

Past Practice into Future Policy: A Model for Historical Reflection in the Humanitarian Sector

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Abstract

This article describes the results of a pilot project on using historical reflection as a tool for policy-making in the humanitarian sector. It begins by establishing the rationale for integrating reflection into humanitarian practice. It then looks at the growing interest in humanitarian history among practitioners and academics over the past decade and sets out the arguments for why a more formalised discussion about humanitarianism’s past could result in a better understanding of the contemporary aid environment. The main body of the article focuses on our efforts to translate that potential into practice, through a reflective workshop on Somalia since the 1990s, held at National University of Ireland, Galway, in June 2017. Drawing on our experience of that event, the article puts forward four principles on which a workable model of reflective practice might be developed: the importance of the workshop setting, how to organise the reflective process, the value of pursuing a single case study and the careful management of expectations and outcomes. This article is not intended to be prescriptive, however. Rather, our aim is to put forward some practical suggestions and to open a conversation about how a model of historical reflection for aid practitioners might be developed.

Keywords: humanitarianism, humanitarian history, academic–practitioner collaboration, Somalia

Introduction

In October 2016 the *New York Review of Books* published an article by International Rescue Committee President David Miliband titled ‘The Best Ways to Deal with the Refugee Crisis’. It began with a predictable target. US Presidential candidate Donald Trump’s claims about a ‘tremendous flow’ of Syrian refugees making their way to North America were based in ‘myth, not fact’, Miliband wrote (Miliband, 2016). Not only that: they also openly belittled the difficulties faced by those seeking refuge. Those remarks, of course, were hardly unusual. Quite apart from Trump’s aptitude for fomenting societal division, politicians (of all stripes) have for centuries done battle over what Caroline Shaw called ‘the moral possibilities and conundrums that remain so familiar to the “refugee question”’ (Shaw, 2015: 11). Add to that equation the poor or misleading data that hinders international efforts to assist refugees and it becomes

easier to explain policy-makers’ short-termist tendencies. As Miliband put it, ‘The practice of humanitarian aid has been undermined by the fiction – sometimes convenient for donors in the midst of financial stress and host countries concerned about taking in permanent new residents – that the problems they seek to address are temporary’ (Miliband, 2016).¹

Miliband’s solution to this problem was striking in its banality: long-term programming, properly supported (financially and politically) by states and international agencies. Yet in calling for better-informed, long-term decision-making, he nonetheless highlighted the need for a much deeper discussion of the relationship between long-term processes, lessons learnt and the practice of humanitarian aid. At a time of great uncertainty in the world, increased instrumentalisation of humanitarianism and heightened expectations of aid actors to ‘do no harm’ as they prevent, respond to and ease suffering in times of crisis, taking a moment to reflect on various

aspects of that response and to consider the humanity within humanitarian action can only be a positive step. Put simply, there is great value in asking what happened? How can we translate the considerable knowledge that has been accumulated in the humanitarian sector (from institutional memory to experiential learning) into informed decision-making at home and in the field? Could a more robust engagement with humanitarianism as an historical phenomenon help us to better navigate the contemporary aid environment? If so, what steps can we take to translate the lessons of the past into future policy?

This article outlines the results of a pilot project conducted by Trócaire and National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway on using history as a tool for policy-making in the humanitarian sector. It begins by reflecting on the need for adaptability and responsiveness among humanitarian agencies, and the value of seeking knowledge from outside the traditional parameters of humanitarian studies. The main body of the article outlines the aims and implementation of the project and puts forward four principles on which a workable model of reflective practice might be developed. Our objective is not to establish a single transferable framework for historical reflection. Rather, we hope to open a conversation about the ways in which the humanitarian sector can develop formal (and fruitful) collaborations with academic historians and to integrate some of their methods into their work practices.

Humanitarian History and Policy

The impetus for this project came from a growing interest in history within the aid industry. The humanitarian sector's engagement with its past has expanded significantly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, typified by the Overseas Development Institute's five-year 'Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action' project (2011–15), Médecins sans Frontières' *Speaking Out* initiative (Médecins sans Frontières, n.d.), its recently released associative history (Médecins sans Frontières, 2018) and the 2015 conference on the fundamental principles in 'a critical historical perspective', hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Projects like these were vital in opening questions about institutional (and sectoral) memory and communities of practice. Equally significantly, they grew in tandem with a rich vein of historical research. Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity* (2011) broke new ground, and it was followed by diverse new histories of humanitarianism, the development of new partnerships between NGOs and the writing of new histories of humanitarianism in places like Exeter, Galway, Geneva, London, Mainz, Manchester, Milan, Oslo, Ottawa and Sheffield.

The result was a growing conversation about humanitarianism's past and its potential to shape our understanding of

the present. Those discussions have centred on three themes. The first is an insistence on moving beyond what David Lewis termed the aid sector's 'perpetual present': 'a state characterised by an abundance of frequently changing language and "buzzwords"' (Lewis, 2009: 33; see also Borton and Davey, 2015). High rates of staff mobility significantly impact the development of institutional memory (Korff *et al.*, 2015). This, in turn, leads to an overemphasis on contemporary events to guide reflection. As John Borton put it, 'such is the degree of ahistoricism within much of the sector that initiatives aimed at fostering improved practice tend to only reference recent practice' (Borton, 2016: 195).

History's second contribution is to disrupt the often repeated – and far too uncritically consumed – trope of 'progress' in the aid sector. Historians' suspicion of linear narratives, insistence on context and focus on process are all useful tools for challenging the idea that things will/can/could get better. Third, and relatedly, thinking historically also means asking new questions about experiences with which we are familiar. For historians, this involves us in what Catherine Hall calls 'reflexivity': being 'more open to the need for an awareness of those many "others" whose ways of thinking are so different from ours' (Hall, 2017: 254). For aid workers, it should lead to a greater questioning of the contexts in which the humanitarian sector operates, at headquarters and in the field, as well as the processes that have helped to shaped them and the deep-rooted power relationships that underpin them.

We can also read these debates as part of a longer-term trend within the aid sector. Aid agencies have come under increased pressure in recent decades to show immediate results, to be effective, efficient and transparent and to adopt practices with a sound ethical and moral base. Anecdotally, there has also been a growing exasperation among practitioners at witnessing the same approaches being repeated, with the same misguided but not unexpected results. The quest for efficiency, effectiveness and data-driven strategies has informed aid policy for at least five decades (Hilton, 2018). In the rush to record and justify their actions, however, humanitarians often have little time to reflect on the process of decision-making. They tend to know what decision was made but rarely why that route was taken or what alternative options (if any) were available. This can lead to an underappreciation both of humanitarianism's nuances and of what we have forgotten, ignored or not measured. It also privileges presentism. As Jeff Crisp rather pithily observed, over the course of any emergency, the sector 'can be guaranteed to describe it as an "unprecedented crisis"' (Crisp, 2016).

Description of the Project

We developed 'Humanitarian History: Past Practice into Future Policy', a project funded by a New Foundations

Grant from the Irish Research Council in 2017, from conversations about these issues. Our aim was to find a method that would allow humanitarians to integrate historical reflection into their work practices and to establish a model that might be replicated in a variety of institutional contexts. We wanted to create an environment, in other words, in which it was possible to think historically about what did and did not work in the field, what contextual factors shaped decision-making processes in humanitarianism and whether the outcomes of those decisions – some of which had decades-long consequences and influenced humanitarian policy on a global scale – were expected.

Having established those broad challenges, we set about developing a model of reflective practice that would help answer them. Early in the process, we made the decision to focus on a single case study (of humanitarian intervention in Somalia since the 1990s) and to focus our activities on a workshop format. This approach, we felt, would concentrate our discussions and make tangible the lessons learnt more effectively than attempting to find answers to such far-reaching questions in a global context. Somalia was selected because of its pivotal role in redefining humanitarian aid in the post-Cold War era. The crisis in the region altered understandings of humanitarian intervention as a tool of international security, raised questions about NGO engagement with, or disregard for, local politics and offered massive logistical challenges in the delivery of aid (Harper, 2012). Its legacy still resonates, about how complex decision-making processes are implemented in pressurised situations and how task-focused approaches have shifted attention from outcomes and their wider social and political implications.

The main activities of the project took place in a workshop at NUI Galway on 22–23 June 2017. Discussions were organised in a chronological fashion and focused on three interlocking themes:

- the militarisation of intervention in the post-Cold War era and the redefinition of humanitarianism that accompanied it;
- the period following the withdrawal of UN staff from Somalia in 2001 and the questions it raised about the relationship between the international humanitarian sector and those it is charged to help;
- the shifting discourse of humanitarian action in the twenty-first century, particularly the normalisation of crisis and displacement and the recurrent themes of food security, famine and drought.

Each session was introduced by brief reflections from two practitioners and an academic, followed by a guided open discussion, bringing in participants from the floor and lasting approximately an hour and a half in each case. Brief outlines of the session themes, including questions

for reflection, were circulated to all registered participants in advance, with the aim of stimulating debate and providing the parameters to focus the reflective process.

A Model for Reflective Practice

Feedback from workshop participants and in subsequent meetings and correspondence suggests that this model was productive. Nonetheless, it was not without its challenges. The open-ended nature of the discussions was enjoyed by many but uncomfortable for those who favoured more clearly defined outcomes and the pursuit of specific recommendations. In the background, too, was the question of whether almost two days of debate on a single topic represented too much of an indulgence for a community defined by the need for an urgent response.

With those comments in mind, we set about refining our model of reflective practice. While remaining cognisant of the needs of individual organisations and groups of practitioners, we suggest that the successful use of historical reflection in an institutional or cross-sectoral context should take account of four factors.

1 The Workshop Setting

The value of historical reflection is influenced by the immediate environment in which the discussions take place. The impact of this physical setting should not be underestimated, not least since it focused attention on the immediate task at hand and encouraged participants to be present (physically and intellectually) for the entire event. Our experience indicates that the value of hosting discussions at a university or research institute lies in taking participants away from environments in which protecting organisational brands and concerns over access to funding restrict conversation and co-operation. That is not to suggest that university campuses represent ideal territories for debate; they require careful consideration of the same issues of accessibility (physical, cultural and intellectual) as any other location. Rather, we would simply reiterate, as one contributor to our Somalia workshop described it, that the unfamiliar context facilitated a more useful and honest ‘portrayal of reality’ than might otherwise have been the case.

2 Establishing Ground Rules

That level of open engagement, however, must be carefully cultivated. At the risk of stating the obvious, it is important to set the right tone for the discussions. Willingness to engage and respect for sharing information can be facilitated by carefully choosing speakers and commentators to stimulate the debate. In our case, the decision to pair practitioners with academic contributors in each of the thematic panels was an attempt to

balance the value of individual experience with a more global reading of the cultural, political and social environments in which these histories were developed. Likewise, the careful preparation of guidance notes and questions, and their circulation to contributors and workshop participants in advance, provided structure to the sessions.

The mix of skills and differing levels of experience and knowledge of the region (and the humanitarian sector more broadly) among workshop participants also helped in drawing out comparisons between past and present challenges. The fact that, two and a half decades on, Somalia struggles to shake off its reputation (warranted or not) as a 'hopeless' case, and the practical demands of working in such a complex crisis over a long time period, carried particular resonance for participants more immediately concerned with what is occurring in contemporary Syria and South Sudan, for example. The participation of two Somali colleagues (via Skype), along with members of the Somali diaspora, was significant in that sense. It provided an alternative (and frequently highly critical) reading of the workshop's quarter-century timeline and helped to link the historical element of our discussions directly to the future of the region.

Given the open nature of the discussions and the sensitive nature of much of the material shared, it was also important that all participants were made aware of some ground rules for discussion from the outset. We suggest adopting a version of the Chatham House Rule, where 'participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed' (Chatham House, n.d.). This is particularly important in encouraging participants to share sensitive information without fear of it being broadcast, with implications for security and policy.

Related to this, we would stress the need to take full account of the ethical implications of the reflective process. Several participants at our Somalia workshop, for example, commented on the cathartic nature of discussing the events of the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet there are very specific consequences, including heightened emotional vulnerability, associated with recalling sensitive experiences with which participants are familiar (Ellis, 2007) and in the dynamics of a group setting (Christensen, 2016). The reflective process must be carefully managed to safeguard the well-being of participants and to avoid subjecting them to undue stress.

3 Single Case Study

Our decision to focus on Somalia was taken with a view to a) available expertise and the Irish humanitarian

community's long-standing relationship with the country (dating back to at least the early 1990s), b) the region's continuing global relevance and c) the themes it allowed us to cover (see above). This geographical focus had several additional advantages which became apparent in the course of the project. In particular, it facilitated participation from individuals with a range of different areas of knowledge: practitioner and academic, humanitarian, developmental, security and rights-focused, and the Somali diaspora in Ireland.

The potential pitfalls of a discussion ranging over twenty-five years of history are obvious: topics risk being conflated, debates lose focus and tangible lessons become an increasingly elusive prospect. Focusing on a single country/regional case study did not eliminate those problems completely; conversations still needed to be carefully steered to keep them 'on track'. It did, however, anchor complex issues in a single context. The pace of change within organisations often happens so slowly that it is only through long-term reflection of this kind that it can be identified and analysed. In the field, by contrast, change occurs so quickly and with such disruption that it is difficult for agencies and individual humanitarian actors to make sense of it without taking time to reflect on its causes and implications. Our discussions provided an opportunity to follow individual decisions and policies from their (often contested) origins through their implementation and their consequences. Taking this a step further, the process of mapping those narratives on to national, regional and international spaces also helped to stimulate reflection on how changes in the operating environment, such as the securitisation and militarisation of aid, shaped the practice of humanitarianism in Somalia.

4 Managing Expectations and Outcomes

For this pilot project, as we have already noted, participants were provided with prompts for reflection, and speakers were issued with broad instructions on their contributions, but we left the outcomes deliberately open. The pursuit of defined recommendations, we felt, would risk directing the discussions towards a specific goal and, in turn, undermine the exploratory nature of the project. Nonetheless, this approach did not find favour with all participants.

On the one hand, it is clear that the value of the workshop drew from its relatively open format and its emphasis on the process of reflection, rather than being outcome-driven. This allowed for the widest possible engagement from a deliberately restricted audience (forty-one people registered) and encouraged the speakers to be more provocative in their comments. Yet there is a balance to be struck between open engagement, the interactive element of revisiting the past and of sharing

experiences, and the need to apply the knowledge that results.

That begs the question: how do we translate ‘relevance’ into sustainable policies? As a start, we suggest that contributors to the final roundtable should play a clear role in summarising the discussions and pointing the way to lessons learnt. But our experience leads us to caution against producing recommendations for the sector. The emphasis – in this project at least – was on encouraging historical thinking and engaging in reflection. Trying to summarise those discussions and the myriad voices and disparate opinions that engaged in them to a set of easily referenceable lessons risked conforming to the ‘stabilising practices’ identified by Pascal Dauvin (2004) as a core characteristic of a professionalised aid industry. As he might have put it, we seek out recommendations because we think that is what is expected of us: ‘In a world characterised by the imperative to professionalise and the virtues of expertise, what we do must comply with accepted and credible conventions’ (Dauvin, 2004). Historical reflection, however, by its very nature requires us to do something quite different.

Conclusion

David Miliband’s insistence on long-term thinking in response to the global refugee crisis reminds us that there is very little that is new in the world of humanitarianism. We have, as his claim that the questions of the 1940s have ‘returned to public life’ suggests, faced many of these questions before (Miliband, 2016). And while history does not repeat itself – the humanitarian situation in Europe after the Second World War cannot be directly equated with our contemporary context – we can look to the past to disrupt the idea that the challenges we face are ‘unprecedented’ and require the constant pursuit of new solutions.

This is particularly urgent in the pressurised environment in which NGOs operate. If there is no time to pause, and to analyse and review, how can change occur? How can we adapt and digest the findings of endless evaluations and research projects without the space to engage in the reflective process? This, we suggest, is why collaboration is important. Academic historians bring an emphasis on scale and context, built on deep reading of archival and other sources, to bear on the policy-making process. Our experience of the ‘Humanitarian History’ project suggests that working together in a space of mutual exploration and the co-production of knowledge has enormous value.

Note

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