

THE ECHO CHAMBER

Results, Management and the
Humanitarian Effectiveness Agenda

A summary

Juliano Fiori, Fernando Espada,
Jessica Field, Sophie Dicker

The Humanitarian Affairs Team
Save the Children

About the project

A major theme in humanitarian discourse over the last 25 years, effectiveness has been a central concern for those seeking to reform humanitarian practice and governance. Research on humanitarian effectiveness has taken the concept at face value, exploring what is effective, how to be more effective, and what the impact has been of individual initiatives. With effectiveness at the forefront of strategic discussions within Save the Children and across the humanitarian sector, the Humanitarian Affairs Team (HAT) felt that there are important questions to be asked:

- Why has effectiveness become an organising ideal for humanitarians?
- What is the character of the 'humanitarian effectiveness agenda' that has been constructed of initiatives to improve humanitarian performance?
- Why is effectiveness understood in the way it is, and what are the implications of all this?

Setting out to investigate the forces and motivations that have shaped the humanitarian effectiveness agenda, its influence over humanitarian action, and how its contribution to notions of success relates to the circumstances and aspirations of people in countries affected by crisis, we planned seven field studies (Central America, Liberia, Niger, the occupied Palestinian territories, the Philippines, South Asia and the Syria region) to provide insight into different understandings of effectiveness and the interests involved in forming these understandings. *The Echo Chamber* and the accompanying *Essays on Humanitarian Effectiveness* are the culmination of a research that started in October 2014 in partnership with the University of Manchester's Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute.

About the Humanitarian Affairs Team (HAT)

The HAT seeks to inform and support the development and implementation of Save the Children's humanitarian strategy, offer proposals to improve policy and practice within the organisation but also across the humanitarian sector, and foster opportunities to translate these proposals into practicable plans of action. Housed in Save the Children UK, the HAT serves as a counterpoint to

Contact the Humanitarian Affairs Team:
humanitarianaffairs@savethechildren.org.uk

www.humanitarianeffectivenessproject.com

Cover photo credit: Hedinn Halldorsson/Save the Children

This report has been produced as a discussion paper by the Humanitarian Affairs Team in partnership with the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute and does not reflect Save the Children policy



programmatic and technical expertise, providing insight into the conceptual and theoretical questions that underpin humanitarian practice.

The Echo Chamber

The humanitarian effectiveness agenda is characterised by the ascendancy of top-down neomanagement tools, particularly results-based management techniques and initiatives, and the dominance of risk mitigation frameworks. Through its emphasis on accountability-through-management, this agenda has reinforced a reflexive and self-referential tendency within the humanitarian sector, creating an echo chamber in which the ideas of the sector's dominant actors bounce off each other, validated without modification or critical interrogation. This echo chamber is the result of:

- The processes of bureaucratisation and professionalisation inside and outside the humanitarian sector that have framed developments in humanitarian performance management.
- The influence on the humanitarian sector of the revolution in management at the end of the 1970s, through which business principles were used as the basis for reforms to public sector bureaucracies in the United Kingdom and then elsewhere.
- The birth and elaboration of the humanitarian effectiveness agenda itself, demonstrating the prominent role that commercial ideas have played in shaping humanitarian performance management.

SEVEN TRENDS

The Echo Chamber identifies 7 trends associated with the development of the humanitarian effectiveness agenda:

Humanitarianisation

The hegemony of the effectiveness agenda, its pervasive focus on results in the short term, and the lack of an alternative framework to tackle different types and timescales of suffering have resulted in the use of humanitarian approaches

and tools in other, non-acute emergency settings, such as situations of urban violence.

Constructing the exceptional crisis

In this era of competition, mobilising action and donorship has required the presentation of each crisis as 'the worst yet', as exceptional. Such presentation often dehistoricises and politically decontextualises emergencies, which can not only distort strategic and operational decision-making, but it can also result in operational responses that undermine local capacities and fail to address root vulnerabilities.

Missing politics

The ascendancy of management approaches in the humanitarian sector has resulted in diminishing engagement with politics and governance issues and a turn towards technical inputs and solutions. The result has been an inability to capture the multidimensionality of the causes of crises and needs of affected populations, all of which are inherently political.

Tightening donor controls

A results-led culture of reporting has developed out of the humanitarian effectiveness agenda, which has been deployed by donors to control specific programmes, primarily for the purposes of risk aversion. This top-down regulation is serving to disconnect humanitarian actors from the needs and aspirations of crisis-affected communities.

Averting risk and blocking out critique

Risk culture permeates the humanitarian sector too, as results based management has raised the cost of failure for humanitarian agencies. This is problematic in that competition and commercial incentives – namely, to ensure a future income stream – have fostered an environment where agencies chase lower-risk activities or more measurable outcomes in order to demonstrate success, sometimes at the expense of addressing the real needs in a situation.

Distancing humanitarians from those they seek to support

The humanitarian effectiveness agenda has placed emphasis on the deliverable project as the primary concern. As a result, non-interventionary modes

of humanitarian action have increasingly been seen as acceptable – even favourable – in certain contexts. Particularly where there is a perceived high risk to security.

Projecting truths

International humanitarian action is underpinned by assumptions about the universality of the ideals and conceptual frameworks guiding the actions of humanitarian agencies, and these “truths” are projected onto societies that host humanitarian operations. However, frameworks such as those which assess effectiveness have come from a particular time and culture – which has implications for the way that aid is received.

EIGHT WAYS TO REIMAGINE SUCCESS

More than tools and mechanisms: challenging an ideology

Excessive concern for setting and achieving desired results is short-termist. It focuses on process but not systems. It makes humanitarian action instrumental to an economic logic that deprioritises voice, perspective, ethics and politics. And it leaves unchallenged the incentives that shape the actions of humanitarian agencies, preventing a meaningful participation of crisis-affected populations, and undermining the democratisation of humanitarian governance. We might question the way measurement is used by donors in the regulation of humanitarian agencies, and the way it is used by humanitarian agencies in marketing strategies. We need to question the significance given to effectiveness in determining how success is understood; to challenge the forces that reinforce reflexivity, concentrating power in the hands of an elite insufficiently connected to the interests of crisis-affected populations. This requires challenges to be posed to the ideology that has shaped the humanitarian effectiveness agenda.

Beyond the humanitarian market-place

Humanitarian agencies and their activities are dependent on the resources of institutions and individuals able to generate their own income. But that economic relations play an important role in enabling humanitarian action does not mean that they have to dictate all aspects of the institutional life of humanitarian workers. Institutional donors exercise considerable normative

power over humanitarian agencies through their conditioning of funding; they have generally promoted the commercialisation of humanitarian activities. However, humanitarian agencies are not powerless to determine their own organisational structures and set their own culture: they can choose between different sources of funding; they can adopt cooperative business models; they can establish and enforce ethical codes and red lines for the funding they are prepared to accept.

From results to systems: rethinking linear approaches to the planning, delivery and evaluation of humanitarian action

The idea that the application of commercial principles in the humanitarian sector can satisfy both donors and the intended beneficiaries of humanitarian aid stems from an imagination of the market as the main source of public goods. However, in the absence of any ‘consumer power’, it is not possible to make humanitarian aid demand-driven; therefore, a market model accentuates the inequalities that characterise the relationship between humanitarian agencies and those they seek to support. Humanitarian agencies should, then, seek to check obsessive attention to results and rethink linear-rational approaches used to plan, deliver and evaluate humanitarian action.

Reforming organisational structures and processes. Humanising operational activity

Challenging commercial incentives requires changes in organisational structure and process. It requires a greater proportion of income to be invested in programmatic and operational functions, research, evaluation and advocacy, compared with expenditure on marketing. It requires more attention to strengthening operational systems that are adaptable to different circumstances and can facilitate interagency cooperation. It also requires a humanisation of operational activity, with greater focus on the human needs of staff and aid recipients, and less on institutional economic imperatives. And it requires a reduction in the administrative requirements of staff assessment, risk management, and strategic planning; a change that would encourage humanitarian staff to take initiative and assume leadership, and would reduce the bureaucratic burden.

Sacrificing organisational growth (at least initially) to change business models

It is not possible to alter the political economy of humanitarian aid without fundamental changes to the business models of humanitarian organisations,

and to funding arrangements for particular emergency responses. The creation of some arrangement through which funding for crisis responses, accessible to all humanitarian organisations, is regulated by a body with international legitimacy is an appealing, though alone insufficient, option to reduce the distortion of humanitarian activities that results from competition. Strengthening interdependencies between humanitarian agencies through pooled or consortium-based funding can also break the commercial incentives to compete, potentially encouraging more anticipatory approaches to humanitarian action that are more readily shaped by circumstances and needs in particular crisis contexts. Both models can be used to ensure funding is open and provided to organisations most connected to the needs and aspirations of crisis-affected populations.

Remaking the political economy of humanitarian aid

The political economy of humanitarian aid is fundamentally determined by interests. Its remaking is a political project, pursued through the articulation of political interests. Challenging a political economy that centralises power requires humanitarian agencies to turn from a politics that privileges private enterprise to a politics of solidarity, according to which they position themselves in pursuit of a common purpose alongside those to whom they provide support. This solidarity is not grounded in some fanciful notion of altruism; it is not devoid of self-interest. Rather, it articulates interests and incentives primarily in political rather than commercial terms, related to broad goals of humanitarian action – saving lives, alleviating suffering, upholding rights, fighting oppression, or wherever a particular agency sets its limits. It gives greater currency to principles that promote the specific hopes and needs of crisis-affected populations themselves, and it shapes political relations according to these principles.

A cultural shift: promoting principles that reflect a politics of solidarity

Since neomanagerialism has reshaped the identity and culture of humanitarian organisations (their language, their institutional practices and customs, their values, and their normative outlook), even initiatives to improve performance that have not directly sought to reinforce the commercialisation of humanitarian activities have generally been informed by neomanagerial ideals. Neomanagerial culture serves as a safeguard for the existing political economy of humanitarian aid. In order for humanitarian agencies to change this culture and promote principles that reflect a politics of solidarity, they need to interrogate their values and understand how they have projected

them. They need to engage critically with their histories to understand how their cultures have evolved. And they need to establish clarity regarding the ethical frameworks that guide their actions.

Towards a different conception of knowledge: contextualising humanitarian activities

Reimagining success in the humanitarian sector requires humanitarians not only to roll back commercialisation, but also to challenge how knowledge is produced and used. Reliance on linear-rational models and quantitative methods of programme evaluation should be complemented by the more regular use of qualitative approaches and of anthropological, historical, and sociological research methods, which can support more rounded perspectives on the effects of humanitarian action and can provide humanitarians with different lenses through which to view and interpret the environments in which humanitarians operate and the effects of humanitarian action within them. Drawing on interpretative approaches would encourage more open-ended planning, allowing for understandings of success to be shaped according to context and according to the needs and aspirations of crisis-affected populations. Challenging hierarchies of knowledge would open definitions of success, and even effectiveness, to contestation.

With increased focus on results in the humanitarian sector over the last 20 years, effectiveness has been understood as 'doing what works' as efficiently as possible. Significant energy and resources have been invested in technocratic measures to improve effectiveness of humanitarian action through strengthening accountability, developing technical proficiency, building an objective evidence base, and achieving greater value for money. But whose understanding of effectiveness has this been built on and how closely does it reflect the understandings of people for whom humanitarian action is enacted?

This report offers a critical analysis of the emergence of the humanitarian effectiveness agenda, the bureaucratisation and professionalisation of humanitarian action, the politics behind these trends, and their impact on humanitarian action. It proposes that, in spite of bringing order and focus to efforts to improve humanitarian action, the development of the effectiveness agenda has reinforced an echo chamber within the humanitarian sector that is depoliticising humanitarian agencies, distancing them from the humanitarian imperative and the people they seek to support.

The arguments presented in *The Echo Chamber* are informed by field research which is presented in a second publication – *Essays on Humanitarian Effectiveness*. Essays in the collection offer an analysis of the impact of context on understandings of and approaches to effectiveness.

The Echo Chamber: Results, Management and the Humanitarian Effectiveness Agenda and *Essays on Humanitarian Effectiveness* can be downloaded at www.humanitarianeffectivenessproject.com