

Crossfire

In this month's Crossfire, two combatants debate the following statement, **Astier Almedom** in support of it, **Bobby Lambert** against:

'The "quick in and quick out" style humanitarian action may do more harm than good for the well-being of disaster-affected communities.'

Dear Bobby,

I hope this finds you well. I rather feel that deep down you would agree with this statement, having worked so hard and so long to train local people and to build the capacity of disaster-prone or disaster-stricken communities with a long-term view of disaster preparedness and response.

I would like to begin with an example, a very clear case in point: MSF's action in Goma in response to the volcanic eruption of Mount Nyiragongo of January 2002 as reported in April's issue of *Waterlines*. I'm afraid I was disheartened to read what was aptly entitled 'A volcanic issue . . .' The question of learning lessons in humanitarianism is indeed volcanic. There are almost as many humanitarian agencies forever claiming that they have learned lessons, as there are repeated old mistakes. The authors of this particular set of lessons have, I suppose, got off their chest a real burden, but where does that leave the people of Goma?

The authors deserve praise for their frank reporting. This is the sort of thing that agencies might try to cover up, particularly if there is any likelihood that those affected might seek compensation for the damage caused. Can you imagine what would have happened if what befell Goma, had taken place in the Netherlands; and Congolese aid workers had gone to the disaster zone for a 'quick in, quick out' operation? Let me stress that I am only imagining, for argument's sake. A disaster of any sort is the last thing I would wish on the people of the Netherlands. Having said that, I would imagine that there would most definitely be a public outcry and a demand for explanation as to how a Congolese 'quick in and quick out' type of humanitarian agency got

there without doing its homework first. This homework should have involved finding out what lessons had been learned in the past when a similar disaster struck the area; whether any contingency plans existed, and so on. What did this particular agency's goals 'to prevent mortality, alleviate suffering, prompt a restoration to health and restore dignity' really mean?

Their only source of drinking water presented the people of Goma with chemical and biological threats to health and well-being. On-site training was desperately needed in the areas of chlorination and the removal of fluoride – none of it 'quick in and out'. I think you may agree that if the people of Goma have survived displacement, destitution, malnutrition, cholera and dysentery thus far, it may only be a matter of time before fluoride poisoning catches up with them.

*Yours,
Astier*

Dear Astier

It's a pleasure to engage in this debate with you on the above motion. I strongly agree that we need to adopt a long-term view when planning humanitarian interventions, even rapid emergency interventions illustrated in the Goma article quoted. This requires a clear exit strategy and an understanding of the boundaries between the emergency relief form of humanitarian action and the longer-term development approach. In terms of this motion, we may also wish to consider what we mean by 'quick in and quick out'. The rapid emergency relief phase of the humanitarian intervention may last weeks or months, or may (far too frequently) last for years, even decades.

In sudden onset disasters there is often a clear need for short-term action, giving life-saving assistance. Some organizations, such as MSF, are geared up for this and we can see the benefits of having an international system with such capacities. We need to respect such capacities as complementary to those of the more developmental (but often slower to react) agencies. 'Live horse and you'll get grass' is a saying

in Ireland, no doubt inspired by our experience with the Great Hunger or famine of the nineteenth century (would that we had had an MSF to react then!). If we want to save the horse, while encouraging the grass to grow, we also need to ensure that the horse gets some other fodder immediately.

I would argue that the emergency relief phase of humanitarian action should be as brief as possible and that agencies move quickly to a more developmental model. This may mean that the model adopted by the agency may be a 'quick in and quick out' first phase, with the agency staying on site; or if the agency specializes in short-term humanitarian action then the agency itself may be 'quick in and quick out', making way for others with a more developmental approach. I am sure you would agree that there are great dangers in prolonging the emergency relief phase of humanitarian intervention longer than is necessary.

We should also strive to strengthen our lesson-learning capacities, which is a key aspect of RedR's work. I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to some of our training courses that are relevant to these issues, notably our Essentials of Humanitarian Practice and our Environmental Health courses.

The humanitarian system is quite good at the 'quick in, quick out' model. Where there is considerable room for improvement is in the more developmental models. Rather than criticizing agencies who are good at the 'quick in, quick out' model, we should be encouraging dialogue and discussion between the diverse range of actors in the humanitarian system, valuing this diversity as a great strength and seeking to strengthen those areas where we are weak.

*Yours,
Bobby*

Dear Bobby,

Your distinction between the 'quick in, quick out' model, and agencies who specialize in it is helpful. I agree that MSF, a Nobel laureate, and other

agencies are often good at providing emergency relief. However, I would argue that the 'humanitarian system' is ridden with what I call chronic institutional amnesia and lack of accountability.

First, the 'quick in, quick out' agencies typically have high rates of staff turnover. The result is that valuable experience and lessons from past operations either remain unrecorded and are thus forgotten, or they are disconnected from future operations as new recruits may be untrained to ask the right questions or are unable to connect with sources of knowledge on the ground. 'Institutional memories' are carried by individuals who know about lessons learned by a given humanitarian agency, and when these individuals leave, the agency actually becomes a victim of memory loss. This is where the training of new and existing agency staff plays a vital role. Like you, I have engaged over the years in teaching and training students (undergraduate level and up) and practitioners, for better and more effective humanitarian action. The more lessons are documented and disseminated, the less there is room for denial and complacency.

Secondly, there is still a grave need for accountability to be instilled. I do not agree that merely encouraging dialogue and discussion among humanitarian agencies is enough to protect those on the receiving end from being more harmed than helped by 'quick in and quick out' models and styles of emergency relief operations. As long as competition for funds and kudos drive individual actors, there remains little or no incentive for humanitarian agencies to pool together their skills and resources in the interest of the disaster victims and survivors. What we see repeated time and again is little or no sharing of information and knowledge between external actors and including local organizations – which are often invisible and relegated to picking up the pieces afterwards. Agencies have not been held accountable to the people affected by their actions on the ground. As an African woman, and a trainer, I hope to see good agencies, including RedR, listen to and learn from those affected by disasters such as that of Goma, 2002. This would make a first step towards true learning of lessons

from past mistakes whose costs in terms of lost lives and harmed livelihoods are yet to be accounted for.

*Yours,
Astier*

Dear Astier,

I am glad that the discussion has moved on from a debate on a narrow view of the 'quick in and quick out model' to how we can address what you call institutional amnesia (great term!) and accountability. I agree that there is much to be done here.

I believe accountability is the biggest challenge, as getting that right can help drive the other changes that are needed. Accountability in humanitarian action is a huge structural challenge, and one with very few parallels in other sectors. It needs to be addressed at the highest level within the sector and within individual organizations, which usually means on the board. What models can work where donors (governments and private individuals or companies) are located in one part of the world and the beneficiaries are located at a great distance? How can we bridge this disconnect in an effective manner?

As you are most likely aware, the Geneva-based Humanitarian Accountability Project (formerly the ombudsman project) is addressing this issue. In the case of RedR, our board has been wrestling with this for some time now, and asking how can we bring

the ultimate beneficiaries of our humanitarian work into the governance and management of our organization? One approach is to look for trustees who can bring that perspective to board meetings. I would very much welcome your suggestions as to how we can do this. I would love to hear your thoughts on this and perhaps you can suggest some suitable candidates for trustees on our board (are you interested?).

On institutional amnesia, I believe we need to look at the system as a whole and not just at individual agencies within the system – we should look at the 'ecology' of the system. Some good work on this is being done (e.g. by ALNAP). A key component is the staff of agencies (with work on this being done by People in Aid and through the Emergency Personnel Seminars). Some of these initiatives are rooted in the experiences in the Great Lakes crises of 1994/95.

Learning these lessons and changing our behaviour as a result is a huge challenge. This must mean developing and maintaining responsive learning organizations. Valuing and investing in the staff of those organizations is a key part of meeting this challenge, but there is a long way to go in this area.

*Best regards,
Bobby*

Astier Almedom is Henry Luce Professor in Science and Humanitarianism at Tufts University, USA, and Bobby Lambert is Director of RedR – Engineers for Disaster Relief.



The barracks in Goma covered by lava following the eruption of Mt Nyiragongo (Photo: Florian Westphal/ICRC)