

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

How to co-produce transdisciplinary and plural knowledge to solve complex humanitarian problems? An illustration in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Delving deeper, Camille Maubert and Jeremy Allouche shine a light on what the tensions and dilemmas might be. In addition to those inherent to the conflict of cultures between aid actors and researchers, there are the unequal considerations and conditions that researchers from the Global South and North face. The complex crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo provides a unique anchor to the authors' analysis.

The humanitarian and protracted crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the most enduring and complex of the Great Lakes region, intertwining issues of governance, health and food security emergencies, insurgencies, natural resources issues and land conflicts. Humanitarians and researchers (both academic and non-academic¹) have been working for decades to understand the causes and find holistic and multisectoral solutions to these problems. However, in Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu, where most humanitarians are located, the limitations of the humanitarian and research sectors have become very clear as the impact and relevance of the multi-million-dollar humanitarian industry remains minimal at the same time as the applicability of academic studies is also being questioned. Both criticisms tie back to the weakness (or lack) of partnerships between humanitarians and researchers on the one hand and the difficult collaboration amongst Global North and Congolese practitioners and researchers on the other.

In this article, we explore the challenges to developing humanitarian and research partnerships through the following questions: What are some of the normative and systemic barriers to the coproduction of knowledge and egalitarian partnerships within humanitarian research projects? And how does the enduring epistemological dominance of the Global North, that is, the ascendancy it holds over other regions as a source and especially vector of mainstream ideas and intellectual standards, impact international collaborative projects? Our contention is that complex crises require solutions based on plural knowledge and stronger transdisciplinary partnerships. Transdisciplinarity aims to achieve a high level of “interaction between academics and practitioners in order to promote a mutual learning process between them”². In the context of humanitarian work, contributions across disciplines and societal stakeholders are key to producing socially robust knowledge and find creative and collaborative ways of problem-solving³. As a result, when reflecting on the collaboration between researchers and humanitarians of the Global North and the Global South, we need to look beyond what each can bring to the other and look at the institutional and epistemological inequalities that these partnerships reveal (and contribute to).

¹ Research does not happen only in universities but is undertaken by a host of other entities, including non-governmental organisations, charities, humanitarian organisations, think tanks, consultancies, research-intensive institutions and others.

² Gerald Steiner and Alfred Posch, “Higher education for sustainability by means of transdisciplinary case studies: an innovative approach for solving complex, real-world problems”, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 14/9, 2006, p.877-890.

³ Basarab Nicolescu, “The transdisciplinary evolution of the university condition for sustainable development”, paper presented at the *International Congress of the International Association of Universities*, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 12-14 November 1997.

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We argue that humanitarian and research relations need to change from functional and ad hoc collaborations to more equitable partnerships. By this, we mean that partners across disciplinary divides and North/South divide should equally participate and have access to decision-making, funding, publications, institutional strengthening and visibility within humanitarian research projects. Here, we look at how more egalitarian partnerships may be implemented across disciplines and between “international” and “local” actors within the humanitarian knowledge production chain. Our contribution is rooted in our own reflexive insight, as we work across the fields of humanitarian research and practice. It is complemented by interviews with Congolese and international practitioners working in humanitarian research for international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and consultancies in the DRC.

Working across disciplines

Partnerships between humanitarian practice and research are, in theory, acknowledged as an efficient way to produce transdisciplinary knowledge to solve complex humanitarian problems. However, in practice, the boundaries between these two worlds endure and their collaboration remains largely functional. Most respondents commented that while many organisations did start to include research activities in their strategies, these are restricted within the bounds of operational projects. According to a Congolese director of a research consultancy:

“Humanitarians do research related to already existing projects, so our researchers enter a process already in place and therefore have little leeway to provide guidance as their hands are tied by monitoring and evaluation frameworks. They don’t do in-depth studies. Research is not used for innovation but to confirm a project.”

Respondents noted that humanitarians give prominence to professional experience and are reluctant to run brand-new studies. In humanitarian settings, decision makers have limited time and resources and as a result tend to gather evidence from already existing literature and combine it with information on the local context to inform their choice.

There was a sense that research was mainly used for instrumental purposes, often as part of a box-ticking exercise to grant legitimacy to decisions and orientations that had already been taken. One international practitioner working in a large international organisation remarked how “some organisations are very operational and base their decisions on people’s experience and knowledge of the context and experiences of what they did in other places. There is a certain humanitarian arrogance to it”. The researchers we talked with emphasised the fact that even organisations who claim to be “research-based” are often limiting their “research” to the bare minimum necessary to get projects approved by donors, emphasising short-term results over long-term research. The very definition of “research” and the standards it must follow are not understood in the same way by humanitarians and academic researchers. For the former, research is mainly an evaluation exercise involving the assessment of activities and observations against work plans for the purpose of making decisions. For the latter, research engages critically with a situation beyond the remits of a particular project. It is a process engaged in for learning purposes, with a view to scale up findings and also ideally create space for the humanitarian side to question its practices. These are two different worlds with different priorities. Interviewees noted how these various understandings fuelled a mutual mistrust between humanitarians and researchers. For instance, one of our interviewees declared that “what is acceptable for operational research is not necessarily at the same standards as academic research due to the need to be quick”.

Generally, research is used mainly to document individual humanitarian activities rather than create more generalised knowledge about the situation. The confidential nature of many humanitarian consultancy reports – mostly for internal publications – also means that it is difficult to create bridges with the researcher community. One interesting initiative nonetheless was the Social Science Analytics unit attached to UNICEF, which aims to collect data across disciplines and to produce generalisable and actionable data. Their “integrated analytics approach” does not only produce and use their own data but also collects data from other actors from their existing and ongoing research. This provides for a

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more reliable evidence base and also allows them to co-develop solutions with different actors, combining programmatic data and more qualitative research done by NGOs. The approach is aimed at improving the reliability of data and the involvement of actors who will actually use the data collected.

The collection of transdisciplinary data extends beyond involving multiple humanitarian and research sources. Many interviewees remarked that, when engaging with research, humanitarians still largely favour some disciplines and methodologies over others. In particular, humanitarian knowledge production tends to privilege quantitative data over qualitative research. One reason for that is rooted in the practical nature of humanitarian work and the need for fast actionable information. As a result, research involves large samples of participants which can be taken as representative of their community with the goal of generalising findings – often without questioning whose views and needs are taken as representative of the broader category of “local people” or “beneficiaries”.

Humanitarian experts’ local knowledge looks for the universal rather than the particular and context-specific. Qualitative and experiential knowledge was only considered in very few cases and only to inform broader patterns and conclusions, rather than speaking to the diversity and intersectionality in conflict experience, which may provide new, additional insights. Similarly, concepts and labels used to categorise populations in humanitarian statistical research – like “vulnerable”, “victim” or “poor” – are rarely questioned. As explained by respondents in NGOs and research consultancies, the criteria used to attribute these labels to populations are often defined by teams in the Global North without confronting them to the local reality in DRC. For instance, in many humanitarian gender protection programs, women are seen above all as victims or potential victims of sexual violence but rarely as a victim of poverty, a head of family, an entrepreneur or even a perpetrator of violence herself. This lack of understanding of the complexities of local realities not only limits the types of service she has access to but also reinforces narratives of the Congolese woman as a forever victim (of the Congolese man). As a result, the imposition of outside epistemology and tools fails to account for local experiences and subjectivities and reproduces certain discourses and biases about DRC, thus perpetuating social inequalities.

What comes out clearly from our interviews with practitioners and researchers is the general suspicion the humanitarian sector has not so much of research itself but of certain academic traditions. Although it embraces technical disciplines like nutrition, medical sciences or monitoring and evaluation, it is suspicious of other forms of evidence. As one Congolese research coordinator for an international agency shared:

“People love numbers and statistics because they impress. So when we present qualitative research there are always questions of sampling and people doubt the results. [...] More critical disciplines such as anthropology or political science question the results of quantitative research and make us realise the weaknesses of humanitarian work. That’s why we prefer numbers.”

While successful interactions between academics and humanitarian practitioners do exist, they remain partial and selective. Traditions of research that engage with the humanitarian work on its own terms are tolerated, but those who look too close into its paradoxes and institutions are shunned. This is apparent in many respondents’ observation that in-depth, longitudinal, independent studies looking critically at the impact, sustainability or drawbacks of humanitarian work rarely, if ever, receive funding. Talking about initiating research on the misuse of language and its disastrous impact on the Ebola response, one international field coordinator said: “[it’s] always well received as a great idea but there is never any funding for it.”

Partnerships between the “international” and the “local”

At the centre of discussions about building better humanitarian and research partnerships is the localisation agenda and the issues raised by collaborations between actors of the Global North and

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the Global South⁴. The much-quoted figure that only 0.2% of humanitarian funds were allocated to local actors (Global Humanitarian Assistance Report) was a rallying point for the humanitarian sector to address power imbalances and the marginalisation of local actors in the industry. Calls for a greater inclusion of local actors have since gained momentum in the wake of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit through initiatives such as the Grand Bargain or the Charter4Change. Nonetheless, despite these commitments, the implementation of the localisation agenda has been slow and superficial⁵.

Interviews with humanitarian actors in Goma reveal that the slowness to implement this agenda is deeply rooted in structural issues. A deep sense of distrust between internationals and locals is engrained in the humanitarian culture. As one interviewee told us, there is a belief that for humanitarian research to be carried out properly, it is necessary “to send an expat, to make sure things go well – control finances, check the paperwork – otherwise nothing happens and there’s always the risk of corruption”. Representatives of local consultancies deplored how difficult it is to breach the glass ceiling and stereotypes about Congolese researchers’ capacities:

“It is also very hard for organisations like ours to be able to establish its reputation with aid workers because of mistrust. Humanitarian actors tend to think that they are above the Congolese in all aspects (financial, technical, lobbying) and this is what stifles local initiatives. Expats have the advantage of being in easier contact with NGOs, donors etc. to access connections, contracts... and this penalises the locals.”

The lack of trust between “international” and “local” actors is rooted in the way these two groups are defined in opposition to each other and the perceptions that are engrained in it. This binary construction rests on stereotypes that romanticise or vilify local actors – both of which ultimately perpetuate unfair and unequal relations. On the one hand, locals are often described as lacking something through a view which construes them as “static, rural, traditional, incapable and waiting to be ‘civilised, developed, monetised and properly governed’”⁶. This perpetuates power differentials, notably through the idea that locals need capacity-building, which is to be provided by international experts. Stereotypes of internationals as holders of excellence raise questions about whose knowledge counts and who decides what kind of, and whose, capacity needs to be strengthened in which ways. Our interviewees also deplored how the gates to Western standards and knowledge remain jealously guarded by international actors. A Congolese research consultant deplored that “local universities teach outdated methods, so local researchers don’t always enter the job market with the right skills and tools. They learn on the job but struggle to access formal training”, a feeling that was echoed by another practitioner who attributes this problem to the State’s lack of interest in research and the resulting lack of scholarships and financial support for students to build their capacities. While some specific technical training might be provided to local research teams in the context of commissioned projects, these remain very limited and international partners (NGOs and universities) are reluctant to support Congolese applications to more formal training schemes. This severely limits the ability of local actors to build their own skills and institutional capacities.

When it comes to subcontracting humanitarian research projects to local organisations, understandings of capacity need to be rethought and new modes of inclusive partnerships developed.

On the other hand, localisation relies in part on a romanticised stereotype of local actors as inherently authentic, legitimate and knowledgeable within their (broadly defined) local context. Though it is necessary to recognise the expertise of local actors, our research in Goma shows that the simplified understanding of what “the local” is and who “the locals” are can create a problematic backlash on the localisation agenda. The term “locals” is used to indistinctively designate Congolese people, whether they are humanitarian actors, local elite, or affected people, thus obscuring a wide diversity of profiles and interests. As Barbelet notes, however, local staff often shift between working for international and

⁴ Maria Al-Abdeh and Champa Patel, “‘Localising’ humanitarian action: reflections on delivering women’s rights-based and feminist services in an ongoing crisis”, *Gender & Development*, 27/2, 28 June 2019, p.237-252; Kristina Ropestorff, “A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action”, *Third World Quarterly*, 41/2, 11 July 2019, p.284-301.

⁵ Kristina Ropestorff, “A call for critical reflection...”, art. cit.

⁶ Kristina Ropestorff, “A call for critical reflection...”, art. cit., p. 8.

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national or local organisations, blurring the lines between the local and the international⁷. In the context of humanitarian research, the oversimplified understanding of “the local” poses questions about whose understanding of the situation and needs does – and should – guide humanitarian action. The lack of attention paid by many organisations about the background and agendas of the locals they hire or interact with negatively impacts the quality of humanitarian work. This is particularly apparent when it comes to language. According to interviewees involved in research and data management for NGOs, many organisations working in Eastern DRC would categorise Lingala-speaking people from Kinshasa (2,400 km away) as locals and hire them as local experts, even when they do not speak Swahili and have little understanding of the local context. One interviewee explained that the term “locals” may even be used to designate staff from other francophone African countries. As a result, being “local” can become a shorthand for nationality or even race, meaning that the individual experiences of non-white or non-expat workers are invisibilised. Such a conceptualisation of the local also fails to capture the complex translocal and transcultural relationships of humanitarian actors within the humanitarian arena.

Language also plays an important role in perpetuating hierarchies between local, national and international actors. Interviewees noted that localisation did not provide an opportunity for local workers who master the main languages in Eastern Congo (French and Swahili) to take up decision-making roles and that in many humanitarian organisations the top-level staff only speaks English: “[During the Ebola response] all the exchanges in the UN response Communication Working Group were in English (...) so no local staff attended these meetings, further excluding them. Side meetings were carried out in French, but then only few expats bothered to come.”

The prevalence of English as a working language in a francophone and Swahili-speaking country was a major issue as mastery of English is often an unspoken prerequisite for building partnerships. Local researchers who speak several local languages are excluded from research design meetings as well as the humanitarian platforms where results are disseminated because of their “lack” of English, thus losing major opportunities for networking and fundraising. Beyond language itself, the technical jargon used by internationals and practitioners also ostracises people from “the system”. As the aid industry became more complex over the years, international organisations use an increasing number of standards (Sphere, Core Humanitarian Standards), guidelines and processes (cluster mechanisms, response cycles and Humanitarian Response Plans, etc.) in order to respond to humanitarian situations in a coherent manner. As a result, in order to gain legitimacy in the humanitarian field, it is essential “to speak in the northern way”, that is, to use the jargon and standards from the Global North.

The structural inequalities between international and local workers are rooted in the value placed on technical capacity and expertise. As local researchers and practitioners strive to learn the ways and language of international actors, they are trained to fit into an outside paradigm. Within the localisation agenda, better partnerships between researchers and practitioners of the Global North and those of the Global South require a critical approach to dominant knowledge. This kind of critical engagement would allow us to move beyond the current debate with its strong focus on effectiveness of partnerships to more fundamental analyses of power imbalances and exclusionary practices that underpin the very issues the localisation agenda tries to redress. It draws attention to the question of who claims to represent the local, who defines who the local is and how this may lead to the marginalisation of certain actors in the humanitarian arena. As called for by Ndlovu-Gatsheni, there is a need to emphasise more epistemological standpoints instead, where the consciousness of the people matters more than where they are located⁸.

Towards equitable partnerships for the coproduction of humanitarian knowledge

As humanitarian crises are becoming more and more complex and as more funding bodies encourage

⁷ Veronique Barbelet, *As local as possible, as international as necessary: understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action, Overseas Development Institute*, 2018, [https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/As local as possible as international as necessary understanding capacity and co mp.pdf](https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/As%20local%20as%20possible%20as%20international%20as%20necessary%20understanding%20capacity%20and%20co%20mp.pdf)

⁸ Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality as the future of Africa”, *History Compass*, 13/10, 2015, p.485-496.

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cross-sectoral partnerships in the wake of the Grand Bargain, it is imperative to examine more systematically the issues embedded in these collaborations. Our paper highlighted the structural and epistemological barriers which prevent the flourishing of truly equitable partnerships between humanitarian and academic disciplines as well as between North and South actors. These barriers often remain invisible due to the lack of reflexivity which persists in the humanitarian industry and, according to an international humanitarian practitioner, its reluctance to have a “meaningful conversation on the nature of localisation and globalisation across the divide”. We pointed out the need to open up space to critically engage with issues of bias and power both across disciplines and among the various actors active in the humanitarian knowledge production chain. Despite efforts to integrate research into humanitarian work and to localise this process, the fostering of egalitarian partnerships within transdisciplinary and multicultural teams requires more systematic thinking. We stressed how many partnerships are still limited to technical and partial collaboration characterised by uneven global intellectual division of labour rather than the result of joint and equitable work. For humanitarian-research partnerships across the North-South divide to be more equitable, we argue that there is a need to challenge the conventional divisions between research and action, between scientific knowledge and popular knowledge, between humanitarian work and academia, and between North and South. The notion of coproduction seeks to deconstruct and disrupt these hierarchies to facilitate a more equitable distribution of power among stakeholders. It also emphasises the centrality of plurality, going beyond binary divisions and incorporating non-technical types of knowledge and actor. Genuine humanitarian and research partnerships should aim to go beyond mutual understanding and towards coproduction of knowledge as the only way to create the plural knowledge necessary to solve an ever-complex crisis.

Biographies

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