PREPARED-FOR-PARTNERSHIP? Trust and distrust in international cooperation

27 February 2019

Two parallel universes

Much of my professional work takes place in two sectors of international cooperation: relief work and peacebuilding, mostly in violent crises. Yet when it comes to atmospheres of trust and equitable collaborations between external and internal actors, they feel like very different universes. The prevailing mood in relief work is distrust; the prevailing effort in peacebuilding is trust. This has significant impact on the ability to form genuine partnerships. Why these stark differences?

Humanitarian distrust

Some years ago, I gave a key note speech on "*Why is there so much distrust in the humanitarian sector*?" This may sound an overstatement, and there are plenty of counter-examples. Yet be around in the sector long enough, listen and observe attentively, and you will notice how little trust there is overall.

Relief agencies suspect crisis-affected people of cheating to get more relief items they are entitled to, or others to have moved into the displaced camp or the distribution queue, to also get free hand-outs. Modern identification technologies have made cross-checking easier, so there is a bit less of that in recent years, but still. Crisis-affected populations are grateful for the aid they receive but observe expensive modes of operating of those who came to help them, wonder what they do with all the survey answers they get, have no idea of the budgets available and how they are spent, and who the people are whose faraway decisions affect them. They wonder about the real motives and agendas of relief agencies. Crisis-affected people may also distrust the local authorities, uncertain whether these seek to get personal financial or political benefit out of their misery.

Local organisations in crisis-affected areas are approached by international relief agencies with distrust as starting point. They are the object of a generic stereotype in which they have limited capacities, may be serving the self- interests of the founder, are possibly politically aligned and not impartial[i], and always constitute a significant <u>risk</u> of fraud and corruption. International relief agencies are weary of local and national governmental authorities, for the same reasons as local populations. A general reflex is to keep them informed but work in parallel to them (there can be closer collaboration in e.g. health, education, social welfare and child protection, depending on the country's public sector capacities).

Local and national agencies distrust each other, as they are made to compete for limited international funding. They become '*my partners'* of an international agency rather than privileging solidarity and partnership among each other. International agencies also compete against each other for the limited funding and, the larger ones, to maintain and increase market share. Institutional donors generally have a fair degree of confidence in international relief agencies, but had that boat rocked by instances of fraud (typically kept very quiet), sexual abuse and exploitation (nowadays very publicised) or instances of poor performance (discussed a bit more widely in informal professional circles but not given too much airing).

This in a sector that calls itself '*humanitarian'*, driven by the impulse to help fellow human beings-in-dire-need and rooted, supposedly, in strong principles such as *humanity* and *compassion*. The low level of trust, and the emphasis on competition, control and compliance, are now so *normal*, that when you are in it, it doesn't it strike you as odd. Has it ever surprised you?

Peacebuilding: trust building and partnering

Peacebuilding work is relationship work. People in deeply divided societies, where social groups fear and hate each other, need to rebuild relationship with each other and often with their leaders. It may be little more than a functional relationship, like an ability to share a market together and exchange goods and services. That still requires a modicum of trust – particularly in environments with no effective or trusted law and contract enforcers. Programmatic interventions such as disarmament and mobilisation, police reform, an anti-corruption commission, job creation schemes etc. will not have peacebuilding impact if they are not carried out in ways that restore broken relationships between people (some 'social cohesion') and basic trust of populations in institutions.

Interpersonal skills, the ability to have and to facilitate difficult conversations, and to build and maintain trust, are core competencies for local, national and international peacebuilders alike.

Many international peacebuilding civil society organisations create fairly equitable partnerships with local and national civil society actors-for-peace. My experience with 'development' work is limited, but what I pick up of it, seems also quite geared towards genuine 'partnerships'.

A discourse indicator

The difference shows in how each sector refers to local non-governmental organisations: Relief agencies speak about '*local/national NGO's*', peacebuilders about '*local civil society'*. Even though there is some 'uncivil society', the word 'civil society' carries connotations of intrinsic legitimacy and value in the wider body politic. Peacebuilders and human rights advocates are deeply concerned about the shrinking legal and political space for civil society in many countries. They seek to protect and strengthen civil society. International relief agencies often weaken local agencies, by hiring away their best staff and turning them into sub-contractors. Local peace actors object to the '*NGO-isation of civil society'*. Local organisations in Cox's Bazar district, who experienced a Rohingya refugee influx followed by an aid agency influx, have had to ask, explicitly, to be treated and supported as '*civil society'* organisations.

Uneasy co-existence

In contexts where internationally-supported relief work and peacebuilding take place, like Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, and Mali, the co-existence of these divergent attitudes to local actors takes on a surrealistic character. One starts from belief in the potential of national actors and intentionally seeks to support them. The other starts from deep doubts, even disbelief in the potential of national actors (unless they become staff of international agencies, where they suddenly metamorphose into capable colleagues), throws some training and workshops at them as a form of 'capacity building', but keeps them on a very tight leash. Sometimes we have the same local organisation portrayed and treated in opposite ways by different international agencies.

There is no simple 'humanitarian-peacebuilding nexus'. Conflict reduction or peace work and relief work require different mindsets, different 'doing' skills, different appreciations of the importance of 'being' and relationship management competencies. In terms of the *Competing Values Framework*, the relief sector operates with the quadrants of '*compete*' and '*control*', the peacebuilding world with those of '*collaborate*' and '*create*'.[ii]

Even within multi-mandate organisations that do both relief and peace work, the respective dedicated units can appear as different universes.

Structural factors influencing preparedness-for-partnership

Before we pin this erratic situation only on individuals or agency cultures, we can identify some structural reasons for these parallel universes.

Replace or reinforce: Speedy logistics and funding permitting, emergency relief goods and services can be delivered by international providers just as well as national or local ones. For the objective of saving lives, Indian and Indonesian rescue teams, if quickly on the scene, could have pushed aside the Protezione Civile after the deadly 2016 earthquake in Central Italy. Bangladeshi emergency teams, used to having half their country under water, could take over next time the dykes in the Netherlands break. If they want and can, external relief actors can replace local ones – for a while.

Peace however cannot be delivered by outsiders. Sustained peace can only be achieved by the collective effort of many local and national actors, including in the public institutions. That also holds for societies torn apart by a lot of external interference. Ultimately, it is the local actors that invite external interference or not and determine how far its influence can go. In other words, peace can only be built and sustained from within. External actors can support local ones but can't replace them.

Superiority and complementarity: International relief actors can wear a cloak of superiority. They have the money and the expertise (which they build and retain with that money) that gives them the logistics and the ability to meet the standards they have created themselves. International relief actors have a lot of power – to which they are mostly blind and which they don't like coming under the spotlight. By nature of the task, international peace actors must, of necessity, be more humble. They have valuable contributions to offer, but critical roles and abilities lie with the local actors. Complementarity is inevitable.

Balance between relationship- and task-management: In their interaction, peacebuilders must practice trust building across divergences of interest and opinion. If they can't achieve it among themselves, they can't help others in divided societies do so. If they don't model it, they will not be credible as peace facilitators. They must be skilled at working with emotions, as it is mostly emotions that drive behaviours in conflict situations. Failing in relationship management, will lead to failure in task management. Competencies in '*being*' are as important as competencies in '*doing*'. That doesn't mean that those partnerships never run into serious trouble. But the mindset and competencies of peacebuilders prepares them better to handle these constructively. By contrast, self-awareness, emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills are not a core competency – in practice- for relief workers. The '*doing*' easily trumps the '*being*'. All the more so as poor behaviours can be explained by the 'cumulative stress' that many relief workers suffer indeed. Yet peacebuilders, particularly those working in their own war-torn societies, suffer at a deep personal level as well.

Money volumes: Relief operations, certainly in the first period of high-profile disasters, disburse significant amounts of money. By comparison, peacebuilding is cheap (though the cost of war, and the profits from arms sales, are immense). Absence of big money actually helps peace work: it doesn't muddy the relational waters with the temptation of material gain. But if no public money should be misappropriated, this is only a quantitative and not a qualitative difference. All are equally held to financial accountability.

Time-horizons: International relief actions operate with short-term time horizons, typically six to twelve months. Peacebuilders do not have long funding contracts. But they know that theirs is a long-

term endeavour. Overcoming the legacy of major civil war can take a generation, at least. Serious peacebuilding work, of necessity, must be strategic and long term. Another factor that encourages strategic partnerships.

Trust-dilemma

At the heart of all this, is the trust-dilemma. All of us have certain inclinations towards trusting. Some of us go through life with a disposition to others of *distrust until proven trustworthy*. Some of us start from a *trusting position, until someone else proves not worthy of that trust*. In the short run, the first attitude may take us further. In the long run, the second one may provide the greater rewards. Where do you see yourself on this?

A degree of caution is not misplaced. Opportunistic local NGOs exist; more mushroom into existence when significant aid money becomes suddenly available. Temptations of personal financial gain for some can be hard to resist. Civil society organisations, also peacebuilding ones, can be used as stepping stones for directors with political ambitions. Trustworthiness cannot be assumed.

But there are also many local people and leaders in service to their fellow human beings, often working on a voluntary basis or with modest salaries, consciously forsaking opportunities in the private sector where they could earn much more. Some have spent years of tenacious commitment to build up increasingly capable organisations. Just as there are many civil servants doing whatever they can with the inadequate means their bureaucracy can't provide. I've often been their guest and must admit that many of them give more than I do. Labelling them generically as a '*high risk*' is deeply insulting to them. Nor do international agencies acknowledge the risks that local ones run, when entering into substantial collaboration agreements with them.[iii] Being under constant surveillance about their use of public money, they are surprised by the disregard of wastage of public money by international agencies. "*With US $ 2000, I can do five times as much as they do*." (Lebanese NGO director) "*For the full cost of one international here for one month, I can run a team of four capable colleagues for five months*" (Bangladeshi NGO director) Not to speak about expensive conferences and duplication of research.

We seem blind to how local and national peacebuilders carry on, even without international funding. So do many local relief actors in protracted and forgotten crises, after the boom-and-bust wave of international relief has passed. There is no reporting of what local actors do and achieve when no internationals are present. Our picture of realities on the ground is very incomplete, probably distorted.

Research shows how local/national actors (have to) rely on social (and political) relationships and networks that are held together by trust.[iv] The practical conditions often do not allow reliance primarily on formal systems of control, checks and balances, as international agencies do. The personal trust relationships provide the checks and balances. For them, the work is also personal, and they are surprised at the lack of personal involvement and investment in trust by international actors. Another Lebanese CSO director expressed this as the coffee principle: "*Don't start talking to me immediately about a project and budgets, let's first have some coffees, get to know each other, and see whether we share the same values and objectives.*"

The differences show up in the 'due diligence' processes to which international agencies like to submit local/national ones. These pay a lot of attention to the formal set-up (contributing to 'NGO-isation') and explicit policies and procedures. They contribute to '*more paper and less aid*'. It sometimes forces a local agency to quickly borrow policies and procedures from another, so they can meet the paper requirements. It doesn't mean these are internalised – just as the codes of conducts and policies and

procedures on sexual harassment and other abuse of international agencies don't work without the right organisational culture.[v] As another Bangladesh CSO director put it: "*Our society is still largely a verbal one. The relevant point is not whether you have the right policy paper, but how often these issues are internally talked about with staff.*"

International agencies are justifiably careful. A step-by-step approach might make sense: First work with a local organisation on a transactional basis. Take this as an opportunity to get to know each other. Local CSOs are well advised to do the same and explore how reliable an international agency is. If trust increases, the relationship can develop into a more equitable partnership. Sometimes that happens. But I also see too many cases where it doesn't, where the talk about 'partnership' masks continued subordination, even after years of collaboration. Workable and liveable partnerships cannot exist on the force of paper agreements, policies and procedures only. However detailed, these are brought alive only by the actual behaviours of people collaborating. That doesn't happen without a grounding in lived and practiced values, a willingness to give some trust, a solid dose of self-awareness, and good interpersonal skills. Only when the being is alive will the doing thrive.[vi]

Nuance

The two above characterisations of relief work and peacebuilding are generalisations. I am well aware that each has other practices and experiences. Assess for yourself however, particularly if you have longer experience in one or the other, or both:

- Is relationship and trust building an explicit attention point and objective in your role, in your practice?
- Has your agency offered you experiential learning to strengthen your self-awareness, emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills? Are people recruited and is performance assessed also on that aspect?
- Does your organisation explicitly reflect on how to achieve complementary collaboration and equitable partnership?
- Is relationship continuity a conscious attention point at times of staff turnover?
- Is your organisation's culture prepared for partnerships?

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[i] This is often alleged, without international actors making the effort to actually verify this. One cannot simply rely on the identity of a CSO director, or her or his political connections to draw conclusions. The question is whether the CSO works inclusively across divides, whether the political connections are used to maintain a dynamic 'impartiality', and for narrow- or common-good interest. See M. Stephen et alii 2017: *Partnerships in Conflict* p. 26, International Alert & Oxfam

[ii] Competing Values Framework

http://www.thercfgroup.com/files/resources/an_introduction_to_the_competing_values_framework.pdf

[iii] See 'The Partnership Chronicles' https://www.gmentor.org/equitable-partnership

[iv] E.g. Howe, K et alii 2015: *Breaking the Hourglass: Partnerships in Remote Management Settings – The cases of Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan,* Tufts Univ.

[v] For a sad confirmation of this, see The Konterra Group's 2019 review of Amnesty International's Staff Wellbeing

[vi] The phrase comes from Being at Full Potential coaching

http://beingatfullpotential.com/

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GMI offers consultancy services and advice on aspects of humanitarian and peacebuilding *doing*, and more generally supports teams and organisations with the *being*.