Hard ethics in humanitarian work

The humanitarian sector has been surrounded by ethical debate since its beginning, if a beginning could be defined at all. The act of doing good to our fellow men, based on a shared humanity, may be simple, but it implies many grounds for reflection and considerations which generate a complex ethical debate.
Over the last few decades the humanitarian community has developed specific Codes of Conduct to deal with some of these ethical issues, of which the most widely used is the Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Response Programmes. This Code of conduct has become an essential reference for all Humanitarian practitioners and agencies involved in humanitarian action. However this Code, in my view, only concerns the tip of the iceberg of both fundamental and modern questions on humanitarianism.

In recent years, complex and brutal emergencies have looked for a response from the Humanitarian community, presenting new challenges and dilemmas: from Somalia, to the Asian Tsunami of 2004, from the 2005 Pakistan earthquake to the Haiti earthquake in January 2010; from Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar to Darfur and so on. The history of recent emergencies provides a wide spectrum of cases and contexts which cannot be situated in a simplistic ethical framework, apart from what is offered by the solid foundations established in the Code of Conduct for Humanitarian Response more than a decade ago.

However, the ethical management of the humanitarian response in itself seems to be on the margins of any debate, or even outside it. This issue is, for me, at the core of the ethical debate in modern humanitarianism and is certainly an area that will require more in-depth discussion and consideration in the near future.

I will skip over the many ethical aspects of humanitarianism that have already been established as solid ground within the humanitarian community: the basic principles of impartiality, independence, neutrality, etc, and all the connotations and specific debates around those aspects. Instead I will focus on what is still probably a “terra ignota”, the ethics of humanitarian management.

What does humanitarian management involve? By humanitarian management I mean the establishment of strategic priorities, the allocation of resources, the decision making process behind these processes, the setting of minimal quality and accountability requirements and standards and ensuring that effective learning based on previous experiences is translated into changed behaviour in future humanitarian responses. Some readers may argue that the argument is not very different from that found in any other managerial sector, and they may be right. The key components here though are how decisions are informed and taken in a way that respects the fundamental principles of humanitarianism together with how decisions, once taken, are appropriately implemented in order to ensure the highest ethical standards, and the greatest positive humanitarian impact possible.

A full set of moral principles becomes empty rhetoric if there is not a practical way to implement and manage those principles in practice. In fact the moral code could become, and I do believe in many cases does become, one of the elements responsible for

unethical behaviour. If not well managed the moral principles may provoke personal or institutional paralysis which impacts negatively on the humanitarian response itself.

What are the key elements that should come into an ethical consideration of humanitarian management?
I think some of these elements are crucial:

- Staff competency
- Finding a good strategy
- Sound financial management
- Sound management of communication(s)
- The decision making framework
- Accountability
- Effective Learning

Let me comment on each of them.

Staff competency: No profession will tolerate a situation in which staff not competent in their specific area of work (medicine, architecture, engineering or whatever), are found in charge of making important decisions related to that work. Unfortunately, in the humanitarian sector there can be found, in small and large organisations alike, people in charge of significant humanitarian programmes without the necessary skills and knowledge to manage them appropriately, despite their undoubted good intentions. The consequences of this throw an awful shadow on the whole sector. Important initiatives are now taking place to ensure that people in charge of humanitarian action are fully competent in the specific areas of activity that this complex work requires. Taking into account how crucial this aspect is for the final outcome of any humanitarian action, I believe that having rigorous systems in place to develop and verify the personal and institutional competencies required for any humanitarian work is an ethical issue that should be in the forefront of any humanitarian action. No humanitarian agency should allow staff, not competent in humanitarian terms, to be in charge of key humanitarian decisions.
The level of competency and the kind of competency required varies, of course, depending on the relative scale of the decisions to be taken, from a member of a Board of Trustees to a Headquarter manager, to a field worker. However in all cases ensuring that a check of competency has been done at each level is indispensable. I will not enter into a detailed proposal here on this point, which is a topic for more detailed discussion and research.

Finding the right strategy: The way in which humanitarian agencies define their own strategies for a humanitarian action, including elements like what global strategy determines the particular strategy, what ingredients are taken into account in each specific strategy and which of those become the key dominant drivers of the strategy in question, is not an innocuous field. On the contrary, how strategy is determined is the backbone of the ethics or lack of ethics of an agency or of its staff.
In any strategy, institutional considerations, market considerations, analysis of "competitors and collaborators" all interact and in many cases compete with the basic and traditional humanitarian principles. What the rationale is behind the strategy adopted, what the balances achieved are and why they are achieved in the way they are, are fundamental moral questions that cannot be ignored or subordinated to empty rhetoric or propagandist messages.

Along with the obvious aspects related to the objective setting of priorities and to the allocation of resources, there is a fundamental question of time scale inherent in determining humanitarian strategy.

It is accepted doctrine that humanitarian work forms a continuum going from relief to development. The "veni, vidi, vici" demands of donors – "go, do quickly and report faster" in modern terms – frequently cause this continuum to be by-passed. The tyranny imposed by some donor's appetite for swallowing reports of success on the pretext of efficiency and accountability in many cases generates a perverse effect in terms of impact de facto. This in turn creates a space within which evaluators repeat the well known mantra of a lack of transition and accompaniment of communities after the relief phase, once the media and the donors have regaled themselves on their "successful" reports in the news or at their bureaucratic desks.

Defining the timing and phases on the basis of the impact on populations, whilst at the same time taking into account and shaping the donors' will is a profound ethical topic that should be incorporated in any good humanitarian strategy.

Sound financial management: This is probably the most conventional area, and therefore the richest in protocols couched in terms of "good financial practices". From accounting to reporting and auditing, the administrative machinery for good management of funds in humanitarian programmes is well established in most cases. This is essential as the financial volumes that are involved in humanitarian crises are enormous and the contexts in which they are used are not always ideal in terms of putting controls in place. To ensure a good and effective management of the funds that private or public donors put in its hands, the humanitarian sector should always be foremost in making the most demanding requirements.

Nonetheless, this is still an area that requires more development: preventing fraud is just a condition sine qua non; it is the starting point and not the end of the matter. Knowing how to get the maximum benefit from every single cent donated for humanitarian work implies sound knowledge of financial matters, humanitarian matters and ethical considerations. Areas which should receive more attention in the immediate future include investments and liquidity, risk control, relations with ethical banks, the impact of market inflation and so on.

At the moment all these issues do not play a central role in thinking about the ethical management of humanitarian action, and in ethical debate finalist[1] approaches dominate over more integrated finalist and procedural approaches. What matters is not only what we try to achieve, but also how we achieve it in an ethical manner, where cost effectiveness is included as part of the ethical question.

Sound communication management: The Humanitarian sector has had a long tradition in communication management, employing strict rules and codes of conduct; probably

[1] Finalist approaches should be understood as approaches based on desired outcome and/or results

because this is one area in which more abuses have taken place and where abuses are highly visible.
Although the Humanitarian Code of Conduct and other specific codes cover the area of communication and relationship with the media, the new internet dimension, and social networking tools like twitter and others are raising new questions. For example, is the humanitarian community using these tools in the service of increasing the impact of interventions or is the focus once more on the aid workers as the centre of operations rather than the victims? As we know tweets, facebook messages or Skype have been essential communication tools in some of the most recent emergencies (e.g.: Haiti, Chili), used to contact family abroad, and to get information on the situation on the ground, demonstrating that there is a high potential for tools like these, if they are used appropriately. It seems to me that in a world where communication tools are evolving very rapidly, a permanent updating of this ethical dimension is required,

Decision making framework: Decision making in humanitarian crises is a fascinating area of study, where different logics and inputs enter into a high speed and energetic interaction. Whether this interaction will result in a positive outcome or in a wrong or conflictual one is something that depends on how all these ingredients are managed together.
The ingredients are extremely diverse: the values and mission of the organization and of each one of the persons involved in the decision making process, the strategic considerations and rationale behind the process, considerations of capacity and resources, the choices and ethical dilemmas confronted, the financial and political considerations, the management of personal or brand related risks, and, at the end of the day, the slew of emotions surrounding any decision making process.
Establishing the right framework for decision making is a critical ethical issue for any humanitarian organisation. Defining clearly who will make the decision, what inputs will be taken into account and who else should give advice and information on the decision is essential.
The timing of the decision making is a key factor. A decision not taken in due time is always a non decision. A decision that is not ideal, but taken on time, is much better than a decision not taken. When time pressure is a key factor in decision making, clear mechanisms should be put in place to ensure decisions are taken in time, and these mechanisms should be established well in advance. Not doing so will lead to decisions made on an ad-hoc or random basis, probably far distant from the reference framework that should illuminate any humanitarian decision.

I think humanitarian agencies still need to make significant progress in clearly defining this decision making framework and that they need to accept strong discipline in its implementation, as a moral duty inherent in the humanitarian mandate.

Accountability: One of the topics most discussed in recent years within the humanitarian community has been to what extent and in what ways humanitarian agencies are accountable to the victims of the disasters, to the donors and to society in general. Very significant progress has been made here during the last decade and there is no doubt that the development of the Humanitarian Accountability Project is a big step forward in this area. The key challenge now is to keep the spirit of real accountability alive and to ensure that accountability does not turn into a bureaucratic box-ticking process: the issue will always be a permanent area for on-going reflection and improvement.

Effective Learning: Do humanitarian organisations learn, and if so at what cost? Permanent improvement by continued and sustained learning is essential in all professions, and is an ethical imperative in any type of social work. This especially applies to the humanitarian sector, as the learning capacity of the organizations and the sector as a whole will have a direct impact on the improvement of the quality of the humanitarian aid provided.

But a variety of obstacles hamper effective learning in humanitarian agencies, including among others:

- The recognition that failures are a key source of learning; the first requirement here is to acknowledge that there was a failure, something which still is not fully embedded in the culture of humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian agencies are much more oriented to their successes than to their failures, while in terms of potential learning the latter have greater potential than the former.
- New challenges in the humanitarian sector are appearing and growing every year, making it difficult to focus on key aspects for which immediate learning is required.
- High turn over of staff and lack of adequate tools for knowledge management make the learning process more difficult, leading systematically to "re-inventing the wheel".

This inefficient learning capacity has a direct impact on the cost and quality of the humanitarian assistance provided to the victims of disasters or conflicts, becoming thereby a moral question. Can the humanitarian sector continue to evolve through a "learning by shocks" attitude, rather than by learning in a more structured manner?

Formal evaluations, which have become a lot more frequent over the last years, are only a partial answer to this. The key problem lies not in the diagnosis of failures, but rather in the capacity in management terms to absorb the lessons learnt from these evaluations, and in the use of the lessons learnt to transform ways of working in future interventions.

From do no harm to do conscious good by ethical management: a final reflection on the ethics of humanitarianism, which could be called the "ethics of humanitarian management" Mary Anderson's famous book "Do no harm", opened up a deep reflection on the consequences of inappropriate humanitarian assistance. Embedded in a consequentialist moral approach, this has led both to posing important questions and to an attitude of "stop and think before you act", which, unfortunately, has been frequently misunderstood by some as "stop and think and therefore do not act".
I think the time has come for humanitarian agencies to be able to act when required, being very aware of what they are doing, making use of strong management systems which are based on rigorous ethical reflections concerning management and taking on board the inherent risks of their interventions.

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