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WHEN 'LEADERSHIP' MEANS ACKNOWLEDGING OTHERS MIGHT KNOW BETTER

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Cover Image: World leaders at the Reforming the United Nations: Management, Security, and Development meeting during the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 18 September, 2017, New York City, USA.

ABSTRACT

Humanitarian work in the early twenty-first-century is steeped in the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ and ‘leave no one behind’. Yet, “too often it is the most vulnerable people and the people most in need [who] fall through the cracks” of humanitarian responses (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies 2018, p. 5).

This paper argues that humanitarian leadership is in need of a major paradigm shift: one requiring agencies to actually learn from people’s lived reality, rather than trying to fit that lived reality into pre-existing international systems and procedures. Humanitarians should reconsider tools that are not fit for purpose and reconsider ways of working that are built on a flawed logic of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘protection’. This paradigm shift is vital for ensuring that those “most vulnerable people”, the most marginalised and excluded, are at the forefront of humanitarian (and development) thinking.

Introduction

Humanitarian work in the early twenty-first-century is steeped in the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’ and ‘leave no one behind’. Yet, as the 2018 World Disasters Report tells us, “too often it is the most vulnerable people and the people most in need [who] fall through the cracks” of humanitarian responses (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC] 2018, p. 5). These are “... the people who we need to reach first, not last. They should be the forethought, not the afterthought” (IFRC 2018, p. 5).

So, what is going wrong? This paper argues that if humanitarians are to have any hope of ensuring that those “most vulnerable people”—whom the author prefers to describe as those who are most marginalised and excluded—are at the forefront of humanitarian (and development) thinking, there must be a major paradigm shift in humanitarian leadership.

Following de Ver’s (2009) work on developmental leadership, which foregrounds the importance of contextual understanding while noting that “many of the conceptions of leadership in the literature are Western-oriented, universalist or individualistic”, this shift will require actually listening to, and learning from, people’s lived reality, rather than trying to fit that lived reality into pre-existing international systems and procedures that are built on a flawed logic of ‘vulnerability’ and ‘protection’ and that employ tools that are not fit for purpose.

Humanitarians need a fundamental realignment of knowledge–power dynamics, in which:

- a) simplistic, ever-growing checklists of seemingly homogenous ‘types’ of people deemed to have ‘special needs’ are discarded in favour of continual reflection on, and real-time responses to, the effects of intersecting inequities that permeate our societies (both during and outside of humanitarian crises); *and*
- b) ground-level, site-specific understandings of shifting patterns of marginalisation and exclusion are core to needs analyses and the humanitarian response.

Leaving no one behind?

The statements quoted in the introduction were made two years after the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, which was called in response to “the highest level of human suffering since the Second World War” (Agenda for Humanity 2016), and the launch of the Agenda for Humanity. In his report to the Summit, then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated: “Leaving no one behind is a central aspiration of most political, ethical or religious codes and has always been at the heart of the humanitarian imperative” (Ban 2016).

The Agenda for Humanity, said Ban Ki-moon, had to be a “vision for change”, which was:

... grounded in the value that unites us: our common humanity. This common humanity has many different ethnic and national identities, religious beliefs and cultural customs. Yet, it connects in the universal principle that there is inherent dignity and worth in every individual that must be protected, respected and given the opportunity and conditions to flourish. (Ban 2016)

As the author has noted elsewhere (Fletcher 2019), such aspirational statements are nothing new. Multi-country commitments to international development and humanitarian endeavours that build on our ‘common humanity’ and call for the inclusion of those who are most marginalised and excluded can be traced back to the post–World War II period, if not before. For example, the Marshall Plan was “directed ... against hunger, poverty, desperation and chaos” (Marshall 1947). ‘Purpose Three’ of the UN Charter is:

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms *for all* without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. (United Nations 1948, emphasis added)

‘Humanity’ is one of four humanitarian principles that have been accepted across the world since the first Geneva Convention of 1949. (That may be changing; the recent Centre for Humanitarian Leadership working paper by Clarke and Parris (2019) explores the roots of these principles and argues for a new set of principles, namely “equity, solidarity, compassion and diversity”.) In his inaugural address, then President of the United States Harry S. Truman laid the foundations of the program that became the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). He declared: “Only by helping the least fortunate of its members to help themselves can the human family achieve the decent, satisfying life that is the right of *all* people” (Truman 1949, emphasis added).

Further declarations of defeating poverty and inequality have come and gone in the years since Truman’s time. “Leaving no one behind” is, of course, the aspirational slogan of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their forerunner, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), were built on “principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level” (United Nations General Assembly 2000). Intended as a shared international commitment to “all the world’s people, especially the most vulnerable” (United Nations General Assembly 2000), the MDGs were called “the most successful anti-poverty movement in history” by Ban Ki-moon (United Nations 2015). Despite this, the final report on the 15-year effort to achieve the MDGs noted:

Millions of people are being left behind, especially the poorest and those disadvantaged because of their sex, age, disability, ethnicity or geographic location. Targeted efforts will be needed to reach the *most vulnerable* people. (United Nations 2015, emphasis added)

‘Vulnerable’ or marginalised and excluded?

As has been noted for decades by theorists and activists (particularly those connected to feminist and disability rights theory and activism):

The concept of vulnerabilities disempowers, reducing our agency and productivity to trembling inadequacy in the face of adversity. *The language of risk is not ours.* We are, paradigmatically, ‘copers’, the ones who find ways to feed, clothe and educate our children, to keep depression at bay, to encourage hope, to care for our sick. We need to be supported from these strengths and capabilities rather than reduced to the vulnerable to be protected. (Reid et al. 2012, emphasis in original)

The humanitarian sector is “saturated with the language of vulnerability and risk”

Nevertheless, the humanitarian sector is “saturated with the language of vulnerability and risk” (Reid et al. 2012). It can be found throughout Ban Ki-moon’s speech to the World Humanitarian Summit; it is the language of the United Nations, as indicated by the quote above and by the existence of a specific Global Protection Cluster (GPC); it is the language of the Agenda for Action, as part of which “more than 1000 ... commitments [were] made to take action to uphold the rights and find solutions for the most vulnerable groups” (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] 2018). This bears repeating: there were more than 1000 commitments made, and the language through which they were presented was language in which commitments were made to do things for vulnerable groups, rather than to work alongside them, in solidarity. Clarke and Parris (2019) have proposed ‘solidarity’ as a new humanitarian principle; a replacement for the current principle of impartiality that, they argue: “not only places a barrier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ but insists that there be this separation and absence of judgement of the circumstances in which others find themselves.”

The language used to define and describe the Agenda for Humanity commitments and actions shifts and changes within and between webpages and key documents; there are ‘core commitments’, ‘individual commitments’, ‘joint commitments’, ‘themes’, ‘core responsibilities’, ‘shifts in direction’ and ‘transformations’, each of which is defined and described in different ways at different points. For example, the five ‘core responsibilities’ and 24 ‘transformations’ used as an organising principle on the website’s ‘core commitments’ search engine do not

match the core responsibilities and transformations listed elsewhere (for instance, in the downloadable trifold leaflet about the Agenda on the website). This is, perhaps, an inevitability; seeking consistency in anything that involves 9000 participants from diverse governments, civil society and non-government organisations, private sector and academic institutions could well be a never-ending task.

The seven ‘transformations’ identified under this core responsibility now seem to have settled into the following:

- address migration
- end statelessness
- empower and protect women and girls
- ensure education for all in crisis
- empower young people
- include the most vulnerable. (Agenda for Humanity 2016)

This last transformation is described as follows:

The needs and risks faced by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, older persons, adolescents and ethnic minorities must be identified and prioritised. National and international organizations should put in place strategies and programmes with a specific focus on protecting and respecting the rights of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged underpinned by comprehensive data analysis. (Agenda for Humanity 2016)

Who are the “most vulnerable groups”, and how are workers on the ground supposed to be able to identify them, let alone protect them?

But who are the “most vulnerable groups”, and how are workers on the ground supposed to be able to identify them, let alone protect them? The quote above references “Women and girls, persons with disabilities, older persons, adolescents and ethnic minorities”; the author searched within and across a wide range of materials related to the Humanitarian Summit and the Agenda for Humanity as well as the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Field Handbook (OCHA 2018), which references the Summit and resultant initiatives. From this, a (very long) list of human characteristics and conditions that will result in ‘vulnerability’ was developed, including the following:

- being female
- being old or young
- being disabled
- being a member of a minority race, ethnicity, political affiliation, religion, sexual identity or cultural group
- being indigenous
- being poor
- being a renter, squatter or landless person

- being forcibly displaced
- being a migrant
- being stateless
- being “associated with a party to an armed conflict”
- living in a rural area or “geographically-isolated area”
- living with HIV or AIDS.

The UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, applies a slightly different method, which it calls an “age, gender and diversity” (AGD) approach; a “systematic application” of which is intended to ensure:

that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on an equal footing and are able to participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their family members and communities. (UNHCR 2011)

However, the focus is still firmly on “specific personal characteristics” (UNHCR 2011), with ‘diversity’ used to refer to characteristics, including ‘different values, attitudes, cultural perspectives, beliefs, ethnic background, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, health, social status, skill and other specific personal characteristics’ (UNHCR 2011).

There is a strange neutrality at play here: first, that everyone who possesses the same characteristic is equally vulnerable; and, second, that people are vulnerable because of who they are or because they are in the ‘wrong’ place at the wrong time.

People are not marginalised and excluded just because they possess different characteristics to others

As the author has argued elsewhere (Fletcher 2015b, 2015a, 2019), people are not marginalised and excluded just because they possess different characteristics to others. Sociologists have long agreed that humans are continually engaged in historically based social and political processes of inequity involving judgements of worth made on the basis of difference from perceived ‘norms’ (Acker 2006; Collins 1993; Connell 2002; Connell 2005 [1995]; Kimmel and Ferber 2014; Ore 2009; Rahman and Jackson 2010).

Our societies function on the basis of social hierarchies, which intersect. These hierarchies form around points of difference, such as race and ethnicity; gender; sex; sexuality; caste or socio-economic status; disability; and other characteristics (often on a culturally specific basis). For example, in some countries, religion (often tied to race and ethnicity) is a deeply influential factor in whether or not people have power in decision-making and access to resources; in others, it is of far less importance.

The dominant norm (which is not necessarily the same as the numerical majority) is the item against which someone’s place on the hierarchy is judged; further:

The social hierarchies at play in our worlds are (re) generated through on-going ways of deeply human thinking and acting, on-going inequitable relationships and power dynamics, and on-going (re)creation and implementation of systems and structures that are, themselves, symptoms of human-based decisions and value systems (e.g., laws, education and health systems, social welfare systems, tax systems, financial structures etc.). None of these exists outside of human relationships or outside of emotions. They occur within what Taylor (1985) called ‘the realm of human self-interpretation’; a realm to which, he added, ‘there is no dispassionate access’. (Fletcher 2019)

Those who are considered to be the ‘right’ category of race or ethnicity; the ‘right’ sex; the ‘right’ sexuality (in terms of who they are known or assumed to have sex with, as well as when, where and how); ‘fit’ dominant gender norms and so on, reap benefits. They are engaged in decision-making and they have preferential access to resources, such as education, health care, land, legal protection, etc. Those who do not are excluded from these benefits and, at worst, are subject to punishment (including refusal of their basic rights to life and justice). This is as true in humanitarian crises as it is in everyday life.

Taking a categorical approach (that is, putting people in fixed categories of ‘vulnerability’, such as women and girls, people with a disability, indigenous people, etc.) serves to mask the intersecting social hierarchies and judgements that function to marginalise and exclude people. It also serves to overwrite the deep reserves of resilience and capacity demonstrated by so many people in the face of human-inspired and weather-related disasters. As Reid et al. (2012) write, people need to be “supported from these strengths and capabilities rather than reduced to the vulnerable to be protected”.

If we are serious about achieving this— and about achieving the commitments to partnerships of equality and to localisation— then humility will be an essential leadership quality.

Ensuring this happens in practice requires leadership (and leaders) that, first and foremost, acknowledges the limitations of taking a categorical approach to marginalisation and exclusion, including the reality that too often humanitarian and development workers are not asked to reflect on their own judgements and prejudices. Second, it requires demonstration of humility. While, traditionally, this trait may not be seen as central to leadership built on the model of ‘leading from the front’, it is essential for “leaving no one behind”.

If we are serious about achieving this—and about achieving the commitments to partnerships of equality and to localisation—then humility will be an essential leadership quality.

Vulnerable to on-the-ground confusion

Given that the 'basic architecture' of the international humanitarian system comes from the United Nations, and that the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (established in response to a UN resolution) is the primary mechanism for coordination of UN and non-UN humanitarian assistance, it is reasonable to expect the United Nations to be one of the organisations that leads the way in setting standards for humanitarian responses.

The 272-page *United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Field Handbook* (OCHA 2018), mentioned earlier, could be reasonably considered a key document—if not the key document—on “the what and the how of international emergency response” (OCHA 2018).

The UNDAC Handbook was developed using information drawn from the United Nations, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the IFRC and the Humanitarian Best Practice Network (OCHA 2018). It covers everything from seating arrangements suitable for different types of meetings (complete with diagrams; see Figure 1) to how to deal with the media during a humanitarian crisis (UNDAC 2018).

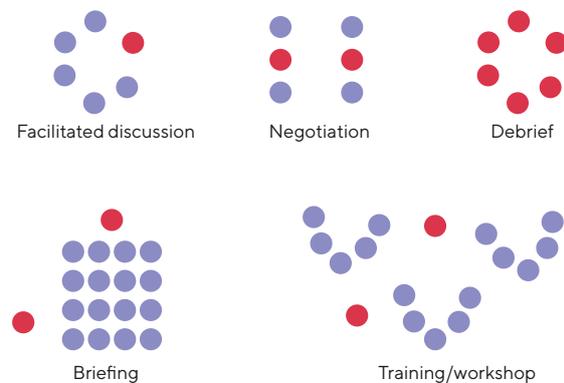


Figure 1: Different types of seating arrangements, UNDAC, 2018.

More than 50 references to the word ‘vulnerable’ appear in the UNDAC Handbook, mainly within the section ‘Protection considerations’. The closest definition of ‘vulnerable’ was in the sub-section ‘Specific needs of vulnerable groups’, which stated:

Vulnerable persons or groups of people are those who are exposed to a combination of, or more serious, risks than the rest of the population and who have limited capacity to cope with these risks. Vulnerability is context-specific and depends on the capacities and support networks of each individual. Women, men, boys and girls of all ages may require special interventions or support depending on their circumstances and the threats their environment poses.

Vulnerability in relation to one situation does not necessarily indicate vulnerability in all situations and blanket classification of vulnerable groups should be avoided. For this reason, it is useful to carry out a vulnerability assessment to understand the specific vulnerabilities of and within a population group to risks they face as well as the existing capacities to cope in the face of these risks.

Vulnerability is influenced by displacement, geographic location, specific cultural and social power dynamics, access to information and education, access to material and financial resources, access to services and infrastructure, social support networks and specific characteristics of the group, family, or individual ...

Specific groups are often more vulnerable and need special assistance in the aftermath of a disaster. Experience shows that these groups almost always include women, children, people with disabilities and older persons. Other potentially vulnerable groups include the poor, persons living with HIV/AIDS, indigenous groups, families hosting IDPs, renters, squatters and the landless, geographically-isolated communities, individuals associated with a party to an armed conflict and certain ethnic and cultural minority groups in given countries. (OCHA 2018, p. 19, s. L.3.2)

The confusions contained in this quote are many. On the one hand, we are told that vulnerability arises when people “have limited capacity” to cope with risks. Then, vulnerability is defined as “context-specific” (rather than specific to a person’s capacities) but still dependent on “the capacities and support networks of each individual”. If an individual is a woman, man, boy or girl of any age, they may require “special interventions”; but “women, children, people with disabilities and older persons” will “almost always” require special assistance (regardless of their capacities or support networks). Over and above this, there is a long list of other categories of people who are “potentially vulnerable”. Although the quote references the usefulness of carrying out a “vulnerability assessment”, no further reference to this could be found in the UNDAC Handbook.

It is beyond imagining what responders are supposed to do in the field, other than to simply hone in on women, children, old people and anyone who is easily identifiable as disabled (whatever their socio-economic status, HIV status, indigeneity, ethnicity and so on).

Changing this requires leadership that is both humble and courageous; leadership that is willing to admit that the long used and ever-growing ‘checklists’ of ‘types’ of people designated ‘vulnerable’ do not actually tell us who is being left out at any particular site, at any particular time. Further, leadership must be shown when advocating for the time and resources needed to develop contextual understanding; and for monitoring and evaluation systems that actually hold people to account for effective identification of, and locally informed

responses to, shifting and intersecting social hierarchies. Such systems will, however, require radical re-thinking of the ways in which assessments are carried out.

In need of reassessment

A whole raft of new materials related to needs assessment have been developed in this space since the World Humanitarian Summit, in large part due to the Grand Bargain. Developed by 16 donors and aid organisations as a response to the report *Too important to fail: addressing the humanitarian financing gap* (High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing 2017), the Grand Bargain was presented at the Summit. It aims to “get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action” (IASC, no date).

Now involving “more than 30 of the biggest donors and aid providers” (Agenda for Humanity 2016), the Grand Bargain involves nine ‘workstreams’ with 49 commitments underneath them, plus one cross-cutting commitment (to “enhance engagement between humanitarian and development actors”). One workstream, titled ‘Improve joint and impartial needs assessments’, includes a number of resources, which include *Grand Bargain principles for needs assessment ethos and Methodology to assess coordinated multi-sector needs assessments*.

The principles are obviously intended as international best practice; they:

... represent core values that have been agreed to by organizations at the global level, in particular, the Code of Conduct and the Humanitarian Charter, and are implemented at global, regional and operational levels. (Grand Bargain Workstream 5, no date)

Principle 1 states that needs assessments should be “people-centred and inclusive” as well as “sensitive to age, sex, and all relevant aspects of diversity”, with ‘diversity’ defined in a footnote (Grand Bargain Workstream 5, no date). This footnote cites the UNHCR *policy on age, gender and diversity*, quoted previously: “diversity refers to different values, attitudes, cultural perspectives, beliefs, ethnic background, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, health, social status, skill and other specific personal characteristics” (UNHCR 2011).

Principle 1 also states that “people with special needs” will require “special attention” (Grand Bargain Workstream 5, no date). Rights activists across the world would argue that there are no such ‘special needs’ but one basic need: fulfilment of universal human rights for all, whether that means provision of mobility aids for people with disability or ensuring that poor, ethnic minority women are able to take part in the making of decisions that will affect them.

The methodology, created to assess whether or not good quality needs assessments have been undertaken, lists a series of “minimum requirements for multi-sectoral need assessments”, one of which is: “The assessment identifies *characteristics* that increase the vulnerability of different groups in the given context (e.g. gender, age, disability, minority status, displacement, etc.)” (Global Public Policy Institute and Inspire Consortium, no date, emphasis added).

What is supposed to happen in needs assessments in practice? The UNDAC Handbook contains a section on ‘assessment’, in which “vulnerabilities and risks” are identified as part of “what you need to know” in first-stage planning (OCHA 2018, p. 14, s. I.3). Minimum information required includes “which vulnerable groups lived in affected areas before impact and what they lived on” (OCHA 2018, p. 14, s. I.3). The list of possible sources for such data includes national institutions, UN agencies, international and local non-governmental organisations, international and local media, geospatial and satellite imagery, databases and datasets, websites, social media and pre-existing large-scale survey data.

Members of affected communities (or even community leaders, local civil society organisations or civil society networks) are not mentioned, despite the reality that lived knowledge of the way in which marginalisation and exclusion plays out at a particular site is really only available at this level.

Understanding the complexities of local power dynamics can, of course, be time-consuming and difficult to achieve.

Understanding the complexities of local power dynamics can, of course, be time-consuming and difficult to achieve. Internal community divisions can run so deep and be so long-standing that they feel ‘natural’ to those involved. In such instances, what outsiders might term ‘exclusion’ is instead understood as a mode of ‘protection’; justified as necessary to maintain religious or cultural traditions. (These arguments are still used by many people in Australia today, for example in relation to same-sex marriage or sexuality education in schools.) These arguments are often used to ‘explain’ inequities, such as women’s lack of involvement in collective decision-making or the exclusion of transgender people from their family networks.

It is not possible to understand the realities of marginalisation and exclusion in a community without asking those involved.

It is not possible to understand the realities of marginalisation and exclusion in a community without asking those involved. Of necessity, this includes both those who are marginalised and excluded and those who participate in the marginalisation and exclusion.

In some cases, those who are marginalised and excluded may be invisible; either because they are literally kept out of sight or are unable to move around freely (as is so often the case for people with disabilities) or because they are not recognised as community members. In Myanmar, for example, internal migrants are often extremely poor day labourers who live on the outskirts of communities and are not considered to be members of those communities because they are not registered there; thus, they do not even appear on local people's radar when it comes to thinking about 'who is left out' of those communities.

The ways in which these patterns of marginalisation and exclusion play out shift subtly from site to site, as explored in 'Appendix: A case study of complexity'. Further, different patterns will be clear to different people; and when communities have faced wholesale upheaval (as in the Rohingya crisis) and everyone is reduced to a state of homelessness, poverty and trauma, then the specific patterns of marginalisation and exclusion that existed in a specific community prior to that upheaval will be much harder to identify.

Simple observation of those who manage to obtain those resources that are available—for instance, being able to source a tarpaulin to erect a makeshift shelter—and those who do not, can always be followed by attempts to understand why some people are being left out and how things would need to be done differently to ensure that their rights are being met. There is a world of difference between this and meeting someone's 'special needs'. (Another whole paper could be written about how humanitarians might seek to learn from the resilience and coping mechanisms of those who manage to survive in the face of marginalisation and exclusion, or in the wake of man-made and weather-related disasters.)

Working for a development organisation, from international non-government organisations (INGOs) to local civil society organisations (CSOs), does not automatically 'cleanse' people of their prejudices. Recognition of this would enable humanitarians to identify the difference between marginalisation and exclusion and 'natural' judgements of some people as less worthy than others. The author has worked closely with many admirable people who are proud to fight for social justice, but who hold deeply discriminatory views: women's rights activists who do not support the rights of transgender women; human rights campaigners who do not engage with disability organisations; and UN staff members who are anti-Islam. The author has written elsewhere of her own 'Ah-ha' moment upon realising that, despite having worked on issues related to gender and sexuality for years, she had presumed that a young woman working in a bottle shop (off-licence) would not know anything about wine (Fletcher 2014). Everyone has

prejudices; the trick is in being able to recognise them and striving to limit the effect they have on behaviour. Few leaders in the humanitarian and development space are willing to even talk about this, let alone build space into staff training programs that encourage active reflection on such deeply human issues.

'Participation' needs to be more than a buzzword

Turning back to the UNDAC Handbook (OCHA 2018), it advises that the participation of "vulnerable groups" in the design of programs should be "encouraged", despite an absolute lack of clarity on exactly who is to be labelled 'vulnerable', by whom, and how.

Nearly ten years ago, 'participation' was one of a series of words termed "buzzwords and fuzzwords" (Cornwall and Eade 2010), described as "a constant supply of must-use terms and catchphrases" used in international development that are:

... simultaneously descriptive and normative, concrete and yet aspirational, intuitive and clunkily pedestrian, capable of expressing the most deeply held convictions or of being simply full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. (Eade 2010)

In a chapter on 'participation', Pablo Alejandro Leal wrote, "Somewhere in the mid-1980s, participation ascended to the pantheon of development buzzwords, catchphrases, and euphemisms." He added: "One cannot speak of participation when a few global power brokers decide the fates of more than two thirds of the world's population" (Leal 2010).

Cornwall (2003) has also been disparaging of what she described as:

... claims to 'full participation' and 'the participation of all stakeholders'—familiar from innumerable project documents and descriptions of participatory processes—[which] all too often boil down to situations in which only the voices and versions of the vocal few are raised and heard.

Participation of those who are marginalised and excluded remains a central pillar of both development and humanitarian aspirations.

Nonetheless, participation of those who are marginalised and excluded remains a central pillar of both development and humanitarian aspirations. It is unclear whether or not the World Humanitarian Summit was an exercise in this sort of participation; the Agenda for Humanity website stated that the Summit brought together:

9000 participants ... including 55 Heads of State and Government, hundreds of civil society and non-governmental organisations, and partners including the private sector and academia ... Together, they generated more than 3500 commitments to action and launched more than a dozen new partnerships and initiatives to turn the Agenda for Humanity into meaningful change for the world's most vulnerable people. (Agenda for Humanity 2016)

No mention is made here of participation in the Summit by either those who have experienced crises or, even more appropriately, those who have experienced crises and “fell through the cracks” (IFRC 2018).

There are two possible explanations for this: first, these people were not included in the 9000-strong Summit invite list; second, their participation was not felt to be important enough to note in the description of attendees. Both explanations are troubling. Nonetheless, the Grand Bargain has dedicated Workstream 6 to a “Participation Revolution”, which will ensure that the voices of people who might otherwise fall through the cracks are “heard and acted upon” (IASC, no date).

Other Agenda-related commitments to reaching those ‘left behind’ can be found in the Inclusion Charter, which contains “commitments and actions” that “draw and build upon the core commitments developed for the World Humanitarian Summit discussions” (Inclusion Charter, no date). The first commitment is to ‘participation’, and states:

We will systematically engage with all affected people, including the most marginalised, to deliver meaningful participation and consultation to ensure that their views are reflected in all aspects of the response including assessment, design, delivery and monitoring and evaluation. (Inclusion Charter, no date)

The Charter was:

... developed by leading organisations that have a specific mandate to support particular vulnerable groups including children, youth, older people and persons with disabilities, as well as national and international NGOs and networks that are concerned about ensuring humanitarian assistance reaches the most vulnerable crisis-affected people. (Inclusion Charter, no date)

Again, it is difficult to tell whether or not those “vulnerable groups” were included in the development of the Charter.

At an institutional level, Charter4Change is a commitment to greater participation of “southern-based national actors” in humanitarian response. Currently signed by 35 INGOs and endorsed by hundreds of southern-based national and local organisations, the Charter acknowledges that “only 0.2% of humanitarian aid is channelled directly to national non-government actors (NGOs and CSOs) for humanitarian work”,

and calls for an increase in direct funding to these organisations (Charter4Change 2015). Charter signatories are also committed to “emphasis[ing] the importance of national actors” while, at the same time, providing “robust organisational support and capacity strengthening” to them (Charter4Change 2015). The Charter makes no reference to the existing capacity within these organisations, despite referencing the Global Humanitarian Platform Principles of Partnership that state:

The diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other’s contributions. Local capacity is one of the main assets to enhance and on which to build. (Global Humanitarian Platform 2007)

The Global Humanitarian Platform was established in 2006 to “enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian action” and was, in some ways, the younger sibling of what became the World Humanitarian Summit. It brought together NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the UN and related international organisations, with a focus on changing “the way in which international humanitarian actors work together” (International Council of Voluntary Agencies, no date). At the last meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform steering committee, held in July 2010, a background paper warned that “the scale of humanitarian needs is likely to outweigh the capacity of humanitarian organisations in some situations” (Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response 2010): a warning that had become reality by the World Humanitarian Summit. The paper also noted both the increasing politicisation of aid and rising levels of mistrust towards humanitarian efforts seen as “part of a Western agenda” (Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response 2010).

The paper concluded with calls for humanitarian organisations to “rethink the manner in which they operate” where humanitarian space is reduced. It added:

It is very important for humanitarian actors to develop strong context analysis, and to make sure that the nature and causes of vulnerability are well understood, in order to provide the most appropriate responses. (Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response 2010)

Ensuring that it is possible to be done in practice—which means ensuring appropriate program funding, designs, timelines, monitoring and evaluation systems and more—would surely be a great example of leadership that acknowledges others might know better.

Conclusion

We are now nearly ten years past the *Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response* background paper quoted above, and two years past the World Humanitarian Summit and launch of the Agenda for Humanity. Spending any time on the Agenda's dedicated website gives one a sense of a grand idea being fleshed out in real-time, while various political and other power-plays take place below the surface.

The vast scale and scope of the Agenda for Humanity is overwhelming; as are the political, ideological and economic complexities of conflicts and inequities—or human-made disasters—often compounded by large-scale weather events, that are occurring across the world today. The ever-shifting winds of politics, ideology and economics that buffet both forms of disasters are often only loosely connected to what Ban Ki-moon referred to as “the value that unites us: our common humanity ... [and] the universal principle that there is inherent dignity and worth in every individual” (Ban 2016).

The failure of actors across the world to live by this universal principle was one of the drivers for the Agenda for Humanity; as Ban Ki-moon noted:

Brutal and seemingly intractable conflicts have devastated the lives of millions of people, threatening the futures of entire generations. More countries are slipping into fragility, marked by extreme poverty and weak institutions and compounded by natural hazards and climate-induced disasters. Violent extremism, terrorism and transnational crime are creating persistent instability. Growing economic inequality within countries and the widening gap between the rich and the poor are further marginalizing the most vulnerable people in society. (Ban 2016)

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At ground level, when people have lost everything and need humanitarian assistance, it is the bonds of common humanity and equal value that can be the motivators for recovery. But this recovery will never be equitable unless humanitarian actors at all levels are able to show leadership in abandoning their ‘tick lists of vulnerability’ and start supporting people to learn from those who are marginalised and excluded, as well as from the communities in which they live.

This is the realignment of knowledge–power dynamics mentioned at the start of this paper. It requires leaders to show humility and courage, and to acknowledge that members of communities are best placed to help humanitarians learn about who is being left out. It

also requires flexibility—the subject of a two-year workstream implemented by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP)—and a willingness to accept that attaining the SDGs, the Agenda for Humanity and all the other international initiatives is both complicated and complex work. Humanitarian responses are complicated in that they are like building a rocket ship with lots of different parts that need to be brought together in a particular way in order for the ship to be able to lift off. But they are also complex, which is another matter entirely. Complex situations are like bringing up children. No matter how many times you have done it before, each new situation is different and requires constant learning and adjustment as you go along, because unanticipated challenges and opportunities will keep emerging (Fletcher 2019; Funnell and Rogers 2011; Glouberman and Zimmerman 2002). These challenges and opportunities will be highly context dependent and will require much deeper thinking about the social, political and systemic (re)production of intersecting inequities that permeate our societies, both during and outside of humanitarian crises. Virtue signalling by adding to the ever-growing list of ‘vulnerable’ people is not good enough.

Without such shifts to what would be more a developmental leadership model (Lyne de Vere 2009), the author sees little hope of real change. As noted in the *Agenda for Humanity Synthesis Report 2018*:

The lack of time and resources invested in doing things differently, and the reluctance to adapt entrenched systems, processes and attitudes, mean that, for the most part, progress has been limited to what can be achieved within existing humanitarian structures. Changes that require rethinking the established way of doing things, including those that call for the inclusion of a more diverse set of actors in decision-making, have made less headway. (OCHA 2018, p. 6)

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Appendix: A case study of complexity By Gillian Fletcher

In Myanmar, where I have worked as a consultant for nearly 20 years, issues of ethnic identity are both central to issues of inequity and impossible to pin down in any categorical form.

Yes, on paper there are 135 ethnic groups recognised by the Government (not including Rohingya), and these are grouped into eight “major racial groups”.¹ However, as Cheesman (2017) has noted, it is not known how the number ‘135’ became official, or the data on which it is based.

Historic and deep fault lines lie underneath this state-accepted typology. For example, the Kachin (one of the eight identified groups) “encompass a number of ethnic groups speaking almost a dozen distinct languages”. Kachin people from the Jingpho/Jingphaw groups consider themselves to be ‘pure’ Kachin, while many of those who belong to different language groups do not even identify as Kachin; they are Lisu, Maru, Lashu and so on.

Most people considered to belong to this ‘racial group’ are Christian, but a minority follow animism or Buddhism. Despite being in the minority, Buddhist Kachin were given preferential access to education during the decades of military rule. Minority Rights Group International has received reports of:

... community members being subjected to conversion activities and discriminatory treatment by authorities because of their religion, such as rewards if they convert to Buddhism or exemption from forced labour, lower prices for basic foodstuffs such as rice and greater educational opportunities.²

Each of Myanmar’s ‘racial groups’—including the majority group, Bamar—has similar layers of complexity, deepened yet further by dominant religious and cultural norms used to justify marginalisation and exclusion on the basis of sex (with deeper layers of discrimination for women who are considered to be lower on other hierarchies, such as sexuality), disability, poverty, age, and more.

Then there is the complexity of who holds formal or informal power in each site. Long-standing systems of control include heads of ten households, heads of 100 households, official village leaders and unofficial village leaders (both of whom may be aligned with a particular ethnic armed group or religious group), political parties, and a wide array of local civil society organisations (CSOs). These range from small village-based organisations that exist to cover funeral costs

to organisations that are part of an informal national network of rights-based, equity-focused CSOs. Then there is the Buddhist nationalist movement Ma Ba Tha, known in English as the Patriotic Association of Myanmar, which is closely linked to the Myanmar military and is vehemently anti-Muslim. Ma Ba Tha has contributed hugely to marginalisation and exclusion experienced by Muslim people across Myanmar; the movement was also behind what are known as the ‘race and religion’ laws, which abused women’s rights in pursuit of Buddhist nationalism.³

This plays out across the country on a day-by-day basis, in ways that would be mostly invisible to anyone not actively involved. Bamar staff tell me it has taken them years to win a level of trust when working in minority ethnic areas; younger female managers have spoken of being subtly disregarded by older men, as well as of undermining themselves because they have internalised their ‘place’ on the hierarchies of age and sex; and, in a particularly development-specific hierarchy, highly skilled national staff who do not speak English (despite, perhaps, speaking two or three other languages) complain of being passed over again and again for well-paid jobs in international non-government organisations (INGOs) or with donors and international organisations.

These complexities cannot be reduced to tick lists of ‘categories’ of people, nor can they be understood or negotiated without paying careful attention to what is happening on the ground.



Religion is one of many sites of inequity in Myanmar.
Photo: Gillian Fletcher

1 Myanmar National Portal, <https://www.myanmar.gov.mm/en/web/guest/people-society>

2 Minority Rights Group International, ‘Kachin’, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/kachin/>

3 The four laws are the Monogamy Law; Religious Conversion Law; Interfaith Marriage Law; and the Population Control Law; <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/burma-four-race-and-religion-protection-laws-adopted/>

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