

Fit for purpose: the role of modern professionalism in evolving the humanitarian endeavour

Peter Walker and Catherine Russ

Peter Walker is director of the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, USA, and member of the Editorial Board of the *International Review of the Red Cross*.

Catherine Russ is learning advisor of Enhancing Learning & Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA), London, UK.

Abstract

The humanitarian enterprise has grown in size and complexity over the past generation. Modern systems of scrutiny and accountability demand a higher level of accountability than ever before, both to programme beneficiaries and to donors. This, we believe, puts pressure on the system to become more professional and on aid workers to consider the establishment of a formal profession of humanitarian aid. This article reports on research carried out to test this hypothesis and on an approach that is presently being used to establish the necessary components of a professional system.

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The humanitarian enterprise has expanded steadily over the past three decades. In 2010, the last year for which we have reliable figures, the traditional donor community – made up largely of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s states – contributed \$12.4 billion to humanitarian aid.

The general public, as recorded through their contributions to the main traditional Western-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs), contributed an additional \$4.3 billion.¹ These funds were used to deliver aid to an unknown proportion of the 215 million people affected by natural disasters, 27.5 million internally displaced persons, 10.5 million refugees, and an unknown population of war-affected people.²

Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico³ worked with available data from a number of the main humanitarian agencies and used it to extrapolate possible global figures for the number of workers who were active in delivering this aid.⁴ They estimated that in 2008 there were approximately 595,000 aid workers (both development and humanitarian) active worldwide working for the UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the main NGOs.⁵ The figure does not include peacekeepers and human rights workers, nor does it include national organizations active only in their own country. Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico reasoned that, as a first approximation, the relative populations of humanitarian workers to total work force would be comparable to the relative proportion of humanitarian spending as to total aid spending. Using this approach, they came up with a figure for 2008 of approximately 210,800 humanitarian aid workers in the world and, again working from the financial data, a suggestion that this workforce might be growing at a 6% annual growth rate.

Thus, at a conservative estimate, the humanitarian enterprise delivers over \$16 billion worth of life-saving assistance and protection via a workforce of a little over 200,000 to an at-risk population of more than 250 million people. Unlike just about every other form of international exchange, such as trade, currencies, labour, or military, this exchange, or emergency aid from richer nations to poorer ones, is largely unregulated in its international workings, its functioning within a country, and indeed the internal functioning of individual agencies.

The picture painted above is deceptive. It is a picture of the old world, not of the one that is evolving. The new humanitarian aid world includes donors from outside the OECD, such as China, India, Turkey, and Malaysia.⁶ It includes southern-based NGOs going global, such as BRAC (the Bangladesh Rehabilitation

1 Development Initiatives, *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2011*, pp. 4–5, available at: <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/gha-report-2011.pdf> (last visited December 2011).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

3 Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Victoria DiDomenico, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: 2009 Update. Trends in Violence Against Aid Workers and the Operational Response: Why Violent Attacks on Aid Workers Are on the Increase*, Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Policy Brief No. 34, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, April 2009.

4 For a full description of their methodology, see their previous paper, Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Katherine Haver, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations*, HPG Report No. 23, ODI, London, September 2006, available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/269.pdf> (last visited December 2011).

5 Paul Harvey, Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Glyn Taylor, *The State of the Humanitarian System: Assessing Performance and Progress*, ALNAP, London, 2010, p. 18, available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/5825.pdf> (last visited December 2011).

6 See Andrea Binder, Claudia Meier, and Julia Steets, *Humanitarian Assistance: Truly Universal? A Mapping Study of Non-Western Donors*, Global Public Policy Institute, Research Paper No. 12, Berlin, August 2010. See also Adele Harmer and Lin Cotterrell, *Diversity in Donorship: The Changing Landscape of Official*

Assistance Committee) and MercyMalaysia,⁷ local NGOs and municipalities, as well as diaspora groups and volunteer hi-tech associations working on crisis mapping or smartphone communications. Thus, the old aid community is expanding and diversifying. At the same time, predictions over the impact of climate change and globalization of the less developed countries of the world suggest that we will see more frequent disasters in a greater number of countries,⁸ along with more civil unrest in those states less able to cope with this rapidly changing environment, all generating a greater demand for humanitarian assistance.⁹ As crises become more frequent in states with reasonably well-developed and democratic administrations, we are also seeing the beginnings of an assertion that the international aid system needs to be less exceptionalist and interventionist, and more a model of normal business, with the regulatory structures, checks, and balances that that entails.¹⁰

We are thus seeing an evolution of humanitarian action from an ad hoc, emotive-based, largely Western-driven system to a more global system of defined service delivery, which is increasingly pressured to define and regulate its competence, coverage, and purpose.¹¹ This move towards a professional approach and indeed the establishment of a profession in the humanitarian arena is manifesting itself in three ways: moves to define and establish the notion of the professional humanitarian worker; moves to reassert the role of the host state in regulating humanitarian aid; and moves within the present humanitarian community to develop mechanisms to judge more objectively and assure the quality of aid delivered. In this article we will explore the first of these trends. We will then go on to examine data generated by an opinion poll of aid workers. Finally, we will discuss what we believe are exciting and timely implications for the evolution of a more professional approach to humanitarian work.

The modern concept of profession

Just what does ‘professional’ mean? In his presentation of the professional model, Hall differentiates between the structural and the attitudinal attributes of professions.¹² Structural attributes include ‘such things as formal education and entrance requirements’. Attitudinal attributes are more concerned with the ‘sense

Humanitarian Aid, HPG Research Report No. 20, ODI, London, September 2005, available at: <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/docs/275.pdf> (last visited December 2011).

7 See BRAC’s website: <http://www.brac.net/content/who-we-are>, and MercyMalaysia’s website: <http://www.mercy.org.my/> (last visited December 2011).

8 See, for instance, Mackinnon Webster, *et al.*, ‘The humanitarian response costs of climate change’, in *Journal of Environmental Hazards*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2009, pp. 149–163.

9 David D. Zhang *et al.*, ‘Global climate change, war, and population decline in recent human history’, in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 104, No. 49, 2007, pp. 19214–19219.

10 Peter Walker, Colin Rasmussen, and Sebastián Molano, ‘Using disaster response law to promote international aid coordination’, in *Disasters Journal*, 2012 (forthcoming).

11 Peter Walker *et al.*, ‘A blueprint for professionalizing humanitarian assistance: good intentions are not enough’, in *Health Affairs*, Vol. 29, No. 12, December 2010, pp. 2223–2230.

12 Richard H. Hall, ‘Professionalization and bureaucratization’, in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, February 1968, pp. 92–104.

of calling of the person to the field'. A similar distinction between systems and attitudes is made by Cruess, Cruess, and Johnston.¹³ For them, the core of a profession is 'possession of a specialized body of knowledge and commitment to service'. They explain that 'because knowledge is used in serving others, professions are identified as being altruistic and value laden'. They go on to identify four main attributes of professions:

1. a monopoly over the use of specialized knowledge,
2. knowledge used in an altruistic fashion,
3. autonomy to establish and maintain standards of practice and self-regulation to assure quality,
4. responsibility for the integrity of knowledge, its expansion and proper use.

Schön picks up and supports this list of attributes, going on to describe how professionalism is more than the simple application of specialist knowledge.¹⁴ The true professional has to 'think like a professional'. He refers to the 'reflective practitioner' as somebody capable of thinking on his or her feet, developing a new understanding in response to each context that arises. Here is a concept of professionalism that seems compatible with humanitarian work, where, in the midst of an emergency, the clear-headed humanitarian is expected to respond calmly and intuitively in a situation that may be totally new and unexpected. Thus, experience and training are both important components of an overall package of professional attributes. This does suggest that the current debate of whether humanitarianism is a profession in its own right or a collection of professionals working in a humanitarian setting could be resolved by analysing humanitarianism against the four professional attributes listed above and determining whether, together, they are substantially distinctive from the individual disciplines that interface in the sector.

Aid worker views on professionalism

In 2009, we and colleagues carried out a survey on behalf of ELRHA (Enhancing Learning & Research for Humanitarian Assistance) of over a thousand aid workers to better understand how they saw their work and notions of professionalism associated with it.¹⁵ Of the respondents to the survey, 92% indicated that they supported notions of professionalizing the work and structure of humanitarian aid. Respondents went on to detail the values, skills, and knowledge that they thought aid workers needed, the support structures that they should have, and the

13 Richard L. Cruess, Sylvia R. Cruess, and Sharon E. Johnston, 'Professionalism: an ideal to be sustained', in *The Lancet*, Vol. 356, No. 9224, 2000, pp. 156–159.

14 Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

15 The full methodology and results of the survey can be found in the original publication: P. Walker *et al.* above note 11.

methods for codifying competence that they thought should be put in place. Five critical areas for advancement were identified:

1. core competencies,
2. systems of certification,
3. apprenticeship and experiential learning,
4. professional associations, and
5. accreditation and accountability.

We will review each of these five areas and reflect on how the present humanitarian community might move towards establishing these building blocks of a profession.

Core competencies

Originally proposed in business management literature,¹⁶ the notion of core competencies seeks to identify attributes that are central to a business, to its success, and to the benefits that its consumers expect. The competencies should be applicable across the business, not just for one product or market, and they should give the business a competitive advantage over others. This approach has now been widely adopted in the health profession. In 2008, for example, the American Emergency Nurses Association established a set of 'Competencies for nurse practitioners in emergency care'.¹⁷

Competencies involve values, knowledge, and skills. They can exist at an entry level to a profession and can be expanded upon and become more expert in nature as professionals gain more experience and rise within their profession. In the professionalism survey already referred to, humanitarian workers were asked to rank the values skills and knowledge that they thought most important to their work. They ranked most highly the values of:

1. respecting and being accountable to humanitarian aid beneficiaries (the primary clients) and
2. independence and impartiality of action.

Top-ranked skills focused on the ability of aid workers to adapt and function in the difficult environment of a humanitarian crisis. Respondents seemed to be concerned with how to be a good logistician, accountant, or medic in the complex and stressful environment of an aid operation. They ranked highly skills such as team building, negotiating, listening, and multi-tasking.

Core areas of knowledge follow the same pattern of being less about a delivery profession and more about its application in crises. Needs assessments, monitoring, and evaluation ranked high, as did knowledge of security concerns and of the basic legal frameworks of humanitarian work (international humanitarian

16 Coimbatore Krishnarao Prahalad and Garry Hamel, 'The core competence of the corporation', in *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 68, No. 3, 1990, pp. 79–91.

17 See Emergency Nurses Association, 'Competencies for nurse practitioners in emergency care', available at: <http://nursingworld.org/position/emergencycomp> (last visited December 2011).



Figure 1: A pyramid of competencies. All workers need the foundation competencies. More managerial and specialized roles need additional specific competencies.

law, human rights law, and refugee law). Specific expert applied knowledge ranked high within each area of expertise. Nurses were concerned with how nursing core competencies needed to be adapted for the humanitarian environment, and logisticians with how normal logistics skills needed to be adapted.

What seemed to be emerging was an assumed hierarchy of competencies where an individual would have the skills of their core **profession or discipline** (accountancy, management, surgery, etc.), as can be viewed in [Figure 1](#), which would then be underpinned by additional specific technical **role/functional** competencies concerned with the adaption of their profession to the humanitarian environment. This would again be underpinned by a further set of competencies common across all professionals and focusing on the necessary behaviours, attitudes, and skills for successful professional work in the theatre of humanitarian crises. These would, in essence, be fundamental to any role in the sector and be those which we would call **core or common competencies** for the business.

This notion of core humanitarian competencies, initially developed by the UK-based ELRHA consortium,¹⁸ has now been taken up and championed by the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA). They have identified

18 Peter Walker and Catherine Russ, *Professionalising the Humanitarian Sector: A Scoping Study*, ELRHA, London, April 2010, available at: http://www.elrha.org/uploads/Professionalising_the_humanitarian_sector.pdf (last visited December 2011).

and expanded upon six competencies that they believe are essential to all professionals working in the humanitarian field:

1. understanding humanitarian contexts and application of humanitarian principles,
2. achieving results effectively, considering the need for speed, scale, and quality,
3. developing and maintaining collaborative relationships,
4. operating safely and securely in high risk environments,
5. self-management in a pressured and changing environment, and
6. leadership in humanitarian response.¹⁹

These are further expanded upon to demonstrate how they can be learned, evaluated, and used to build the capacity of individuals and agencies.²⁰ If we take the first as an example, CBHA lists the following attributes that should be found in a humanitarian worker if they are to demonstrate the competency of ‘understanding humanitarian contexts and application of humanitarian principles’:

- demonstrate understanding of phases of humanitarian response including preparedness and contingency, DRR, response and recovery;
- apply understanding of the political and cultural context and underlying causes of the humanitarian crisis;
- demonstrate understanding of the gender and diversity dimensions of humanitarian situations;
- keep vulnerable people at the centre of the humanitarian response;
- ensure that programme goals and activities uphold the principles of the key national and international humanitarian frameworks, codes and commitments under which humanitarian organizations operate;
- demonstrate understanding of your role and that of your organization and others within the humanitarian system;
- integrate beneficiary accountability principles into your approach;
- demonstrate an understanding of coordination mechanisms.²¹

These definitions of competency are still in their early days. They are not yet truly global, in that they have mostly been derived from within the older traditional agencies, but over the past year these six competencies have been field tested in at least six countries in three languages in Asia, Africa, and South America, and have already been adopted by training providers such as Bioforce (a French-based institute dedicated to training in the humanitarian sector), and RedR (a global development and humanitarian training provider). The second ELRHA global

19 See CBHA, ‘CBHA launches core humanitarian competency framework’, 20 August 2010, available at: <http://www.thecbha.org/news/2010/08/20/cbha-launches-core-humanitarian-competency-framework/> (last visited December 2011).

20 See CBHA, ‘Humanitarian Capacity Building Programme’, Objective 1 Final Report, 10 August 2010, available at: http://www.thecbha.org/media/website/file/CBHA_Objective_1_Final_report_published.pdf (last visited December 2011).

21 See CBHA, ‘Core humanitarian competencies framework: keeping disaster and conflict affected people at the centre of what we do’, available at: http://www.thecbha.org/media/website/file/CBHA_Competency_Frameworks.pdf (last visited December 2011).

professionalization survey results indicated that a further 1,000 respondents found them fit for wider adoption in the humanitarian sector for the purposes of professional development.²² This work to date therefore demonstrates that it is possible to derive and agree upon a set of such competencies.

Systems of certification

One of the most frequent complaints that we heard while conducting our research was that training, while it may be available within agencies and from some outside sources, is essentially unstructured and unregulated. Any ‘certificate’ that a worker earned for taking a training course was specific only to the agency offering the course; it had no currency. In addition, it was also clear that many courses offer certificates for attending the course, not necessarily for doing well on the course.

Humanitarian workers, particularly those from the global south, are eager to see a system whereby the training they take has currency: that is, it can have a value placed on it and can be transferred between employers. This in essence means moving towards a system of certification of individuals’ knowledge, skills, and experience.

Professional certification of an individual typically occurs through three pathways:

- portfolio-based – requiring extensive documentation to show that competencies are covered by either the person’s education and/or their professional experience,
- competency-based – requiring a person to demonstrate mastery of a common body of knowledge through a combination of experience and education, followed by assessment or examinations,
- curriculum-based – requires the completion of subject-based professional education.²³

If humanitarian workers are to move towards certification, then all three paths will need to be utilized, particularly for a profession that places such emphasis on field experience. In practice, any certification system will need to reconcile the interests of existing practitioners with those of new entrants. Existing practitioners may be resistant to heightened standards that exceed their own qualifications. Wilensky describes ‘a contest between the home guard who learned the hard way on the one hand, and the newcomers who took the prescribed course’.²⁴ Merton identifies this as a trend particular to emerging professions, and suggests that a ‘grandfather clause,

22 See ELRHA, ‘Global survey on humanitarian professionalisation’, available at: <http://www.elrha.org/news/elrha/globalsurvey> (last visited December 2011).

23 Philip A. Barnhart, *The Guide to National Professional Certification Programs*, 2nd edition, CRC Press, Amherst, MA, 1997, pp. 6–7.

24 Harold Wilensky, ‘The professionalization of everyone’, in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 70, No. 2, 1964, p. 144.

which exempts current members from having to meet the newly instituted and more rigorous standards of the profession', may be the way to move forward.²⁵

In addition, the idea of a global 'Learning and Development Passport' has been consulted on widely in the sector through ELRHA's consultation hubs in four countries and a recent online survey, and is gaining traction as a way of increasing transferability and interoperability in the sector. The idea would entail field workers being recognized for work experience and skills gained in responding to disasters by way of an assessment. The competencies would then be logged in their passport and act as evidence of competence to prospective agencies when recruiting staff.

Moving towards a system of certification also implies sufficient agreement around core competencies to be able to construct the various levels of certification, as discussed above, and a global body with the authority to accredit certificates and institutions offering certification. This, in many professions, is a function that rests with the professional association, as discussed below. Of course, certification can have negative connotations. In some professions it can be used as a method of exclusion, where certification is an expensive process and where the training needed to certify is only available through exclusive institutions.

Apprenticeship and experiential learning

All professions recognize that experience, as well as knowledge and skills, is an essential part of being a professional. Experience allows the individual to adapt their book knowledge to the realities of the context in which they are working. It allows a person to make judgements, not just calculations. Unfortunately, getting that experience is something of a catch-22. The common refrain from individuals wanting to break into the humanitarian field is that every job advertised requires you to have prior experience! But if every agency wants prior experience, where does that experience come from?

This dilemma exists in all professions. No one wants an inexperienced lawyer handling their case or an untested doctor diagnosing their illness. Traditionally, the professions have in the past used an apprenticeship system, and now an internship system, to get past this blockage. Apprenticeships and internships in the professions recognize the responsibility of the profession to provide early experiential learning, in a safe and controlled environment. New recruits from law and medical schools are mentored through internships and residencies to give them time to hone those people and judgement skills. Such programmes are not just about having the new recruit tag along behind the old surgeon or advocate. They all have three key elements:

- they have a well-defined system of mentoring,
- they have a structured learning programme, and

25 See Robert K. Merton, *Social Research and the Practicing Professions*, University Press of America, Lanham, MD, 1982, p. 205.

- they have rigorous systems for monitoring, correcting, and finally assessing how well the apprentice has taken on board the necessary experiential learning.

Very few humanitarian agencies provide anything like a formal apprenticeship system and this is perhaps one of the biggest gaps in the humanitarian community. To address this, the CBHA have developed two such programmes, the first of which is a one-year apprenticeship-type of career development programme for new entrants in the sector, called the ‘Humanitarian Leadership Skills Development Programme’.²⁶ Delivered by Save the Children in the UK and Kenya, it entails training, self-directed learning, online learning, work placements, and simulations in order to prepare individuals for the rigour of field work. The second is the ‘Staff Development Programme’, delivered by Oxfam for existing field staff, containing all of the above but lasting nine months. Properly implemented, these structured in-house training programmes allow staff from across the geographical reach of the organization to develop their skills and acquire recognized qualifications. Of course, organizations offering such training, particularly when they are among the first to initiate them, run the risk of losing trained staff to other organizations and thus not seeing the benefits of their investments.

Professional associations

At the heart of all professions is a membership association. The association is open to all qualified members in that profession. Being a member of an association defines a certain qualification and/or experience level of the member. All associations also have mechanisms for expelling and removing membership privileges from members who falsify claims of their qualifications or who violate the core values of the association.

Cruess, Cruess, and Johnston believe that professional associations are vital to professionalism.²⁷ Associations ensure standards within the profession and ‘discipline unprofessional and incompetent behaviour’. Merton sees the setting and enforcement of ‘rigorous standards’ as the prime obligation of a professional association.²⁸ He describes them as ‘a ‘clearing house of professional knowledge’ and as a voice for the profession, ‘able to speak authentically and authoritatively on behalf of the profession’. For a professional association to have legitimacy it ‘must be representative of as many of the professions as possible’.²⁹ In the absence of some form of humanitarian association with agreed standards, professionalism presently arises within the humanitarian sector in an ad hoc manner, through the best efforts of individuals and employers.

26 See CBHA, ‘Humanitarian Leadership Development Programme, Newsletter 2’, 15 July 2011, available at: <http://www.thebha.org/news/2011/07/15/humanitarian-leadership-development-programme-horn-africa-newsletter-2/> (last visited December 2011).

27 R. L. Cruess, S. R. Cruess, and S. E. Johnston, above note 13.

28 Robert Merton, ‘The functions of the professional association’, in *American Journal of Nursing*, Vol. 58, January 1958, pp. 50–54.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The prime purpose of a professional association, therefore, is to create an independent and self-governing quality assurance mechanism for that profession that is independent of donors, states, and employers. In addition, an association usually promotes information-sharing within its membership in the form of trade and academic journals that it publishes, conferences that it sponsors, and websites that it services.

Evetts sees professionalism as an ideal that transcends national boundaries:

The expansion of the service sector and knowledge work in the developed world and the growth or re-emergence of professions in both developing and transitional societies, indicate the appeal of the concept of 'professionalism' as well as the strength and persistence of 'professions' as an occupational form.³⁰

Present experience

There already are a few associations in the humanitarian field that show all the attributes of being true professional associations. Here are just a few examples:

The World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine (WADEM). WADEM was originally founded as the Club of Mainz on October 2, 1976 with the goal of improving the worldwide delivery of prehospital and emergency care during everyday and mass disaster emergencies. The founding members were renowned researchers, practitioners and teachers of acute care medicine, who joined together to focus their energies on the scientific, educational, and clinical aspects of immediate care. Following the constant development of its scope and extension worldwide, and to better reflect its nature, the organization's name was changed to the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine.³¹ WADEM presently has around 750 members across 50 countries.

Humanitarian Logistics Association (HLA). In 2003, working with the Fritz institute, a grouping of logisticians formed the HLA. They drafted the Marco Polo Declaration, whose 'signatories committed to establish an association which would serve as a catalyst to enhance the professionalization of humanitarian logistics and the recognition of its strategic role in the effective delivery of relief during humanitarian crises'.³² Their membership is open to logisticians worldwide. They have established a temporary home within the Chartered Institute of Logistics and

30 Julia Evetts, 'The sociological analysis of professionalism: occupational change in the modern world', in *International Sociology*, Vol. 18, No. 2, June 2003, p. 399.

31 WADEM's mission statement is available at: <http://www.wadem.org/mission.html> (last visited December 2011).

32 See 'About HLA', available at: <http://www.humanitarianlogistics.org/about-hla/what-is-hla> (last visited December 2011).

Transport in the UK (CILT) and are reported to have a membership in the region of 400. HLA has also developed specific certified courses in humanitarian logistics.

The International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA). The IHSA was formed in 2009. It ‘is a network of people engaged in the study of humanitarian crises caused by natural disaster, conflict or political instability’.³³ The association offers a venue for the scholarly and research community where it ‘can meet and debate different insights and understanding of humanitarian crises, in dialogue with policy actors and implementing agencies’. It hosts a major international conference every two years and has a current membership of between 400 and 500 researchers and scholars worldwide.

Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP). In 2009, a series of focus group discussions conducted by the Harvard Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research (HPCR)³⁴ with its online pool of over 16,000 professionals involved in its international humanitarian law training showed strong demand for an international humanitarian professional association. The programme at Harvard and HPCR International have embarked on a new collaboration to launch PHAP, with a mission to strengthen the protection of vulnerable populations by fostering a global network of professionals to engage in peer exchange on goals, strategies, and methods of humanitarian action. This body proposes to address the growing demand for a permanent and independent platform for professional exchange in humanitarian affairs, contribute to the humanitarian community’s response to emerging challenges, and promote an independent professional voice in humanitarian policy debates.

An international association?

Our survey showed a significant desire on the part of those completing the survey to see the creation of an international humanitarian professional association rather than a series of national associations. It is noteworthy that all the associations created to date that focus on the humanitarian area are international in nature, albeit focusing on specific areas of the profession and none of them yet representing the broad base of stakeholders present in the humanitarian sector, with some of them representing only their own alumni.

This suggests that there are at least two ways to move forward. One is to create a professional association that seeks to represent all humanitarian professionals. Individuals would have membership of the global association and possibly also membership of a more specific sectoral one. Alternatively, existing associations may choose to come together to form a global alliance or loosely federated structure, thus allowing for individuals to gain global professional status

33 See ‘Welcome to IHSA’, available at: <http://www.ihsa.info/> (last visited December 2011).

34 Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research, Harvard University, <http://www.hpcrresearch.org/> (last visited December 2011).

via their specific sectoral association. Either way, any such international humanitarian professional association would embody a number of functions:

- it would be responsible for the approval of the competencies required for certification as a professional humanitarian worker,
- it would recognize career pathways and progression routes for those entering and for those developing in the sector,
- it would provide general career guidance advice and information on jobs, apprenticeships, and traineeships,
- it would be responsible for recognizing the certification that individuals would earn from a training body,
- it would be responsible for handling complaints against individuals and have a mechanism for terminating their membership,
- it would provide a link to accountability and quality initiatives and networks, as well as any emerging global standards.

Having such a set of functions would allow a professional association to promote the competence of aid workers, to help develop career pathways, to promote the professional independence of workers, and to take action to safeguard the professions' reputation by, in extreme cases, removing professional accreditation from individuals.

Accreditation and accountability

Two key challenges to moving towards a professional system revolve around accountability.

Accreditation

Who gives an NGO or a training institute the right to offer a certificate and who assures the quality of that institute? This process of quality assurance and accountability is at the heart of accreditation. Accreditation is 'to give official authorization to or approval of [or] to recognize or vouch for as conforming with a standard'.³⁵ Universities, for instance, have to earn formal approval from an accrediting government body to offer their degrees: 'Accreditation is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement.'³⁶

Two different sets of quality issues are being assured here. The first component is the content that is being delivered. Is it up to date, relevant, and pitched at the right level? The second component is the vehicle for delivery. Are the

35 Merriam Webster dictionary online, available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accreditation> (last visited December 2011).

36 See definition on the Council for Higher Education's website: <http://www.uv.es/alfa-acro/documentos/documentosinteres/27.htm> (last visited December 2011).

institution and its teachers and trainers competent? Does it have a proven track record of delivering good-quality work?

The issue of content assurance is an extension of the debate around core competencies. Often it is the professional body that accredits the curriculum, the overall content of training and education at any one level. That package is then offered, almost like a franchise, which employers, training instructors, and others, can take up and teach. A process of external accreditation is then used to assure the quality of these franchise deliverers.

In the past few years, with the spread of both distance learning and the need for individuals to be able to carry their training competencies from one country to another, innovative projects have arisen such as the one spearheaded by the agency Learning for NGOs (LINGOS) called the Project Management in Development (PMD PRO) Project Management certification; created by Project Management for Non-governmental Organizations (PM4NGOs)³⁷ – a consortium of NGOs, private sector programme managers, and training companies – to contextualize project management concepts for the development and humanitarian environment. Accredited by APMG-International, the Prince2 globally recognized accrediting body, the goal of the PMD-Pro is to:

- confer a professional certification status for project managers in the sector at two levels (and a third in the planning),
- provide certification and learning resources that are comprehensive, accessible, and appropriate to professionals working in the sector,
- integrate content that is contextualized for the international development and relief sector with other internationally recognized certifications.

This has been delivered through a number of agencies around the world to over 1,000 individuals, including World Vision, who have put their field staff through the programmes in a range of countries.

Another accreditation service is the International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET),³⁸ who offer a service to assure the quality of organizations providing training. If the organization passes IACET's requirements, they become accredited. Many professional organizations around the world recognize this accreditation and are thus willing to accept continuing education credits obtained through courses offered by such an accredited body. The IACET does not accredit individual courses *per se* but rather the provider of the courses.

It is likely, however, that, once the sector recognizes and agrees on a professional association, it will be overseeing and endorsing a variety of these quality assurance bodies, as it would be difficult to limit the sector to one or two, given the burgeoning environment and appetite for accreditation. A snapshot of emerging

37 For an overview of this certification, see <http://ngolearning.org/pm4ngos/pages/certification.aspx> (last visited December 2011).

38 See 'About IACET', available at: <http://www.iacet.org/> (last visited December 2011).

relationships between NGOs, accrediting bodies, and universities shows a growing landscape:

- Mango – Credit-rated finance course through Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine,
- UN Child Protection Working Group (Child Protection Cluster) – Diploma being developed through Kwazulu Natal University in South Africa with other partner universities around the world,
- Plan International and Save the Children UK – exploring accreditation of their in-house programmes through Edexcel,
- Tearfund – delivering Disaster Management Diploma accredited through the Leadership and Management Institute in the UK,
- RedR – Credit-rated courses and soon-to-be-launched Certificate through Oxford Brookes University,
- UN Global Nutrition Cluster – Partnered with University College London and three other universities in Uganda, Lebanon, and Thailand to deliver a nutrition course,
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – introduction of online postgraduate certificates, diplomas, MScs and PhDs through Manchester University.

All of these programmes are seeking to marry academic rigour and training competence with practitioner needs. Conceptually, this is exactly what is needed. The hope, of course, is that these early beginnings soon start to coalesce into a more organized structure rather than an ad hoc collection of offerings.

Accountability to clients

Far more problematic, and an issue that plagues all professions, is creating a system of accountability of the professionals to their primary clients: the doctor's accountability to the patient, the professor's accountability to the student, the lawyer's accountability to the client. This is problematic for two principal reasons.

First, it is problematic because of history. Most professions started as guilds, self-defined clubs dedicated to protecting the privileges of that club, keeping others out and maintaining the power and mystique of the club with respect to those who bought its services.³⁹ It is really only since the 1960s that this elitist approach has been challenged and that the notion of accountability to the client has been promoted. In the late 1980s, Mark Frankel reflected on the rise of 'codes of ethics' within the professions as a tool to bridge the gap between professional and client accountability.⁴⁰ The professions are still adjusting to a democratic world and shedding the less useful vestigial aspects of their history.

39 Rosemary Stevens, 'Themes in the history of medical professionalism', in *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 69, No. 6, November 2002, pp. 357–362.

40 Mark Frankel, 'Professional codes: why, how, and with what impact?', in *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 8, No. 2–3, 1989, pp. 109–115.

Second, there are important power dynamics that come into play. By definition, professionals have expert knowledge and skills not shared by the general public. Yet the public, be they patients or crisis victims, seek the services of these professionals at the very time when the client is least able to challenge their credibility and competence. The client needs the lawyer, the patient needs the doctor. The lawyer or doctor does not actually need that individual client or patient. We are therefore seeking to construct accountability between a small, powerful, elite group and a larger, less powerful group in need of the professionals' services, where the less powerful group often has to trust the competence of the professional. This has led to the development of three main approaches to accountability.

The first seeks to develop, from within the profession, codes of conduct and ethics; in effect, self-policing. The NGO Code of Conduct is a case in point.⁴¹ Clients and beneficiaries play little role in developing these codes. Second, because professionals and their associations hold privileged positions within society, they can be held to account through professional malpractice legal suits or other similar legal mechanisms. While this practice is becoming frequent, if not common, in the industrialized nations, its expense and complexity, and its reliance on a functioning and fair judicial system make it problematic to apply in many of the environments where humanitarians work.

Third, and more recently, professional associations, the employers of professionals, and state bodies have begun developing complaint and whistle-blower policies and facilities that allow individuals to report grievances.⁴² These mechanisms function well where there is a regulator system in place, where clients/beneficiaries are aware of their rights to make such observations and have easy access to a mechanism to lodge such complaints safely, and where there is publically available evidence that the act of lodging complaints actually results in change. The Advertising Standards Authority in the UK provides an example of a well-managed and effective mechanism through which it is easy for members of the public to lodge a complaint, and there is evidence that justified complaints lead to action.⁴³

Conclusions

It is evident that the environment within which humanitarian assistance takes place is evolving. It is also evident that the community of organizations involved in the provision of aid and the cultural, legal, and regulatory framework within which they work is evolving too.

41 See the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, available at: <http://ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/> (last visited December 2011). For a comment on the origins, usage, and future of the Code, see Peter Walker, 'Cracking the Code: the genesis, use and future of the Code of Conduct', in *Disasters*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2005, pp. 323–326.

42 Bernard Barber, 'Control and responsibility in the powerful professions', in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 4, 1978–1979, pp. 599–615.

43 See Advertising Standards Authority, 'How to complain', available at: <http://asa.org.uk/Complaints/How-to-complain.aspx> (last visited December 2011).

Humanitarian assistance is much more centre-stage, politically, than it was two decades ago and the regulatory frameworks of most nations now demand higher accountability from all public service providers, particularly for the spending of taxpayers' money. In addition, the advances in information and communication technologies and the increased globalization of commerce enable crisis-affected communities to have more of a voice and to start to demand a greater sense of accountability from those who provide vital services to them.⁴⁴ It is also clear that many of the elements of professionalization are in place or developing. Global codes of ethics and standards of competence exist. Small global associations dedicated to professionalism in their particular area are being established. Training providers are seeking ways to have their training more universally recognized, as has been recently witnessed through the development of the first International Development and Humanitarian Trainer Competency Framework:⁴⁵ spearheaded by RedR UK and Bioforce, it is supported by a range of agencies in the sector⁴⁶ and promotes minimum standards for informal and formal training provision.

There is a sense that the humanitarian endeavour is in the early, but very definite, stage of moving toward a more professional structure, making it timely and opportune to examine all aspects of such an evolution. In that examination, there are four critical issues on which we should be focusing. The first one is the issue of emancipation. One of the frequently heard complaints from humanitarian workers in the south is that the system is biased towards northern candidates, who are able to acquire the presently available professional qualifications associated with promotion, namely expensive masters degrees from northern universities. Under any evolving system, access to a system of accreditation and qualifications should be much more equitable and based more closely on merit, not access via nationality or wealth. We can envisage a future situation where local training institutions around the world could acquire the certified curriculum from the international humanitarian professional association and also acquire accreditation of their training competence from an internationally recognized source, so that they could provide the approved training at the same level of competence as might be offered in France or Canada, but at a price and accessibility suiting the local market. Such training would be recognized as having the same worth, regardless of where it was taught. Under a more global professional system, access would become more, not less, equitable.

Second is the issue of altruism and voluntarism. Some worry that a more professional system equates to a more materialistic one and a more protective one where an elite seeks to use the profession for personal gain. It is true that some

44 For example, Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) and Infoasaid work in tandem to help humanitarian organizations integrate two-way communications into their emergency programmes, and have gained prominence over the past few years in advocating for this to become a standardized humanitarian practice.

45 The Trainer Competency Framework is available on the RedR UK website at: http://www.redr.org.uk/en/Resource_Document/Resource_Download.cfm/rid/EA2726FF-85F7-4E90-BECD8BEE2DE3CD28 (last visited December 2011).

46 These include BOND, ELRHA, Intrac, Mango, and People in Aid.

professions, particularly those where practice has to be licensed by the state, do defend high rates of pay, as we see in medicine and law, but others, as we see in education, have not taken such a route. A sense of service and altruism is central to most professions, and there is no reason why this should not remain in humanitarianism. Also, we need to be clear that establishing a profession does not exclude others. Just as teachers' aids, administrators, and parent volunteers are vital complements to the professional teaching staff, so too are support staff and local volunteers to the work of the humanitarian professional. The first pilot of the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps⁴⁷ is underway with Save the Children UK, alongside Bioforce and NOHA (Network of Humanitarian Assistance), as partners to recruit and train volunteers for EU-funded humanitarian programmes. Further pilots from the Red Cross and Voluntary Service Overseas are launching in the coming months and there is every indication that the following pilots will twin with other continents and include African and Asian volunteers, among others.

Third, pursuing a professional structure, as well as professionalism, allows for those who care deeply about humanitarianism to have an organized voice separate from that of their employers. This is not to suggest that employers and employing institutions do not care, but rather to recognize that they are under different pressures and incentives. We see this today most starkly in the field of medicine where there is often a healthy tension between the opinions of the professional medical body and those of hospital administration. Humanitarianism needs this independent voice.

Finally, a vibrant sense of professionalism adds further pressure to the humanitarian endeavour to develop creative ways of being accountable to its clients or beneficiaries.

Professionalism and professional structures do not answer all the problems associated with the humanitarian endeavour. They do little to address its funding structure, or the tension between humanitarianism and the state and non-state parties that actively create and fuel crisis, but they do allow for more accountable and more consistently high-quality aid. They provide an additional mechanism to assert the independence of humanitarian action from political and institutional agendas. Above all, they assert that humanitarianism is about both compassion and competence.

47 The European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps is funded by the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) as part of the EU Treaty of Lisbon (2007/C 306/01, 13 December 2007): see <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/413&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en> (last visited December 2011).