

HUMANITARIAN PROFESSIONALISM

Issues Note for NGO Policy Dialogue, VIII November 8, 2000

Please reflect on the following three sets of questions prior to the NGO policy dialogue on November 8th. Each set corresponds to the topic of one of the three discussion sessions. We encourage you to bring specific examples from your experiences to the table to share with other agencies.

The discussion uses as a point of departure the Humanitarian and War Project's recent monograph, *Humanitarian Action: Social Science Connections*, the first chapter of which provides a useful point of entry into the issues. The Issues Note also draws upon the Project's activities over the past decade, including earlier discussions in the policy dialogue series.

Session I. The Nature of Humanitarian Professionalism

Issue: How does your agency understand the term "professionalism"? Is improving professionalism a specified objective of your organization?

Background: There is now general consensus among NGOs that relief and protection activities need to be made more effective. Yet there are differences in viewpoint regarding the role that increased professionalism can play in accomplishing this goal.

The concept of professionalism as currently used covers a range of elements, including:

Topical expertise: e.g., on gender issues, humanitarian and human rights law.

Context expertise: e.g., understanding the complexities of local contexts, including socio-cultural, socio-economic, and demographic factors.

Managerial expertise: e.g., processes to ensure that the agency operates according to standards of efficiency and accountability akin to those found in the for-profit business world.

Consistent with this approach, individual agencies and groups of agencies have adopted explicit standards for professional practice (e.g., Sphere) and instituted staff training and professional

development programs. Some now insist that sector activities be managed by people with specialized rather than jack-of-all-trade skills. Many now provide expanded training in management and finance, as well as in technical specialties (e.g., public health).

Not all NGOs, however, are comfortable with approaching professionalism in terms of greater expertise and technical competence. When the Project was drafting what became its *Humanitarian Action in Times of War: A Handbook for Practitioners*, we received the following comment from one of the NGOs consulted. While the situation in East Africa may have changed since 1992, when he expressed his views, the issue raised remains current.

Recently I had occasion to visit the Kenya/Sudan border town of Lokkichogio with its large UN installations and now its thousands of refugees. Apart from the anomaly of access to transport in UN planes by the senior officers of the SPLA, one got an overall impression of many professionals scurrying about on their separate, but more or less parallel tracks, fulfilling mandates which in the end do not collectively address root cause issues. [They] all purport to be addressing the same situation and there is much ado about 'coordination,' but in reality they rarely disturb each other's trajectory.

Some NGOs see an emphasis on professionalism as existing in tension with other agency priorities such as decentralization and the building of local institutions. Most emphases on managerial expertise have a heavily western flavor. Developing topical expertise, and perhaps even context expertise, may also work against choices better left to local organizations. At a time when some northern NGOs seek to place a higher premium on collaboration with southern counterparts, professionalism issues and discussions are more complex than they would be, for example, for multinational corporations.

The “rush to professionalism” is criticized on other grounds as well. Is the force driving the current preoccupation with professionalism the perceived need for more effective humanitarian operations, or is there an element of self-justification by agencies that realize they are not measuring up to expectations? What data is there to suggest that increased professionalism, as defined above, will produce increased effectiveness in relief delivery and protection activities? Is the enlisting of outside experts an effort in self-defense, or is it part of a serious institutional lessons-learning process?

How does your agency approach the issue of professionalism? How does professionalism relate to effectiveness? Are some elements of professionalism identified above more essential than others? How important an objective is professionalism in relation to other agency priorities? Are investments in other priorities (e.g., generating political will or achieving more concerted collaboration among NGOs) more likely to increase agency effectiveness? If increased professionalism cannot ensure the achievement of agency objectives given other intervening variables, what is the relative importance of enhancing NGO professionalism? What other organizational objectives does increased attention to professionalism accomplish?

Session II: The Contributions of the Social Sciences to NGO Professionalism

Issue: What contribution are the social sciences making to greater NGO professionalism and more effective NGO programming?

Background: NGOs have increasingly enlisted social scientists in their work, reflecting a general consensus that knowledge and expertise that social scientists have can benefit humanitarian practitioners. For their part, social scientists are increasingly open to collaboration. Practitioners have access to conflict areas and to data (including a wealth of their own experience) that are otherwise difficult for social scientists to obtain. Some researchers are also eager to contribute to improving international responses to suffering.

Yet the “fit” between these two groups has remained uneven, as elaborated in the H&W Project’s recent Occasional Paper. Collaboration occurs more often than not on an ad-hoc rather than systematic or institutionalized basis. It is not clear what impact (if any) single-event or occasional workshops and conferences (including this session itself) have on humanitarian praxis. Nor does it follow that the identification of training needs by practitioner organizations will lead social scientists to redirect their efforts away from basic research to fill the bill.

Practitioners and social scientists often have different visions of what collaboration should involve. Practitioners have very specific problems they want research to address, while social scientists may focus on broader questions that involve rethinking the parameters of humanitarian activity itself. Some academics are more comfortable with identifying the relevant variables of a problem and explaining their interrelationships than with creating prescriptions for operational use.

The cultures of the two sets of institutions also differ significantly. Harried practitioners feel they lack the time to master the complexities that social scientists view as indispensable, contenting themselves with executive summaries and action points. Practitioners are often frustrated by researchers who cannot “cut to the point” or who provide too much information and in terms that do not allow for easy application. Researchers may want the freedom to use data and conclusions more freely than the commissioning NGO may wish.

Practitioners and social scientists frequently respond to very different time imperatives. The former often feel the need to solve particular problems within a short-time frame and are reluctant to invest in knowledge that might require greater commitment of time and resources. The latter are often reluctant to produce “quick and dirty” results that they feel are based on insufficient data. University-based training programs often demand amounts of time or relocation that practitioners feel they cannot afford.

What has been your agency's experience as regards the need for insights from the social sciences? Please provide specific examples in which (a) drawing on such insights has improved your effectiveness and (b) the absence of such expertise has impaired your work.

Has collaboration proceeded on an ad-hoc or more institutionalized basis? At what points in the program cycle have you sought social scientific expertise (e.g., needs assessment, program planning, operations, evaluation)? Where has such expertise been most, and least, valuable?

For what purposes has it proved better to gain such expertise through the training of your own staff members and in what situations has it been more useful to collaborate with external social scientists? Does your organization actively seek to recruit social scientists for particular positions?

Session III: Next Steps for NGOs

Issue: What approach should the NGO community take to the perceived need for greater professionalism and what role should the social sciences play in the process?

Background: Some analysts have suggested that an industry-wide division of labor is emerging that requires individual organizations to differentiate themselves from "the pack" in terms of technical expertise in very specific program areas. Is the era of the generalist NGO giving way to a period in which fewer NGOs will respond to major crises and will be deployed according to the specific needs involved (e.g., emergency feeding, water and sanitation, health, transport, etc.)?

Yet the desirability for donors of one-stop shopping may also be contributing to growth in the size of agency budgets and in the programmatic areas in which they seek to demonstrate competence. How will future "market pressures" within the industry and among donor governments affect the demand for "specialist" vs. "generalist" organizations? Are smaller NGOs living on borrowed time, or are there "niches" for them too?

There are alternatives to seeking to increase the specialization of NGOs. The NGO official who shared his distress about the situation in Lokkichogio in 1992 questioned whether a specialization-based approach to professionalism should be the direction of the future.

Rather than describing the perimeters and delimitations of professionalism, we would serve ourselves better by talking about the competent, accountable, transparent, well-rounded generalist... The competent generalist is the one with the wisdom to know when specialist skills are required and whence they can be mobilized.

Should the idea of “professionalism” be scrapped altogether, or should it be redefined in the direction of building organizational capacity for identifying problems, highlighting their technical aspects, and then hiring specialists to solve them? What might this alternative imply for definitions of professionalism revolving around greater managerial effectiveness, career trajectory planning, training, and industry-wide standards? What are the benefits and the dangers of pursuing this option?

If greater expertise in the social sciences is needed, then some additional institutionalized forms of collaboration between humanitarian organizations and the institutions that have such expertise may be warranted. That would be the case either to train in-house NGO staff with the necessary skills and/or to provide an outside resource to agencies in time of need. A number of approaches are available, including developing NGO in-house social science capacity, retaining outside expertise on a case-by-case basis, and institutionalizing partnerships between academic and practitioner agencies.¹

Based on recent NGO experience, what are the most effective ways to bridge these gaps between humanitarian practice and social science insights? Are there institutional mechanisms that exist or that might be created that allow practitioners in urgent need of information to draw on the expertise of social scientists that have already worked in these areas, rather than trying to start building knowledge from scratch? What would such institutional arrangements look like and how would they be funded? Given the de facto chronic and long-term nature of many complex emergencies, would an NGO approach geared from the start toward long-term involvement in specific crises open up a wider range of collaborative possibilities?

¹ Following the November 8 discussion, a consultation will take place at the Mellon Foundation that will explore further some of the existing and needed institutional linkages between NGOs and university-based social science research and training resources.