Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Divide

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Introduction

This report is based on a series of semi-structured interviews undertaken with nearly 50 people who work in UN agencies or with NGOs in development, disaster risk reduction or humanitarian programmes based in Geneva and New York, as well as in the UK.[1] The research was prompted by an opinion piece commissioned for Plan International's 2013 'Because I am a Girl' report. While it has been suggested that the divide between humanitarian and development programmes has diminished, in part due to the introduction of transition funding lines by some donors and the changes post 9/11, discussions during the Advisory Board for the Plan report made clear a divide did still exist. The opinion piece highlighted the consequences of the divide for adolescent girls who slip between programming gaps, suggesting they present a compelling case for why we need joined up programming.

The premise of this study was then to explore the extent to which people in the different sectors feel the divide still exists, what they believe makes development and humanitarian action so different, and what they perceive to be the barriers to building bridges. It also sought to explore if and how people are crossing the divide and what issues this might raise. This short report summarises some of the findings from the study.[2] From the outset it is important to note that while many so called 'dual-mandate' organisations clearly recognise humanitarian and development action as two ends of a spectrum, and recognise the need to integrate their programmes, all are struggling with how to achieve this. While the report does not have the answer, it might offer some comfort to those trying to make integrated programming work, to know that they are not alone.

Hands off, that's the development stapler

The sub-title sums up a story one respondent told to highlight what the humanitarian-development divide can look like in practice with resources, including people, being ring-fenced as either development or humanitarian by teams working 'together' in the same organisation and/or in the field. While some noted that those responding to an emergency seldom dwell on 'what' they are, and that those receiving aid do not care, in the Head Office the distinctions are more clear with mental boundaries drawn via the labels 'humanitarian' and 'development', physical boundaries drawn via office space, and monetary boundaries drawn around resources. Every person

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interviewed highlighted the role of funders in creating and perpetuating the divide, particularly through the existence of distinct funding streams and through the restrictions placed on humanitarian funding in terms of use and the time to use the funding. The boundaries in institutions and funding mean that humanitarians talk to other humanitarians; in other organisations, in donor agencies, at meetings and at conferences. Those in dual-mandate organisations suggested that they often know these people better than they know the (development) people in their own organisation. For some then their self-identity was clearly linked to being a humanitarian, but what defines humanitarian?

"You can't have an 8-to-5 development attitude in a humanitarian setting"

Just as all the respondents saw that the humanitarian-development divide still existed, so too all saw humanitarian action as something distinct from development and from other forms of intervention. Where they differed was on what defines humanitarianism, and also if they were 'humanitarian enough' to use the label. Many focussed on the notion of emergency and the idea of saving lives, both as defining features and as points of debate. The notion of humanitarian action as short-term, fast-paced emergency relief was both promoted and contested. The problem lies with the fact that contemporary crises are often protracted and a number used Palestine as an example, with one noting while the response is not necessarily an emergency response, the crisis itself is *"absolutely humanitarian,"* suggesting then that emergency and humanitarian are no longer synonymous.

The life-saving aspect as a defining feature of humanitarianism was also questioned. For example, after working with humanitarian medical organisations for a number of years and believing there is nothing more life-saving than distributing medicine or trying to cure people, one respondent began to question the point of it all. They suggested that what matters most to those in a war zone might be that the next generation can read and write, and escape the war, noting, *"At the end of the day what we call life-saving as humanitarian, it doesn't, I don't want to say it doesn't matter because of course it's important [but] I changed my perception of what humanitarian action is, actually, along the line*." The question of what actually is life-saving action troubled many, as did the question of, 'Am I still a humanitarian if I am not directly involved in saving lives?' Being even a layer or two removed – for example not being the person called within the first 48 hours of an emergency and not having to have their mobile phone on at all times – led to some level of self-reflection around whether they could still call themselves a humanitarian, reinforcing immediacy and personal contact as being key definers of being an humanitarian.

Many of those who did call themselves humanitarian noted this was because they were not defining it in the 'strict sense of the term' but rather more loosely as being around humanity and solidarity, while still preserving the notion of saving lives. The problem with using a strict definition was highlighted by some through reference to the Ebola crisis and also the unfolding 'migration crisis' – suggesting that the definition allowed inaction to be justified. On the other hand, some interviewed thought the definition had become too diluted through the addition of new aspects (such as disasters) and the adoption of a more developmental approach. They called for a return to a more 'pure' approach of the past, allowing the humanitarian difference to be clearer.

"The way they think in terms of time lines. It's definitely faster than the rest of the world"

The notion presented implicitly or explicitly by many was that humanitarians are different from the rest of the world – through their conceptualisation of time, of risk, and through their desire to enter places as others are fleeing and their ability to function there. This discourse constructs the humanitarian-development divide as what one termed almost 'organic', deriving from the natural, and different, characteristics of humanitarians. While the 'Wild West' nature of humanitarian settings has diminished, the 'grab your bags and go' mentality remains, and the adrenalin rush of entering a crisis is still talked about as something that drives people or at least working in the *"white-hot heat of emergency"* as something they relish. It begs the question, are those with these 'natural' characteristics drawn to the sector, or does the sector nurture these traits? Is it a natural or a constructed divide?

Some see the divide as a constructed concept, in part stemming from a desire to build a humanitarian identity - with development being the 'other' against which to judge difference. Yet this construction is more than individual: it is also institutional and linked (once again) to finance. To sustain funding, organisations need to be able to show how projects produce concrete and measurable results – humanitarian action is constructed as being able to demonstrate this, where development, struggling with nebulous concepts such as 'empowerment', cannot. As one in the humanitarian sector summed up, *"In development it's like, 'Make sure you know the answer to the meaning of life, and then construct a weird log-frame that tries to explain it poorly, and then implement it.' Just odd."* They went on to say, *"I'm here to change the world. I'm not here to sit on my ass… and the humanitarian skill set, the reality of the delivery and the urgency makes that connection a lot easier."* This immediacy of helping people, and helping people on a large scale, seems to draw many to the sector and away from development, which is seen to be too slow and too far removed from those suffering. On the other hand while development was seen to be concerned with qualitative improvements, humanitarian action tended to focus on quantity. One respondent noted that as doctor in a clinic they might deal with 20 people but when you are dealing with an emergency *"what you do and what you don't do could impact thousands of lives every day."* While the 'how many' seems to matter to humanitarians some feel it has gone too far, with one noting that their organisation was *"obsessed with measuring things"* and *"unless you can measure it, people [in the organisation] say it's not worth doing."*

"I mean humanitarian aid is critical [but] it feels more clinical than development, don't know why that is"

For many of the self-identifying humanitarians interviewed it was the desire to help, to change things in a tangible way that was the driver. The popular image of humanitarians also constructs them as 'angels of mercy.' However, many of those development professionals that have experience of humanitarian interventions have a different view. Many development people defined humanitarians as focussed on logistical or technical issues. Moreover, as the quote above highlights, rather than seeing them as caring, they were seen as clinical and even without morals. One noted how the humanitarian sector entered one country after a large-scale disaster and *"just stomped right on top"* of the government and existing civil society and they felt they just *"grabbed some money, did some*

immediate work and six months later were gone for the most part..." The short time-frames meant humanitarians were certainly seen to focus on projects and not processes, which could, it was suggested, mean that "*some pretty dictatorial kinds of things can happen.*"

Thus, contrary to how humanitarians see their own work as allowing an immediate and close connection to people, this is not perceived outside the sector, and the extent to which they have empathy for those they 'help' was also questioned. This difference in how humanitarians see themselves – and are seen by others – highlights a real divide, a divide that is furthered and not lessened by the humanitarian principles which guide the sector.

Without the principles they're not humanitarians, they're just helping

The sub-title sums up what many within the humanitarian sector think really makes action 'humanitarian': adherence to the principles, with impartiality and neutrality highlighted as key. The former – generally understood as the distribution of aid to those most in need – while presented as key, was also highlighted as problematic and again especially for those working in dual-mandate organisations that might already have established links with people, families and communities prior to the emergency for example. The latter, neutrality, was a particular point of tension. Put simply, humanitarians think that development people are in bed with the government, while development people think humanitarians don't understand the difference between governments and governance. While for some the principles were key to all aspects of their work and guided their day-to-day actions, others were more ambivalent about them. While some feared the principles would be the thing that would be forsaken in a move to integrated programming, others thought the way some follow the principles is almost cult-like. The relevance of the principles then is perhaps not well understood outside the sector, and within the sector changes in the nature of crises, including the focus on response to 'natural disasters,' are also calling into question their centrality.

What to do with "those earthquake folk"?

Coming from a development and a disasters background, one of the original hypotheses was that disaster risk reduction (DRR) could provide a bridge across the divide. Instead, DRR people – what one respondent referred to as "*those earthquake folk*" – seem to have become a third sector; not a bridge, but an island. Within dual-mandate organisations, DRR is something of an orphan, finding a home neither within development nor within humanitarian teams – one describing its location as "*in the corridor*". Development people had no strong feelings on DRR, seeing it mostly as a distraction from their 'real' work. Some humanitarians, however, saw even post-disaster response as not properly humanitarian, suggesting it is a logistical response in a context where there is no need for a code of conduct or principles such as neutrality and independence, for example. Others would suggest this view does not recognise the political aspects of disasters and post-disaster response. However, of more importance here is that while the majority of those interviewed from the humanitarian sector thought DRR should be a development concern, the majority think the development people are not taking enough responsibility for this. Rather than DRR being a bridge between the two groups of people, it may have become a new source of tension, as both sides see the other as the one who should take the responsibility for this.

Bridging, crossing, and blurring the edges

Inclusion of disaster response and risk reduction, and of issues such as resilience, was seen by some to be stretching the humanitarian mandate. In the move from relief, to reconstruction, to 'normal' development actions, it was suggested that what was needed to ensure continuity was that the development people come in sooner. Development moving 'downstream' into emergency settings was, however, also questioned and seen as illogical. More logical was for humanitarians to move into a more developmental mode since, "*…how many times are you gonna perform the same action before you try to look at the cause and the root of things and then you can go all the way up to poverty inequality and social justice…*" However, many within and outside the sector felt that humanitarians were now being asked to undertake tasks they were not fully equipped for, either in terms of skills or, given the adrenalin-driven nature of response, in terms of mentality.

However, there were some who seem to have bridged the divide, or act as a bridge across the divide, albeit finding it rather uncomfortable at times, *"It is very difficult to handle when you are in the middle of it because we are supposed to have one foot on one chair and one on the other one and actually it's a toe on one and a toe on the other one so it's very, very uncomfortable situation."* Considering dual-mandate organisations, it seems that some individuals, at least those working on the ground, have learnt to move between the two modes and living through repeated chronic crises is an enabler to this. In other contexts, within organisations, there may be one person who acts as a bridge, who can speak the language of both sides and act as a translator, a go-between, a mediator. As one noted, *"…we all know that they need to be bridged and eventually it's agility, I mean it's flexibility if you like but I like the word agility because it can mean anything from operational procedures, to the way people think, and the way relationships happen within organisations."* More agility in the way people think and in the creation and maintenance of relationships seems key.

People in organisations with a mandate to promote a particular group or issue, such as gender, also seemed to be able to 'transition' across contexts or 'transcend' the divide, carrying on their work by adapting to the changing circumstances of the country/group they work with. They did not, however, identify their organisations or work as 'humanitarian', perhaps once again because of the principles to which they do not adhere to. The idea of accompanying those, for example, returning from refugee camps, including across borders, back to their homes was a logical suggestion of how to ensure continuity of care, but the logistics and finance is another issue. Some crises, such as the earthquake in Haiti, do see individuals and organisations stay after the initial emergency period is over and offer continuity of care through 're-branding' themselves as development. While this might be for altruistic reasons, there is also a financial incentive to do so and this troubled many.

Money, money, money…

All those interviewed raised the issue of finance and funders, and talked of their role in perpetuating if not creating the divide. The existing system was often seen as *"indestructible"* and was considered to force those on the ground into a *"straightjacket of separation."* It adds to the mistrust between the two groups. Put simply, while development is seen to have more funding overall, humanitarian funding is seen as easier to get, and in an era of budget cuts, increasingly so. Each thinks the money is with the other, and this, for some, is why humanitarian organisations are looking to development – not because they want development people to arrive earlier, but because they want development

money to arrive sooner so they can access this. Similarly, development actors were charged with putting 'emergency' here and 'rapid' there to access humanitarian funds. So while each side sees the value of integration, each also wants to maintain its own identity, and also its own unique selling point. Thus mentalities and markets combine to perpetuate the divide.

Conclusions

While many organisations are seeking to move away from operating in dual-mandate mode to integrated programming, this was questioned by some in the sense that unless the real differences are tackled then it could just mean a new, neutral name for a grouping that contains the same old divisions: some people more focussed on emergency issues, others on longer term issues, just now they would be in the same department. As such it was felt there is a continual push for events that *"instead of bringing us together, continue restating the differences."*

For many these are very real differences, perpetuated by individuals and institutions, which together recreate a divide built on and characterised by:

- **My identity** – defined by difference from people in other sectors, and, for humanitarians, by the principles that construct the sector and its workers as distinct and different;

- **Mentality** – different understandings of time and risk, and of how best to 'help';

- **Misunderstandings** – of what those in other sectors do, how they do it, and why;

- **Mistrust** – of the ability of other sectors to take on new roles, and of them doing so; and

- **Money** – funding programmes create the need for a unique selling point, which reinforces identity difference and ultimately reinforces the divide.