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On the mysteries of humanitarian decision-making: getting from World Humanitarian Summit commitments to #BetterAid

BY ALYOSCIA D'ONOFRIO

Alyoscia D'Onofrio is the Governance Senior Director at the International Rescue Committee, leading a team of technical specialists working on aid responsiveness, organisational development, voice and empowerment. You can follow Alyoscia on [Twitter \(https://twitter.com/AlyosciaD\)](https://twitter.com/AlyosciaD) and read his [blogs on Medium \(https://medium.com/@Alyoscia\)](https://medium.com/@Alyoscia).

In the final days before the [World Humanitarian Summit \(http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/\)](http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/), a significant chunk of the aid industry is focused on submitting commitments, influencing communiqués, haggling for speaking slots and chasing hotel rooms. The aid circus is finally coming to Istanbul, after a long and winding road.

In 2015, somewhere along this route, the CHS Alliance published its Humanitarian Accountability Report, a great collection of articles about improved accountability and effectiveness in aid: [On the Road to Istanbul – How can the World Humanitarian Summit make humanitarian response more effective? \(https://www.chsalliance.org/har\)](https://www.chsalliance.org/har). In this blog I want to dig into a couple of ideas around decision-making that surfaced in that publication and have been nagging away at me ever since, informing my work at the [International Rescue Committee \(http://www.rescue.org/\)](http://www.rescue.org/) (IRC) around [building more client-responsive aid practices \(https://medium.com/@Alyoscia/night-plane-to-juba-customer-satisfaction-in-the-aid-business-f4f20fc59ce6#.vyv7ri79\)](https://medium.com/@Alyoscia/night-plane-to-juba-customer-satisfaction-in-the-aid-business-f4f20fc59ce6#.vyv7ri79) and a broader engagement with efforts to improve aid in other ways. These include generating and using evidence around what works, using better monitoring data, analysing local power dynamics and applying this knowledge in design and implementation, etc.

Here is the simple phrase from the 2015 Humanitarian Accountability Report that struck me and stuck with me:

“As humanitarians we need to admit not only that we make decisions, we also need to be open about how we make them. This change in decision-making culture is the key to making us more accountable to the crisis-affected people we serve.” (p.31 (<https://www.chsalliance.org/files/files/CHS-Alliance-HAR-2015.pdf#page=33>))

On first read, it seemed a rather odd phrase. We “need to admit ... that we make decisions”. What kind of statement was this? What was [Lars Peter Nissen \(https://twitter.com/lpnissen\)](https://twitter.com/lpnissen), the author, thinking? Of course we make decisions. All the time. What’s the big deal?

But as with many ideas, what appears simple and self-evident is actually quite interesting when you reflect upon it further. Here are five observations that this simple comment has provoked:

1. There are big decisions and small decisions. Both are important. The obvious decisions are the ones which attach to starting an intervention and funding it. There are many hidden decisions made by a whole range of staff and external interlocutors which generally remain invisible. This becomes even more important during implementation of an intervention, where course corrections may be taking place without the knowledge of the project manager, let alone their managers.
2. The trouble with aid reform efforts (including some of my own) is that they are rarely rooted in the messiness of daily aid implementation. The focus is so often on inputs: we need more or better monitoring data, evidence, perspectives from affected populations, procurement data, financial data. The assumption is that with better information, better decisions will be made. How is this rooted in reality? Who is reviewing this information? Do they have the time? Do they have the inclination? Do they have the power to do anything with this information? Are they rewarded for doing so or penalised if they do not? How do they make trade-offs between different information? Can they explain these trade-offs? Does the agency that they work for have any way of managing knowledge around past decisions and the learning that could flow from them?
3. Distilling the previous points: capabilities, incentives and accountability matter a lot if we're talking about processing better information for better decisions around better aid. But unless we know ("admit") what decisions are being made when, where and by whom, then much of this is difficult to support, monitor, incentivise and manage.
4. Transparency around decision-making thus moves to centre-stage and is very important for improved accountability to affected populations, learning from successes and failures, for improving aid practices, for generating insights into the validity of existing assumptions and evidence; in short, for successfully applying the Nine Commitments of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) (<http://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/>). Transparency scares people. So cultivating a culture of learning from failure is extremely important.
5. So modelling decision-making – real, contextualised decision-making, not an idealised version, becomes essential if you want improve how aid agencies work. Doing so in a way that does not add heavy compliance burdens to already over-burdened field staff is of the utmost importance.

Circling back to the World Humanitarian Summit and its 'big decisions' about the direction of the aid business in the months and years to come, I suspect that well-phrased commitments (already running into hundreds of pages) will amount to very little if we can't improve the way that we manage decision-making processes in and across aid agencies. Admitting that we make decisions is the first step. Better aid requires the patient work of uncovering the mysteries of who makes what decisions, how and on what basis. Shining the light of day on assumptions and habits is a tough challenge. But an absolutely necessary one.

The CHS Alliance is calling on (<https://www.chsalliance.org/news/latest-news/update-whs-activities>), humanitarian and development stakeholders at the World Humanitarian Summit (<http://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/>), to put affected people at the centre of humanitarian action by committing to adopt and use the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). We encourage our members and other stakeholders to support us in doing this at the summit – find out more information on how to do so [here](https://www.chsalliance.org/news/latest-news/update-whs-activities) (<https://www.chsalliance.org/news/latest-news/update-whs-activities>).
