An Anthropological Perspective on the Timeline of Humanitarian Interventions

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This chapter deals with the main temporal stages of humanitarian programmes and the interlinked contexts within which these stages unfold, proceeding from early identification of humanitarian risks to the linking with development execution of humanitarian aid as a participative and empowering effort.

In the multidisciplinary field of humanitarian assistance, anthropology plays a role at all stages, from the initial concerted efforts to identify possible or probable upcoming critical or disastrous situations to the implementation of steps and measures designed to attain sustainable development for the areas and populations affected.

The temporal stages of humanitarian action are considered here from an anthropological perspective, i.e. early identification of risks, risk reduction and preparedness, rapid reaction in the face of emergency or disaster and, finally, linking humanitarian action to development when it comes to reconstruction efforts in disaster zones. The process is perhaps best characterised as a circle rather than a straight line.

1 Early Identification of Probable Future Hazards

Processes that may eventually lead to humanitarian crises, including degradation or loss of habitat, increased levels of social conflicts and climate change, among others, should be identified as early as possible. In many cases throughout different regions, ranging from the Kalahari over the Sahel and Central America to the Amazon and others, the anthropologic insights into specific conditions obtained

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through ethnographic research can be of great value to humanitarians. For instance, the inhabitants of the Central African rainforest, already facing various challenges such as deforestation and poaching, may today be facing a severe reduction of rainfall:

> The Congolese forest, with its drier conditions and higher percentage of semi-evergreen trees, may be more tolerant to short-term rainfall reduction than are wetter tropical forests, but for a long-term drought there may be critical thresholds of water availability below which higher-biomass, closed-canopy forests transition to more open, lower-biomass forests.[1]

Those directly affected by such impending changes would be the various low-density rainforest groups in the area, collectively known as Pygmies, but well differentiated by anthropologists as the Mbuti, Aka, Baka and Twa.

As in any other discipline, the context—academic, political and otherwise—in which this kind of ethnographic knowledge is obtained is highly contested, with various uncertainties and perils. The former may be illustrated by the work of Paul Farmer, professor of Anthropology at Harvard Medical School and Chair of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard in Haiti. Farmer's well-documented early warnings of a catastrophe waiting to happen in Haiti went unheeded until the earthquake struck in 2010. As to the perils, the dangers faced by Napoleon Chagnon, both in the field among the Amazonian Yanomamo and then in the academy, are poignantly described in his recent book *Noble Savages*, providing much food for thought.[2]

2 Implementation of Risk Reduction Programmes

Reducing risk and vulnerability through enhanced preparedness is essential to preserving life.[3] Moreover, as the Global Assessment Reports (GARs) published by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR)[4] from 2009 onwards have established, disaster risk will continue to rise, making enhanced preparedness essential.

In the effort to minimise disaster impact and losses while confronting risky ecological, political and economic processes and pitfalls, concerned anthropologists have to combine research on general issues, such as poverty reduction and decreased vulnerability, with local/regional forms of knowledge and best practices. As a matter of fact, the possibilities and potentials of these alternative forms of knowledge are often not immediately apparent to outsiders. As James Boon puts it:

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[1] Zhou et al. (2014), pp. 86–90; http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v509/n7498/full/nature13265.html.

[2] Chagnon (2013).

[3] European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, p. 24.

[4] UNISDR, Global Assessment Report 2015, http://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/gar.

> Those who bemoan anthropology's scientific shortcomings underestimate its characteristic accomplishments: discovering subtlety, pattern, dialectics and innuendo in human matters, that viewed by agencies of analysis outside of anthropology appear merely misguided and laughable.[5]

Adequate channels of information can be more complex than what initially meets the eye, linguistically or otherwise. Suppose, for instance, there was a need to distribute information regarding volcanic eruptions and evacuation to indigenous Mapuche populations in southern Chile and Argentina. Agents from disciplines unrelated to anthropology might not be aware that the local language *Mapudungun* has several distinct orthographic variants and at least an equal number of phonological ones.[6] This kind of knowledge directly impacts on the way information needs to be prepared.

Preparedness also suffers from the human tendency to forget. What has been called the last great subsistence crisis in the western world happened after the colossal volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora, in 1816, on the island of Sumbawa, Indonesia. A year without summer followed, and the consequences were severe, not only in Southeast Asia but also in eastern parts of North America and across Europe, with famine, bread riots and epidemics. According to B. McGuire, although our knowledge of the potential hazards of volcanism has increased over the last 200 years, much remains to be done.[7]

3 The Disaster or Emergency Situation

When rapid action and early recovery are of the essence, the anthropologically trained agent will often be able to contribute to humanitarian efforts in several ways.

First, anthropologists are trained to establish rapid and close relationships with host communities. This community closeness refers to a technical and well-informed understanding of the implications of social formations such as super class, section, subsection, clan, moiety, cognation, etc., as well as patterns of affiliation and disintegration of social harmony and conflict.[8] In other words, anthropology needs to look for social heterogeneity most often found beneath an apparent and superficial homogeneity: 'Anthropologists can be extremely effective in presenting valuable insights, demonstrating the ranges of variation within seemingly homogeneous groupings'.[9]

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[5]Boon (1982), p. 47.

[6]Carbonell et al. (2005), pp. 111–137.

[7]McGuire (2015), pp. 26–27.

[8]Godelier (2011), p. 123f.

[9]Ervin (2002), p. 108.

Second, anthropologists learn to avoid the pitfalls of simplifying complex issues that can be tempting for agents working with emergency protocols, tight schedules and limited resources. As I witnessed in Lombok, Indonesia, a system of latrines or waste disposal that is erected without proper consultancy with local practices will most often remain unused.

Third, anthropological knowledge of specific surroundings facilitates communication; familiarity with the specific meaning and implications of local terms and concepts provided by an anthropologist helps to make local knowledge congruent and an active part of the aid effort as expressed in agreed protocols and codes of conduct. Inversely, such mediation allows for protocols and procedures to be optimally implemented within specific sociocultural settings. In other words, and in terms of the conventional distinction, it is a mediation between the logic of the *emic* and the logic of the *etic*.[10]

One may liken this to an informed mediation between the categories of *ethnos* and *demos*, as in the interplay between traditional-kinship-based and modern-social-contract-based political decision mechanisms, common and codified law and adjudication systems, with multiple possibilities for a combination of secular and religious, private and public dimensions. The same holds true for the highly complex interplay of various medicinal systems, traditional, alternative and/or allopathic, in many places.

4 Reconstruction and the Link with Development

If anthropology is a relatively new facet of humanitarianism, development has long been a key concept in applied anthropology and was already well established as a subfield by the early 1980s.[11] The 2002 edition of the Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology includes a detailed entry on development but not on humanitarianism.[12] As Pierre Minn explains:

> Humanitarianism has received relatively little scrutiny from anthropologists, but the same is not true for development, which has attracted significant attention in the form of ethnographic studies as well as theoretical analyses and reflection. Much of the literature in this area is directly relevant to the topic of humanitarianism, and can serve as an important resource for the emerging domain.[13]

The relation to development work is also a controversial aspect of humanitarian action:

[10] I.e., the difference between culture-specific and universal models of understanding.

[11] Hoben (1982), pp. 349–375.

[12] Barnard and Spencer (eds) ([1996] 2003).

[13] Minn (2007).

> The humanitarian instrument lacks follow-through: there are few examples of an international assistance programme moving forward smoothly from the emergency phase into rehabilitation and development. It saves lives but fails to restore livelihoods or rehabilitate economies. In other words, the system has not mastered transition.[14]

In some cases, reconstruction, not to mention development, has to be postponed because of prolonged crises or failures of assistance programmes. For example, the sustained effort to remedy the disastrous consequences of the ongoing Sidjoarto mudflow in eastern Java, where approximately 40,000 persons were displaced, was not met with success. There is much controversy as to how to mitigate the effects of this severe crisis.[15] Similarly, many reconstruction programmes have been in place in Haiti since the earthquake of 2010 with little success.[16] There is also considerable overlap between emergency aid, reconstruction and development:

> While development and humanitarian assistance are two distinct phenomena, they are not without significant overlap. Much of the activities described as 'development' (improving the lives of impoverished populations through education, health care, agriculture, etc.) can be (and often are) glossed as humanitarian activities, and vice-versa. In addition, both development and humanitarian projects, despite their differences, entail relationships between individuals and institutions in wealthy and impoverished countries, and have developed sizable infrastructures to facilitate these relationships and the processes that emerge from them.[17]

In the phase of post-conflict or post-disaster reconstruction leading to development, the anthropologist will rely heavily on a communicative and holistic concept of culture, understood here as the processual combination of the social, cognitive and material dimensions of life. In this way, taking due consideration of the caveats mentioned above, the anthropologically trained agent will consider the implications of social structures, various classifications, symbolic systems and other cognitive domains, as well as the constraints and possibilities of local material and economic conditions. All this will permit an informed focus on factors such as community participation, social dynamics, relativity and possible sources of misunderstanding (Instituto de Derechos Humanos 2000).

Community participation is one of the main factors enhancing the adequate congruence of reconstruction programmes with local needs and aspirations. This has broad implications, from general considerations, such as in whose interests a certain reconstruction programme is really being implemented, to more direct specifics, such as the choice or combination of appropriate qualitative and quantitative measurement tools. *Community members may prefer statements of a verbal or qualitative nature; decision makers may want facts bolstered by numbers.*[18]

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[14]Hyder (2007).

[15]Wayman (2011), http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-worlds-muddiest-disaster-1603529/?no-ist; A.R. Fitrianto, Shrimp Farmers' Innovation In Coping With The Disaster (A Case Study In Sidoarjo Mud Volcano Disaster Toward Shrimp Farmers' Responses), http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212567112003322.

[16]Farmer (2011) and Schuller (2010).

[17]Minn (2007).

[18]Ervin (2002), p. 196.

Community demands are not infrequently disregarded. For example, in the wake of the great earthquake and tsunami of 2004, inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands were, in the first place, concerned with gathering tools to rebuild their homes. However, the roughly 60 NGOs that descended on those remote settlements had their own priorities and agendas, and consequently locals were swamped by items, including radios, junk food and gas stoves, in the absence of liquefied gas canisters. Nicobarese culture is based on joint families of 40–50 people, but the concept of providing aid or building houses for extended families was unknown to the agents of the Indian government, so 7000 *modern* tin houses for nuclear families were commissioned. No wonder social ecologist Simron Jit Singh, present at the time, says he witnessed how a flood of aid destroyed a culture.[19]

In the same way, social dynamics, when not taken into account, can wreck well-intentioned but ill-informed reconstruction programmes:

> . . .. distinguishing with elaborate precision, the contexts – marriage, worship, and to an extent diet, law and education – within which men are separated by their dissimilitudes, and those – work, friendship, politics, trade – however warily and however conditionally, they are connected by them.[20]

Certainly, such knowledge cannot be rapidly acquired as it would appear, for instance, in the list of motivating factors recommended by Richard D. Lewis while negotiating a deal in India. He states:

> Make yourself familiar with Indian family arrangements, e.g. brothers and sons usually living under one roof, look at things from their point of view, develop a tolerance for ambiguity – it is common in Asia, make yourself familiar with the respective positions of men and women and the system of arranged marriage, etc.[21]

In reality, learning about this kind of deep structural patterns, not least the subtle semantics of ambiguity, takes up considerable time as innuendo, and implicit traits of communication are usually not immediately apparent but discernible only after protracted fieldwork that takes months and years. To engage ambiguity is, according to Redfield and Bornstein, one of the gifts of anthropology, the result of working

> . . .in a gray zone between analytic registers, one initiated by the ambiguous, ambitious and varied roles that ethnographers have with human practice: as participant observers, expert witnesses, moral spectators, consultants, activists, critics, historians, outsiders, engaged sympathizers, and active members.[22]

These kinds of insights can otherwise be obtained through documentary and archival studies, such as that of John Pemberton on the historical roots of authenticity in central Java, where the manifestation of a sense of traditional royal Javanese culture employs many elements borrowed from the Dutch colonial

[19] O'Neill (2015), pp. 34–35.

[20] Geertz (1983), p. 67.

[21] Lewis (2006), p. 440.

[22] Bornstein and Redfield (2010), p. 26.

presence and other European prestige-laden tokens: 'Regardless of how many Spanish figurines, French chandeliers, Italian sculptures or Dutch portraits might be crammed into the Kraton Surakarta,[23] it would all eventually, be viewed as "authentically Javanese".'[24] In the aftermath of the 2010 eruption of the Merapi volcano in that same region, such insights were relevant for a proper understanding of the sociocultural landscape of the region. They now need to be considered together with relevant modern concepts in order to form a coherent and meaningful whole in the context of reconstruction.

Further, the anthropologically trained agent needs to dispose of a sense of relativity. He or she will be aware that anthropology, as James Boon puts it, 'forestalls any culture's sense of its own inevitability',[25] acknowledging the importance and significance of the range of variation on the understanding of the nature of humanitarian aid, be it local, traditional, modern, secular or religious.

For instance, in areas with a prevalence of traditional Muslim concepts of charity, this means taking due consideration of *zakat* and *sadaqa*. As Hyder explains:

> Zakat is obligatory and payable only to Muslim beneficiaries who are specified in the Qur'an (Sura 9, verse 60); zakat therefore does not really qualify as being the equivalent of humanitarian aid in modern terms. Sadaqa, especially one particular kind designated as sadaqat al-tatawwu' (alms of spontanaiety) is voluntary and can be given to Muslim and non-Muslim alike without further specification of their status or need. This type of sadaqa is therefore more akin to humanitarian aid in modern terms.[26]

One must carefully evaluate whether these concepts are being considered, even where their logic might differ from the contemporary ideal of humanitarian assistance of inclusiveness and non-discrimination.[27] As it is, the interface between these Muslim humanitarian concepts and non-confessional humanitarian assistance remains to a large extent unexplored. At the same time, these divergent aspects should not be overplayed:

> Whatever the points of difference, they seem to have little impact on humanitarian operations in Muslim countries. OIC members welcome humanitarian agencies to their meetings as observers, have passed helpful resolutions (for example expressing appreciation of UNHCR's work), and in general have good relations with international humanitarian agencies, both as contributors and as recipients. Thus there seems to be broad agreement on the underlying purposes.[28]

There are many possible sources of misunderstanding between anthropology and humanitarian aid. A general principle would be that humanitarianism rests on the notion that the common human moral community to which we all belong consists of

[23]The royal palace in Surakarta/Solo.

[24]Pemberton (1994), p. 67.

[25]Boon (1982), p. 47.

[26]Hyder (2007).

[27]*Ibid.*

[28]*Ibid.*

individuals capable of free communication and, in principle, able to interact and collaborate according to rules of mutual respect.[29]

In practice, in intercultural settings with interdisciplinary teams of agents operating in the field, communication and collaboration often require solid professional support to facilitate intercultural understanding. In this context, the anthropologically trained agent contributes ethnographic inside expertise with reference to specific cases, situations, locations, groups, etc., thus facilitating for other members of the team a better understanding of local beneficiaries and affected individuals' demands and expectations.

5 Conclusion

Finally, anthropologists and specialists from other disciplines, lawyers, medical doctors and nurses and even economists, who also perceive and analyse the intricacies of sociocultural patterns, have much in common. Acknowledging the high frequency of assault on women in India, Amartya Sen points to the fact that this terrible form of violence is related to brute force, as well as to the level of permissiveness of a set of negative attitudinal factors. This shows that any programme of social reform to combat physical violence against women thus needs to take into account educational, cultural and political factors.[30]

As any other aid practitioner, the anthropologist confronts the fundamental question of the justification of the humanitarian approach and the meaning of an effort that is positioned within the boundaries of a field of action characterised by a unified and integral sense of a single human moral community. In other words, it is the sense of obligation to help people in need that follows from a shared moral space.[31]

As to its inner logic and reason, humanitarianism is positioned between the two polarities of morality and politics,[32] justice and heartfelt caring, constituting itself within that field around a core of integrity and empowerment. Rather than the mobilisation of compassion over justice,[33] humanitarianism is the interplay of compassion with justice, of rights with emotions, of violence and trauma with suffering. It is not a matter of translating or replacing one set of values or categories for another but a matter of interaction and dialectics in the context of a politics of compassion. It would thus appear that the essence of humanitarianism is to guard a sense of integrity, an experience, a sense of ownership and empowerment.

[29] Cortina (2010), p. 130.

[30] Sen (2005), p. 237.

[31] Cortina (2010), p. 58.

[32] NOHA, Anthropology in Humanitarian Assistance, 1998, 2nd edn., p. 4.

[33] Fassin (2012).

Therefore, one way to characterise humanitarianism is to see it as mandated by a feeling of obligation (the duty to help) born of a sense of solidarity, which impels the agent to a professionally informed experience of caring, helping and healing. At the same time, the heartfelt condition of this solidarity makes it, following Jean Watson, so unitary to its various manifestations that the members of the host community, the beneficiaries, feel these manifestations as if they were their own from the very beginning, a sense of ownership that empowers recipients and restores them to the same statutory level as the caring humanitarian agent.[34] This leads the humanitarian effort to its logical circular conclusion, which is also a preparedness for a new cycle, considering that rupture, trauma and suffering are not the exception but rather the rule.[35]

Finally, what started as an apparent timeline shows itself to, in reality, be a circular process that, following Adela Cortina,[36] is incomplete without the element of democratic and participative reciprocal education.

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