



# THE UNBEARABLE PRESSURES ON HUMANITARIANS : A SURVIVAL GUIDE

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Ebola response teams were asked to deliver life saving aid in Western Africa while some of their own authorities enacted policies that made it difficult to come home and not be stigmatized and ostracized; Gaza humanitarian response teams were threatened by the population they aim to serve as the local communities perceived/experienced an extreme case of lack of protection; Another war coalition emerges in Northern Iraq and Syria, that makes it impossible for humanitarian nationals of over 50 nations to operate in that region. The Humanitarians become easy targets for armed opposition groups. How much more could be tolerated? Has the world entered a 'new normal' not compatible with our principles or compass? Are our activities and commitments straying from our *raison d'être*? Have we re-adjusted to a new threshold that compromises long held humanitarian principles? Not yet I would argue, but dangerously close and very near a breaking point....

Ukraine, Ebola operations, Syria and Iraq crisis, Typhoon Haiyan, Gaza, South Sudan... We are challenged to continue to deliver, to serve, to provide, to scale up, to save lives, while the fundamental enablers and pillars for a meaningful and timely response slowly crumble around us. We have faced resistance and reticence to launch large operations for decades largely rooted in a combination of national pride of affected nations, donor nation shifting agendas, lack of funds, donor fatigue, internal politics, corruption, lack of access, and insecurity. What may be new as recent phenomena are:

1. External concerted political efforts to scrutinize and ensure humanitarian aid serves a very deliberate agenda and
2. Internal dynamics linked to the inability of humanitarian agencies to stay true to and focused on key priorities for rapid and efficient response.

I have faced these challenges many times. One of the most striking examples when a large Red Cross team and I were mobilized to respond to the April 2008 Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar. We were staged in neighbouring Thailand for three weeks and unable to obtain visas to enter the country where there were tens of thousands of dead and injured. We were eventually demobilized and while a month or two later some were granted visas, but it was too late.

I was able to visit the Myanmar in April of 2013, five years past the event. In a small village, meeting with some affected community members and enquiring as to the impact of that event, I was bluntly told "Where were you when we needed you then?" Clearly, a sense that we -the humanitarians- did not deliver when they really needed us.

Throughout the Syria crisis many nations made it clear that regime change was the objective in their support to the various armed opposition groups. The challenge, in attempting to deliver aid, is that the displaced Syrians (in the millions) did not neatly fit into clean geographic regions for or against one side or the other. Some humanitarian aid agencies opted to deliver to any accessible region (neighbouring countries, across border regions, etc. i.e. without official permission) others to "liberated" regions (i.e. taking sides or appearing to), and some to "government sanctioned" regions (i.e. the government told you where to go) Which ever mode we opted for, a segment of the population would be missed. It was not possible to provide within a framework for all of the above for anyone group, and donor dollars often came with conditionality as to the above options.

The two scenarios of Myanmar and Syria above placed enormous pressures on humanitarians as both individuals and institutions. In all cases, constant media and public pressures dominate, asking very valid questions: When will you reach the people, when will the hospital open, when will food be delivered, when will the homeless get shelter, when? why? who?....

For decades, humanitarians have operated within the framework of principles and guidance such as the Red Cross Movement Fundamental Principles, Good Donorship Initiative, and Sphere. We operated on a platform underpinned by pillars rooted in a needs based approach to priority setting (aid needs to give priority go the most vulnerable), basic security, adequate/timely allocation resources, coordinated action, neutral response, and 'some' independence from political/military agendas. These principles and pillars that are rapidly crumbling or blurring as many nations work to exert their influence in the humanitarian sphere.

Colleagues, welcome to the 'new normal'. In Northern Iraq and throughout the Syria crisis, many nations attempted to (continue to?) instrumentalize their aid dollars in line with political agendas of regime change and/or military objectives. In Ukraine, suggestions were made by both sides that aid should to be restricted to provinces with sympathetic populations with one side or the other. In Ebola operations, Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) were in short supply as powerful donor nations hoarded the desperately needed kits, to protect local responders, to protect one's own (just in case!). Moreover, Ebola affected countries withheld arriving supplies in ports and airports for months demanding fees and invoking various regulations.

Regardless of the various drivers for the above dynamics, and as viewed from the perspective of people urgently needing the humanitarian aid, the assistance was late, insufficient, and often linked to recipients accepting certain conditions. In some cases the conditions imposed precipitated unacceptable ethical breaches denying entire populations access to aid and supplies that were readily available (Myanmar, Syria, Gaza, etc). In turn, often in desperation, recipient populations reacted with frustration and anger that have spilled over into riots, threats/attacks on humanitarians. The cycle of mistrust and suspicion grows.

Humanitarians, always at the front lines in interacting with disaster/crisis affected people/families, the homeless, the sick, the hungry, the war wounded, need to re-adjust in two fundamental ways:

1. Operationally, we need to return to a back to basics approach in which we must not only work hard to earn the trust and acceptance of communities we plan to work with, but also accept and communicate our limitations to those communities
2. Globally and locally, we need to adopt a back to principles approach with our respective donor/recipient governments/partners in which we confidently say "no" to being played as pawns in crisis and to unethical unprincipled conduct.

Both tracks need to be engaged simultaneously. To address the issue of re-building trust and securing acceptance, we will need to address key challenges within our own ranks. Numerous reviews and reports have highlighted gaps in competencies, coordination, and leadership. While progress has been achieved through various initiatives to professionalize, coordinate better, and lead to deliver, significant gaps remain. Tackling difficult and delicate matters as corruption, incompetence, political agendas, and inefficiencies needs to be a top priority. While these issues can be addressed through various private and diplomatic channels, the risk of spill over into the public domain will always exist. A risk we need to take. The impact of outlining -and possibly airing- our deficiencies and the spillover of such topics into the public domain may (and likely will) have wider negative implications for our sector. But these may be short lived and will enable a much needed 'clean up' of some sort. A needed clean up and purge.

Tackling the delicate politics and resulting dilemmas of donor and recipient nations requires perseverance and patience, a constant and unrelenting humanitarian diplomacy of dialogue to message the principles that underpin our work with real life examples, case studies, firm and respectful stances, to influence decisions/actions. For those unconvinced of the essential need to firewall political agendas and military objectives from humanitarian aid, intensified and constant engagement/pressure needs to be the modus operandi. This type of engagement needs to span all levels of our work; whether dealing with the local commander or district commissioner, and/or a minister of state at a capital level, and every layer in between.

Year to year, humanitarians are challenged to respond and deliver faster and better, critical assumptions of a decade ago are no longer valid, including the assumption that humanitarians are not targets and can operate in relatively secure environments. The demands placed on us can be (already are!) unbearable at many moments, irreconcilable with our principles, and even bordering on the unethical. To survive in the new pressure cookers, we need to take a longer-term perspective. Those difficult moments are just that: 'moments' on a much longer-term timeframe. These are moments, which need our absolute and collective attention and intervention to influence/correct actions, and to humanize response operations. These are not moments to abandon principles. We must remain flexible, but unbroken.

