Patronage or Partnership: Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises

(Photo courtesy of UNHCR)

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It is early 1998, on the outskirts of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. "People are dying like flies," says an understandably emotional American missionary running a refugee camp for four thousand Hutus. Asked by a reporter about a series of conflict resolution workshops being run by a British non-governmental organization, the missionary watches four more corpses as they are carried out of the makeshift shelter he has constructed. The missionary says, "I do not like to criticize other groups ... but I wish someone was giving me that sort of money."

This story, which originally appeared in a London newspaper, introduces the central dilemma of *Patronage or Partnership — Local Capacity Building in Humanitarian Crises*, a new publication by Kumarian Press and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The outcome of three years of research by the Humanitarianism and War Project at Tufts University, *Patronage or Partnership* examines the relationship between international relief agencies and local civil society. The book's main purpose "is to identify and examine innovative practices that have contributed to building short- and long-term local capacities, which are then brought to bear on the challenges of emergency assistance, peacebuilding, reconstruction, and development."

Core commitment

"One of the core commitments of most international humanitarian organizations is to strengthen the capacity of local agencies to respond to crises and to participate more fully in their respective societies," states Larry Minear, Director of the Humanitarianism and War Project, in the book's Foreword. "To do anything less, the agencies argue persuasively, would be to leave those societies vulnerable to recurring emergencies. The track record of humanitarian organizations, however, is better in delivering life-saving assistance than in strengthening local capacity."

Why? "In the heat of each new crisis, the scramble to save lives often eclipses the goal of partnership with local institutions," Minear suggests. "Moreover, patterns of relationships established during the relief phases of conflicts, many of them distressingly long-lived, are difficult to alter as reconstruction and development possibilities open up."

Emergency situations

According to [Ian Smillie](), editor of *Patronage or Partnership*, the question of how local organizations and international agencies interact during emergencies has rarely been addressed, but it is growing in importance. "Once upon a time, a war started and ended. Emergency organizations rushed in, did the needful, and left — then development organizations arrived. Not all emergencies were short, but mostly we weren't thinking in terms of decades. Today we are. The war in Sierra Leone just passed its tenth anniversary, the war in Sri Lanka has been going on much longer," he noted during a workshop on Ottawa's Parliament Hill this spring, hosted by [CARE Canada]() and the Humanitarianism and War Project. The purpose of the event was to share and discuss the book's findings with development practitioners, policy makers, and academics.

"Outsiders can't do it all anymore," Smillie stresses. "It makes much more sense to build local capacities to start dealing with [emergency situations], as well."

Case studies

Patronage or Partnership describes capacity building experiences in six countries: Bosnia, Haiti, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Sierra Leone, which represent a cross-section of emergencies at different moments in time. Two of these countries had very weak civil societies (Bosnia and Mozambique) and two had strong ones (Haiti and Sri Lanka). "We were also trying to look at various thematic issues in different chapters," says Smillie. For example, the chapter on Haiti discusses food aid, the Mozambique chapter looks at health care, and the Guatemala chapter deals with gender issues.

Each chapter is framed around some common questions, such as what capacity building means. In his chapter on Sierra Leone, Thomas Turay writes: "Capacity building is about empowering people to take control of their lives. It enables people to rediscover their strengths and limitations, and the opportunities open to them to develop their fullest potential. The process enables people to develop self confidence and self respect, and to improve the quality of their lives, utilizing their own resources."

Beyond training programs

According to Smillie, this implies much more than offering training programs, which often just provide information. "In the spread from simply providing information to changing the behaviour of [individuals or] organizations, you go from a fairly simple level of capacity building to something much more complex. The more complex it is, the more time it's going to take and the more difficult it's going to be. So it's important to think through what we mean by capacity building when we set out on that path."

"The next question is: Whose capacity is going to be strengthened? Is it individuals? Is it an organization? Is it a sector? Or are we talking about civil society as a whole?" asks Smillie. "And why build capacities? Is it to get organizations locally to do what outsiders want them to do, or is to help them to do better what they think is required: to engage and influence the political system and the socioeconomic system, in terms of how they see their future?"

Key issues

As *Patronage or Partnership* reveals, there are often more questions than answers. One of the issues raised by the case studies is: Who has the capacity to build capacities? "A lot of the people who work in emergencies are young and highly stressed. They may not know the local context. They may not have the skills or the background to do what's required," says Smillie.

Another issue is money. "The $5 and $10 donors want to see their money go to helping people in trouble. They're not necessarily interested in long-term solutions. The same thing [applies to] institutional donors. They have short term funding to do specific things in an emergency. It's often not very focused on building capacities or getting things done in the long run," he says.

Corruption

Additional concerns include finding suitable local organizations to work with, and dealing with corruption. "Of course, there is bound to be corruption in a situation of great desperation where large resources are available. But I can't imagine that in 50 years of the development enterprise, we haven't found ways of managing relationships, [implementing] checks and balances, and finding people who aren't corrupt," says Smillie. Unfortunately, "what happens is that we tend to put in more and more controls. And the more you control, the more you detract from the nature of partnership and the kind of trust that's necessary if you really are going to build capacities."

Lastly, there's the issue of motivation. "Do humanitarian agencies really want to change the status quo?" asks Smillie. "A lot of the work that international organizations do is their bread and butter: it's how they live, it's how they survive, it's how they sustain themselves. In some countries, local organizations are very suspicious of the motivation of international agencies."

No simple recipes

When it comes to building local capacities during emergencies, *Patronage or Partnership* underlines that there are no simple recipes. What the book does provide, writes Minear, "is a demonstration of the importance of struggling — country by country, conflict by conflict — with the vexing dilemmas of capacity building in all of their complexity."

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