-exhaustive list!)

QUALITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, LEARNING, ADVOCACY

- Sphere, HAP
- ICVA, Voice
- ALNAP, PiA
- URD, Coord Sud

THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

- Rights & Empowerment
- HIV-Aids, Gender
- LRRD
- Protection
- Participatory Approaches

STRUCTURE

- Clusters
- Internationalisation / Decentralisation

JOINT ACTION AND PARTNERSHIPS

- Joint Ventures e.g. ECB, Good Humanitarian Donorship
- Capacity Building Programmes
- Partnership Building e.g. WEF PPPs


BUSINESS PRACTICES

- Finance & Funds e.g. CERF
- Leadership e.g. HCs
- Communications & Media



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What has been learned about reform and change efforts in the humanitarian sector?

Reform efforts are still largely focused on new “systems”, “guidelines” and “products” as opposed to changed relationships, behaviours, ways of thinking and attitudes



Reflection, learning and analysis - at the heart of many reform efforts - sit uneasily with existing humanitarian culture and process



Reflection

Humanitarian culture & process

Analysis

Learning

Agencies firmly stick to their own “reform” furrows and narrow agendas



National partners are left out of the 'reform loop'





Insufficient attention to process and models of change: linear models dominate

“...Agencies need to pay as much attention to how they do things, as to what they actually do...”

M&E of reform is weak at best, leaving efforts on shaky or non-existent ground



Reform efforts tend to be based on wish lists, not strategies, and therefore are often overloaded



Leadership and political buy-in to reform is rare and unreliable, with two common reactions



ICVA
February 2009



And there are few penalties for not changing

‘...once they have reached a certain size, agencies usually go out of business due to poor financial management and rarely if ever due to poor field performance...’

Tsunami Evaluation Coalition



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From the ICVA Background Paper:

“... The biggest incentive to make changes in the humanitarian community should be the moral imperative to improve our performance for those in need... On the face of it, organisations should be completely committed to making changes to their work in order to better assist and protect those in need. The reality, however, is that the moral imperative does not seem to push organisations to change...”

>>>>>> Why?




At the point of crisis relief agencies are all too often motivated by a “frenzied self-interest” (TEC)

- Real primary objective is “Assist targeted beneficiaries in such a way that our good works are seen and valued by donor communities and the profile of our agency is enhanced”
- “Speed and size of response relative to others” more important than “collaborate with others to maximise collective impact”
- Delivery is in reality shaped by a institutionalised, narrow, “vertical” moral focus, motivated by the charitable impulse and forces of self interest




An emerging hypothesis: “The Humanitarians Dilemma” (after the Prisoners Dilemma)

- An improved humanitarian system is **collectively rational** and **broadly morally agreeable**, and can be **readily articulated**
- But as long as each agency in crisis settings can justifiably act in a self-interested way with few costs, and reasonable benefits, defection from the collective good is rational way to operate
 - “**why should I cooperate if others won’t and get there faster and bigger as a result?**”
- This is the “**Humanitarians Dilemma**”: the system as it is presently structured means there will almost **always be defection** away from the potential higher level **collective good**



All of this means that the basic way of working of the humanitarian system has not been addressed by the majority of reform initiatives

- The system is still, despite all the efforts:
 - Response driven and supply oriented
 - Politicised and competitive
 - Accepted, legitimised, lack of regulation
 - “Helpless victims”
 - “Dump and run” / “truck and chuck”



Efforts to address these basic rules can be characterised in a number of ways

- “Endeavour” “strive” “attempt” not “will”
“shall” “must” “won’t”
- “Talk Up” of change far exceeds the “Take Up” of change
- Change initiatives seldom challenge and often protect this way of working



A prediction, based on the emerging hypothesis

- The **Humanitarian's Dilemma** will continue shape the system until something happens to “change the game”
- Two possible game changers
 1. Collective action efforts with profile (teeth optional)
 2. External or unanticipated shocks

Some suggestions for “collective action” efforts for change

1. Look in more detail at **the rationale for systemic change**: what happens if we do nothing to improve the humanitarian system? Is this ok?
2. Create a **shared vision of the space for possible system-wide improvements, mobilise commitments and regularly assess changes over time**
3. Focus on working together to **change ‘how we do things’** – structural issues, relationships issues and power dynamics – **rather than falling into the trap of ‘changing what we do’** by making technical adjustments and creating new products, guides and systems
4. Pay more attention to ensuring that **the right people are involved in defining the “why”, “what” and “how” of changes**, including ‘non-traditional’ stakeholders, not least those receiving aid
5. **Tackle the incentive issues “head on”**, identifying and addressing the basic rules of the game and how reforms help / hinder (look to others, especially the development & environmental sector)



And watch out for “game changing” external shocks

- No system is sacred
- See international financial markets for more details

Final point



‘...everybody thinks to change the world; nobody thinks to change himself...’ (L. Tolstoy)



Thank you!

- Please keep in touch

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