CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONER:

a conversation with Dr Hugo Slim

October 2020

INTRODUCTION

In his 1995 article, 'The Continuing Metamorphosis of the Humanitarian Practitioner: Some New Colours for an Endangered Chameleon'[1], Dr Hugo Slim—then an academic at Oxford Brookes University—set out an "agenda for good practice for today's humanitarian practitioner". At the time, the 'new' operating environment for humanitarian NGOs was that of complex emergencies, characterised by their highly political nature and internal conflict that destroyed governmental and social structures. In response, Slim suggested a range of skills that humanitarian practitioners should have to best meet the challenges of that time and context.

In the 25 years since the article was published, Slim has held a number of academic and research positions in humanitarian ethics and the protection of civilians at Oxford Brookes University and Oxford University. He's currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict (ELAC) at the Blavatnik School of Government. His most recent book, Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disasters was published in 2015, and from that year until early 2020 he was Head of Policy and Humanitarian Diplomacy at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

We spoke with Slim earlier this year—just as the COVID-19 pandemic was taking off—about his 1995 article. We talked about what's changed for humanitarian practitioners, what's stayed the same, and what new skills they need to meet future challenges.

GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS AND THE ROLE OF THE NGO

When considering humanitarian practitioner skills, it's important to look at how global dynamics for the humanitarian response have changed. The '90s were characterised by the "new liberal order" and a sense of multilateralism in global politics—albeit predominated by the US. "We've come through a world of relative consensus that emerged at the time I was writing in '90s—[the] US and Russia coming together ... driving largely a sort of liberal, hegemonic agenda. So people were prepared to vote together on the Security Council about humanitarian action, about peace," says Slim.

Slim now believes that "we're not there anymore". He sees the current dynamic as "a move back to the earlier age of great power politics, major power competition".

He also notes the emergence of middle powers. "The big difference, though, from sort of the late '80s, early '90s to now is that—although we have these great major power competitions—we also have many, many middle powers." For Slim, these middle powers—including Indonesia, Malaysia and Korea in Asia, and Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya in Africa—"are much less interested in a sort of post-colonial relationship" than in increasingly shaping their own futures without relying on external assistance.

Some elements have remained consistent, however. The complex emergencies that Slim identified as a new feature of humanitarian action in the '90s continue now. From the conflicts and their humanitarian consequences in Somalia, Rwanda and the Balkans that dominated headlines in the '90s, we now see the situations in Syria, Yemen, Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, as well as Rohingya in Myanmar and Bangladesh, unfolding with great complexity.

"What we're seeing regularly is you get this layering of other problems, on top of conflict or within conflict, so it's like a layered cake. If it's not Ebola or HIV, which it was throughout the '90s and the 2000s, you had HIV and conflict as major emergencies in many African countries. You're having to simultaneously manage them, and COVID is the latest."

Slim notes that this is further complicated as the range of "battles spaces" in a conflict environment is significantly diversified—from the Dunantist origins of humanitarian action at the Battle of Sulferino[2] and from the mid '90s. "Now of course if I look at the battlefield today, I don't find an eight-hour battlefield at a place called Sulferino. I find many, many battles spaces."

For Slim, this "modern battlefield" moves not only through physical space, but also "cyberspace, digital space, information space—through economic war and sanctions and into very intimate things around detention, rape. So you have this layering of emergencies, epidemics, pandemics, conflict, drought, disaster, climate change. At the same time as you have this layering of battle spaces."

In addition to these contextual shifts, Slim notes that the humanitarian sector itself looks very different. "When I was writing [in 1995], a lot of NGOs were still quite small. The UN was quite small. We've now seen a massive growth in the humanitarian sector, so that a lot of agencies, which were sort of small- to medium-sized enterprises and companies in the '80s and the '90s, are now major transnational corporations."

He goes on to say that there's also been shift in NGOs' capacity and their "identity into big companies – big transnational companies that are operating a certain orthodoxy, a bureaucratic and professional orthodoxy all around the world". As evidence of this growth, research in the UK, the US, the Netherlands and Canada indicates a near tripling of INGOs between the mid 1990s and mid 2020s[3]. This growth—of the multi-mandate, multi-countries organisations, of which there are approximately 50—has produced professionalised global bureaucracies that rival for-profit corporations.

ARE THE 'NEW' SKILLS STILL RELEVANT?

The skills Slim sets out in his 1995 article reflect the shift in awareness in the humanitarian sector towards the challenges of "complex emergencies". And, as Slim explains in the article, "The classical set-piece relief operation of previous decades is often unworkable in many of these situations."

'New' skills for the humanitarian practitioner in 1995

- Informed political analysis
- Negotiation
- Conflict analysis, management and resolution
- Propaganda monitoring and humanitarian broadcasting
- Accepting a new urban terrain
- A broader understanding of vulnerability to include notions of political-, ethinic-, gender- and class-based vulnerability
- Human rights monitoring and reporting
- Working with armed guards and protection
- Military liaison
- Understanding the relationship between humanitarianism and development
- Country specialism
- Peace-building as rehabilitation
- Personal security and staff welfare.

It's striking just how many of these skills remain relevant today. While some have become embedded in humanitarian practice, others have been accepted into the rhetoric of the sector, though perhaps not the reality. And others retain their relevance, but in new and different ways.

Today, Slim notes, conflict and power analysis have become more mainstream: organisations have developed their own expertise or sought it out from specialist external groups like the Crisis Group. He has also seen a significant change in relation to social analysis—for example, gender analysis and intersectionality, and "inclusion now understands disability much better". He also believes that understanding community participation is now more of a core skill; however, "I think sometimes it's still not very good and it's still fairly top-down participation: 'You will participate *like this* to serve our bureaucratic planning, monitoring and evaluation cycles.'"

Slim's identification of the need to understand humanitarian response in urban contexts has only become more relevant, given the significant increase of population density in these contexts. In the '80s and '90s, the contexts were, for example, the sieges of Sarajevo, Grozny and Juba. In more recent times, the challenges of urban response were highlighted in the responses to the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince in Haiti, flooding and earthquake in major cities across Asia, and current conflict environments such as Syria and Yemen. The majority of refugees now live in urban areas, as opposed to camps[4]. While there's still room for improvement, Slim notes, "People are getting much better at urban. They've got to, they've got no choice."

One key area Slim identified in 1995 that has taken on a whole new meaning today is what he referred to as "propaganda monitoring" and "humanitarian broadcasting". At the time, the main communication channels were television, print and radio. Since then there have been profound changes to these channels with the expansion of the internet and social media, and some recent examples of the way in which social media has been used to incite violence, such as in Myanmar. Slim notes that there's now "a genuine information struggle because of misinformation, fake news, propaganda, that still is over every war".

Humanitarian actors are also employing social media—albeit in a very different way—to communicate with the public about their work and its impact. "They will say they're much better than they are, they will say they do things routinely, which they're struggling to do. They will say they work in certain sort of perfect ways, which they usually don't."

Slim also recognises that greater access to technology does, however, give greater exposure to the people affected by crisis. "Already, particular vloggers, particular people who have made films from Syria and other places, they are shaping the truth about that emergency. They're constructing the truth about that emergency from their own lives rather than NGOs mediating a truth."

WHO ARE TODAY'S HUMANITARIANS?

Not only has there been a shift in the skills that humanitarians need, but also in who actually makes up the humanitarian workforce.

The rise of the humanitarian specialist

The first step in answering that question is acknowledging that while the discussion of 'The New Way of Working[5]' (arising from the World Humanitarian Summit) and the "nexus" between humanitarian and development work is alive in the sector, in practice many practitioners still identify much more strongly with one or the other. Slim reflects that the distinction between humanitarian and development workers was not nearly so clear cut in the NGO sector in the '90s.

"In 1994 for someone from Save the Children, Oxfam, whatever, to use the word humanitarian was very unusual. We were just beginning to take on that word. If you were at Save the Children at that time, you could be working in relief one minute, but then you could be sent to work on Malawi's EPI vaccination program. So we were very integrated."

The nature of the major crisis of the '90s meant an impetus to invoke humanitarian principles. "We needed to affirm some kind of humanitarian sanctity, go to the laws of war, look at protection of humanitarian workers, look at impartiality, neutrality, justify why we were moving across different communities," Slim says. But considering the extent of the divide now, he reflects that the "humanitarian myth-making" and exceptionalism that have resulted can be problematic. (Slim discusses the way in which development and humanitarian actors can work in complementary ways in his article 'Joining what belongs together'.[6])

Workforce diversity

Slim identifies the predominance of women in the formal sector as one of the largest shifts. While women have always been involved in humanitarian work, Slim suggests that historically this sector was not seen as a place for them.

While this has undoubtedly changed, diversity in humanitarian leadership remains an area where much change is needed[7]—both in gender and cultural diversity. "I'm afraid I think that a tripartite class system still exists a bit, but the glass ceiling's changed a bit. So a lot of the national elite have now burst through into the international elite. But I think the class system's still there. And I think it's still as problematic as it was."

Digital humanitarians

The rise of the "digital humanitarian" has also had a significant impact. As Slim puts it, "from face time to screen time is a big shift". Shifting away from the "professional" humanitarian, crisis mapping initiatives have seen individuals from all over the world, and from all types of backgrounds, analyse data from social media, mobile phones and satellite imagery to inform an understanding of humanitarian need. Some argue this is democratising and provides access to vital resources and know-how[8], others raise concerns over lack of training and professionalism[9]. The COVID-19 restrictions on international travel and mobility within countries have also forced more humanitarians to work remotely. It remains to be seen what impact distance will have on relationship and trust building, both among humanitarian actors, and between them and affected communities. (Slim has previously written about the centrality of trust (and mistrust) to humanitarian response[10].)

The impact of COVID-19

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's been much discussion about the ways in which it might change the humanitarian sector. In particular, limits on travel have disrupted reliance on international surge models, and local actors have greater space to operate in (see examples of Solomon Islands during Tropical Cyclone Harold[11]). Local actors are still reporting, however, that real shifts of power are yet to materialise.[12]

On the question of what longer term impact COVID-19 may have on the power dynamics of humanitarian action, Slim speculates that it will likely be a mixed bag. He believes international humanitarian actors will be back on planes as soon as possible, and remote management will be taken up at large scale—with the potential to move the international humanitarian professional into a new breed of "remote technocrats". But, he also believes there will be contexts where local actors push back against a return to the status quo. "I also think that part of that gradual shift of rejection and pushback from societies and countries towards the expeditionary model of humanitarian action—where 'the West goes out to the colonies'– will continue."

NEW SKILLS FOR THE HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONER IN 2020 AND BEYOND

So what new skills do humanitarians need in their toolbox to be able to meet the challenges of the future?

New skills for the humanitarian practitioner in 2020 and beyond

- "De-occidentalising" aid to shift the power and support locally led response
- Navigating change in large bureaucracy
- Adaptability to reflect on core values and re-purpose in changing contexts
- Skill-sharing and meaningful collaboration, as needed and as requested
- Negotiating the digital landscape
- Understanding the centrality of the climate agenda — both in relation to the impact on humanitarian response and the operation of humanitarian organisations.

Negotiating bureaucracy and organisational change

Slim notes that a reality of the current landscape is the need to understand and negotiate a way forward in large bureaucracies. He has previously written on the impact of the bureaucratisation of humanitarian organisations[13], and the ways in which managerialism, force of habit, and the cognitive dissonance between rhetoric and reality can stifle both impact for crisis-affected communities and movements for organisational change.

While shifting power dynamics may mean that those bureaucracies eventually reduce in size or influence, creating change within the current system requires an ability to build relationships and gain support to get agendas through.

"I think it would help people to be very conscious of power in organisations," says Slim. "How it works, developing relationships with the right people, oiling your way through the system, getting your agenda work through, funded, gaining support—all that internal politics."

Meeting the challenge of climate change

Climate change and its impact on humanitarian organisations mean that the skills to address it are now vital. "Understanding how you deal with climate emergencies will be key," says Slim. "So understanding climate change, understanding difference between mitigation, adaptation, doing humanitarian action, which is at once either enabling people to adapt or supporting them to repurpose when they can't adapt."

Humanitarian organisations also need to look at their role in exacerbating environmental and climate concerns—learning how to support the needs of crisis-affected people without creating more damage with their own carbon footprints as large, multinational organisations.

Negotiating the digital landscape

The use of technology to support humanitarian response is growing—from crisis mapping to technology for cash transfers over mobile phones and drones to deliver aid. Slim acknowledges the importance of humanitarian practitioners to be "digitally savvy", not only from the perspective of humanitarian programming, but also in terms of public-facing communications.

Interestingly, academics also argue that while technological innovations capture attention and can be perceived as a 'silver bullet', their use is not without risk and can infringe the principle of 'do no harm'[14]. The "digital divide"—inequality in access to technology—can also heighten exclusion rather than overcome it.[15] Understanding how to engage with technology in an inclusive and safe way is an essential skill for the future humanitarian practitioner.

Understanding place and context, challenging colonial legacies

In his 1995 article, Slim reflects on the rise of the international humanitarian professional, who moved from context to context without a deep contextual understanding. He wrote: "Today's international relief professional is like the multinational executive who feels able to operate in any part of the world because she knows the way the firm works. However, she very seldom knows the way the country works. Similarly, the humanitarian establishment is developing a tendency towards the generic professional at the expense of the expert."

Reflecting in 2020, Slim agrees that this continues to characterise the experience of many international aid workers today: "I think we're quite profoundly ignorant of place as a profession. That moves across the many spaces and places. And I'm as guilty of that as the next person, really."

However, while his original article lamented the decline of specialism, it was perhaps still predicated on the need for "specialists" coming from outside. While those people might commit to embed themselves in a context, there's still an assumption that the outsider brings a level of expertise or plays a role that a local person can't play.

Critiques of humanitarian aid as an extension of the colonial project are not new, but have gained greater prominence as the Black Lives Matter movement has prompted deeper critical examination.

Slim suggests a new term—"de-occidentalising" or "de-westernising". "I use the short version—'de-ox', like 'detox'. Really, a big challenge to the organisation is to 'de-ox' to make sure that actually all states buy into this and the global humanitarian is genuinely a universal human project."

For the humanitarian practitioner, this means understanding how to work collaboratively, without ingrained assumptions that international agencies have the answers and local actors are in need of capacity building. We need meaningful knowledge and skill-sharing that makes the most of the capacities that all respective actors bring to the table.

Repurposing according to core values

Current challenges, such as COVID-19 and the critical reflection brought about by the localisation agenda and Black Lives Matter movement, have also demonstrated the need for organisations to be adaptable, and to repurpose their mandates and approaches as the context and dynamics change.

On this, Slim wonders "whether there will be some repurposing around what the core business of an organisation is. And that might be across the nexus—actually we're a humanitarian organisation, but we realise to do that we have to engage with development money and in development infrastructure and make lasting things."

Skills for the future involve not only the ability to work within bureaucracies, but also enough flexibility to think critically, adapt and change.

CONCLUSION

While reflecting on the skill set for the modern humanitarian practitioner in 1995, Slim also noted that "more than reskilling, today's emergencies also require a fundamental reappraisal of the relief worker's essential identity". Here he's referring specifically to the need for practitioners to be alive to the challenges of claiming "neutrality" in a conflict—"of being in the world of conflict but not of it"—and this observation remains relevant today.

The statement about reappraisal also takes on a new meaning as we come to terms with the humanitarian system's colonial legacy and perpetuation of power imbalance and paternalism. The skills that were relevant in 1995 are, in many ways, still central to humanitarian practice today. We can also add the need for skills to negotiate the major contextual shifts the define our current and future realities, such as climate change and technology.

However, perhaps the most fundamental shift needed for those working to meet the need of crisis-affected communities is that we, as individuals and organisations, must give effect to a more diverse humanitarianism that respects knowledge and skill in all their multiplicity.

Endnotes

1 Hugo Slim "The Continuing Metamorphosis of the Humanitarian Practitioner: Some New Colours for an Endangered Chameleon", Disasters, Vol 19, Issue 2, June 1995, pgs 110-126.

2 International Committee of the Red Cross, "Founding and early years of the ICRC (1863-1914)", 21 May 2010. Available at https://www.icrc.org/en/document/founding-and-early-years-icrc-1863-1914.

3 Logan Cochrane and John-Michael Davis,"Scaling the INGO: What the Development and Expansion of Canadian INGOs Tells Us", Social Sciences, 9, 2020 140.

4 Robert Muggah with Adriana Erthal Abdenur, Refugees and the City: The Twenty-first-century Front Line, World Refugee Council Research Paper No. 2, July 2018. Available at https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/documents/WRC%20Research%20Paper%20no.2.pdf.

5 Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "New Way of Working", OCHA Policy Development and Studies Branch (PDSB), 2017. Available at http://agendaforhumanity.org/sites/default/files/20170228%20NWoW%2013%20high%20res.pdf.

6 Hugo Slim,"Joining what belongs together? The triple nexus and the struggle for policy synthesis", Rural 21, 01/2019 Vol 53, pgs 6-10.

7 Humanitarian Advisory Group, Data on diversity: humanitarian leadership under the spotlight, October 2019. Available at https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/HAG_Data-on-diversity_Final-electronic.pdf.

8 Patrick Meier, Digital Humanitarians: How Big Data Is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response, Taylor and Francis Press, 2015.

9 Elizabeth Resor "The NeoHumanitarians: Assessing the Credibility of Organized Volunteer Crisis Mappers", Policy & Internet, Vol 8 Issue 1, March 2016, pgs. 34-54.

10 Hugo Slim, "Trust me, I'm a humanitarian", Humanitarian Law and Policy blog, 24 October 2019. Available at https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/10/24/trust-humanitarian/.

11 Humanitarian Advisory Group and VANGO, No turning back: local leadership in Vanuatu's response to Tropical Cyclone Harold, Humanitarian Horizons Practice Paper Series, June 2020. Available at https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper_final-electronic.pdf.

12 See the discussion in the online forum "COVID-19 and Localisation: Shifting the power, or shifting the risk?", part of the "No Safe Space: Crisis Response in COVID-19" online forum series presented by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership, Australian Council for International Development and Humanitarian Advisory Group. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP5osB7uTxI&feature=emb_logo.

13 Hugo Slim, "Reflections of a humanitarian bureaucrat", Humanitarian Law and Policy blog, 9 January 2020. Available at https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/01/09/reflections-humanitarian-bureaucrat/.

14 Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, Katja Lindskov Jacobsen and Sean Martin McDonald, "Do no harm: A taxonomy of the challenges of humanitarian experimentation", International Review of the Red Cross (2017), 99 (1), pgs. 319-344.

15 Barnaby Willitts-King, John Bryant and Kerrie Holloway, The humanitarian 'digital divide', Humanitarian Policy Group, HPG Working Paper Series, November 2019. Available at https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/digital_divide_lit_review_web_0.pdf.