Can humanitarian aid be sustainable?

**Thematic track:** Effectiveness of development

**Activity format:** Flash presentation

**Number of participants:** Men (18)   Women (26)   Total (44)

**Date and time of activity:** Saturday, September 10 from 2 to 3:30PM

**Presenters and the key elements of their presentations**

**Patrick Robitaille**
- Head of the Sub-Office - International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Léogâne, Haïti

Humanitarian work is for saving lives in emergency situations. Humanitarian aid does not intend to be sustainable.

It is very important to distinguish between these two types of interventions. Development and humanitarian aid are two distinct subjects, two separate vocations. The mitigation of risks is accomplished through development, not humanitarianism. And when it comes to questions of sustainability, we rely above all on the knowledge and expertise of construction professionals: shelters, buildings, tools, etc.

**Chantal-Sylvie Imbeault**
- Joint Director-General - Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI)

She tackles the problem of humanitarian aid by analyzing the “Before” and “After” of crisis situations.

**Before:**
- Mitigation of risks. Preparing populations for the extraordinary measures they will have to follow in case of emergencies. Reinforcing the capacity of populations to respond to possible additional crises following the initial disaster.

**After:**
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- It is important to prepare populations well, so that they can restore normal conditions as soon as possible after the crises.

- Reinforcing the economy. Buying local goods and services to restart the economy. Recapitalization (in the days following an earthquake, to get people out of camps as soon as possible). Creating employment.

- Working with affected populations; for example, selecting beneficiaries according to the recommendations of local organizations.

- Collaborating closely with all actors to ensure the highest impact.

- Reinforcing the capacities of partner organizations. Working in concert with the authorities.

Yoshiharu Shiraishi

- Associate Researcher - The Japan Association of Charitable Organizations

- The Japanese experience (he presents facts on the earthquake – magnitude, affected territories, number of persons evacuated, etc.)

The population mobilizes rapidly, in spite of possessing small means. The government is slow to react, but wields great means.

The affiliation between civil society and governmental resources allowed them to coordinate a team effort and mobilize an effective response on the ground.

It is important to create coalitions to facilitate emergency aid and make it more effective. The urgency of the Japanese situation allowed them to link governmental instances with the CSOs.

Emmanuel Areno

- Regional Coordinator – Western Visayas Network of Social Development NGO (WEVNet)

Importance of preparing communities for the risks triggered by humanitarian crises (an expertise that has been perfected in the Philippines – multiple cases of disasters caused by climate change: floods, typhoons, earthquakes, etc.). Indeed, the mitigation of risks is essential to rebooting development after a period of crisis has passed.

Developing a fund for crises caused by climactic change.

Insufficient coordination between Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) agencies.
*He brings up the problematic of competition between organizations intervening in crises.

**François Audet**
- Director of the Canadian Research Institute on Humanitarian Crisis and Aid (OCCAH).

Sustainable humanitarianism: Definitions

**Utopianism**
Mediatisation of humanitarian crises.
The first people on the ground are the populations of affected countries.
So, successful preparation of local populations enhances the efficiency of on-site response following a humanitarian crisis.

A paradox, two logics: humanitarian aid (short-term) and sustainability (long-term).
When does humanitarianism begin? When does it end?
Intervening organizations do not agree on these questions.

Humanitarianism as a tool, an instrument for governments and media.

**Realism**
Financial needs: if there are not a lot of resources, intervention will especially be directed towards emergency measures, and there will not be any funds for undertaking actions that would allow humanitarianism to be sustainable.

Is humanitarianism an utopic ideal? Or shouldn't humanitarianism be limited to emergency response (thereby avoiding the long-term prolongment of humanitarian organizations' presence on the ground)?

**Describe the exchanges between the presenters and the audience**

As usual, the audience's interventions manifested people's cynicism about the work of NGOs in humanitarian aid and development (for example, judgements and reactions about the unsustainability of the hastily-constructed wood structures erected in Haiti, a practice to which the Red Cross often resorts).

**Describe the atmosphere in the room**
There are a lot of people. More than expected. Highly animated question period. All of the presenters are solicited by audience members.

Were any issues of diversity, equality, or gender brought up?
No.

The general types of results related to the themes brought up during the workshop, and provide examples.

- Diffusion of information on best practices: yes
- Diffusion of participatory methodologies: yes
- Reinforcement and development of intersectorial collaborations: yes
- Diffusion and enhancement of Canadian civil society expertise: yes
- Emergency of new projects or follow-up on old projects: no

The main questions brought up by participants, and the responses provided (synthesis)

Importance of creating links between structures: NGOs, civil society and local authority, government instances. This work has to be done between peers. Local populations are the first on the ground after the occurrence of a disaster. It is on the basis of these key individuals that work can be done to reinforce their capacities and ensure the effectiveness of emergency response.

International organizations are responsible for pressuring governments to partner with other actors. Avoiding the substitution their roles for one another. The international system does not replace the systems of local governance.

Lessons from the activity

Haiti often recurs in the course of the discussion. The presenters acknowledge that this was a very particular case. Fortunately, some of the external participants hailed from countries where the crisis situations were quite different.

In the domain of humanitarian intervention, if we situate our actions in a perspective a long-term sustainability, it is important that the actors talk and communicate with one another to make their actions effective. Financial backers should insist that all work be undertaken in concert with the governments of the
According to François Audet, 99.9% of humanitarian aid crises are not mediatised. One should be careful not to generalize all of the approaches to humanitarian crisis response, and not to reduce humanitarianism to the case of Haiti.

There are a number of visions of humanitarian aid, as well as of the concept of effectiveness according to which we judge responses to crises. Organizations do not have the same definition of the concept of humanitarian aid within the context of sustainability.

The intervention of Mr. Renaud of the CECI summarizes the reality: it was not that long ago that humanitarianism was integrated into the activities of development organizations. This is a new phenomenon. The intersection of new actors in the humanitarian domain is recent. Their lack of cohesion is to be expected. It is a challenge.

**In conclusion**

It is important for organizations to self-evaluate their practices and ways of doing things, and to think about ways to improve their actions in humanitarian crisis situations.

Obviously, there is no consensus on the best way to proceed. This is a question that has not been settled and which deserves much more reflection and questioning. On the other hand, if the problem did not exist, we would not be here discussing it.

**To contact someone for more information**

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