Humanitarian innovation, humanitarian renewal?

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik

The continued evolution of the humanitarian innovation concept needs a critical engagement with how this agenda interacts with previous and contemporary attempts to improve humanitarian action.

Accountability and transparency have been central to discussions of humanitarian action over the past two decades. Yet these issues appear generally to be given scant attention in the discourse around humanitarian innovation. The humanitarian innovation agenda is becoming a self-contained field with its own discourse and its own set of experts, institutions and projects – and even a definitive founding moment, namely 2009, when the ALNAP study on innovation in humanitarian action was published.[1] While attempts to develop a critical humanitarian innovation discourse have borrowed extensively from critical discussions on innovation in development studies, humanitarianism is not development done in a hurry but has its own distinct challenges, objectives and methodologies.

I will focus here on concrete material innovations, most commonly referred to as 'humanitarian technology'. Discussions on such humanitarian innovations regularly acknowledge the need to avoid both fetishising novelty in itself and attributing inherently transformative qualities to technology rather than seeing how technology may fit into and build upon refugees' existing resources.

Renewing humanitarianism

While it is obvious that internal and external reflections on a humanitarian industry and a

humanitarian ethos in need of improvement are much older pursuits, I will start – as most scholars in humanitarian studies do today – with the mid-1990s and the 'Goma-moment'. To recover from the moral and operational failures of the response to the Rwanda genocide and the ensuing crisis in the Great Lakes region of Africa, humanitarianism turned to human rights based approaches (HRBA) to become more ethical, to move from charitable action to social contract. Yet HRBA always suffered from an intrinsic lack of clarity of meaning as well as the problem of states being the obliged parties under international human rights, a particular problem in the context of displacement, whether internal or across borders.

A decade or so later, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and in the face of accusations about poor governance, insufficient coordination, incompetence and waste, the humanitarian enterprise embarked on institutional reform to become better. Responses were to be maximised through Humanitarian Coordinators, funding was to become more efficient through Central Emergency Response Funds and, most importantly in the everyday life of humanitarian practitioners, the Cluster approach allocated areas of responsibility to the largest humanitarian actors.

The need for greater accountability and transparency were drivers for both HRBA (with its moral intricacies) and humanitarian reform (with its bureaucratic complexities). What is now happening with accountability and transparency within the technological-innovation-as-renewal paradigm?

If Rwanda and the Indian Ocean tsunami were the events ushering in HRBA and humanitarian reform, Haiti was the much heralded game-changer for technology whose use there (despite many practical problems and malfunctioning solutions) is generally assessed as positive.[2] In the years since, a host of new technology actors, initiatives, technical platforms and methodologies has emerged. New communications technology, biometrics, cash cards, drones and 3D printing have all captured the humanitarian imagination.

Thinking about problems and difficulties is often framed in terms of finding technical solutions, obtaining sufficient funding to move from pilot phases to scale, etc. However, as ideas about progress and inevitability dominate the field, the technology is seen not as something we use to get closer to a better humanitarianism but something which, once deployed, is itself a better, more accountable and transparent humanitarianism.

So institutionalised have transparency and accountability become that they have now vanished off the critical radar and become part of the taken-for-granted discursive and institutional framework. Accountability and transparency are assumed to be automatically produced simply by the act of adopting and deploying new technology. (Interestingly, the third tenet usually listed with accountability and transparency, efficiency, is also a basic assumption of this agenda.)

Accountability, participation and transparency

A 2013 report published by UN OCHA, *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*, argues that "everyone agrees that technology has changed how people interact and how power is distributed".[3] While technology has undoubtedly altered human interaction, an assumption that proliferating innovative humanitarian technology unveils power, redistributes power or empowers needs to be subjected to scrutiny.

The classic issues in humanitarian accountability – to whom it is owed and by whom, how it can be achieved and, most crucially, what would count as substantively meaningful accountability – remain acutely difficult to answer. These issues also remain political issues which cannot be solved only with new technical solutions emphasising functionality and affordability; we cannot innovate ourselves out of the accountability problem, in the same way as technology

cannot be seen as an empty shell waiting to be filled with (humanitarian) meaning.

This speaks particularly to the quest for participation of those in need of humanitarian protection and assistance, "helping people find innovative ways to help themselves". In practice, we know that humanitarians arrive late in the field – they are not (at least not outside their own communications) the first responders. Affected individuals, their neighbours and communities are. Yet we should be concerned if the engagement with technological innovation also becomes a way of pushing the resilience agenda further in the direction of making those in need more responsible than well-paid humanitarian actors for providing humanitarian aid.

The arrival of the private sector as fully respectable partners in humanitarian action is in principle a necessary and desirable development. Nevertheless, while expressing distaste for the involvement of the private sector in humanitarian response is passé, talk of the importance of local markets and of 'local innovation', 'indigenous innovation' or 'bottom-up innovation' inevitable begs the questions: is the private sector one of the local participants as well as those in humanitarian need, and what do they want out of the partnership?

The current drive towards open data – and the belief in the emancipatory potential of open data access – means that transparency is a highly relevant theme on the humanitarian innovation agenda. Yet, on a pragmatic level, in an avalanche of information, it is difficult to see what is **not** there, particularly for individuals in crisis with limited access to information technology or with limited (computer) literacy.

Accountability and transparency thus seem to be missing in the implementation of the humanitarian innovation agenda, although innovation should be a means to enhance these objectives (among others) to produce a better humanitarianism.

Conclusions

First, we must beware of the assumption of automatic progress. We may be able to innovate ourselves out of a few traditional challenges and difficulties but most will remain, and additionally there will be new challenges resulting from the new technology.

Second, innovation looked at as a process appears suspiciously like the reforms of yesteryear. What, for example, is the difference between 'bottom-up innovation' and the 'local knowledge' valued in previous efforts to ensure participation? And are the paradigm shifts of innovation really much different from the moral improvement agenda of approaches such as the human-rights-based humanitarian aid?

Third, the increasingly self-referential humanitarian innovation discourse itself warrants scrutiny. With almost no talk of justice, social transformation or redistribution of power, we are left with a humanitarianism where inclusion is about access to markets, and empowerment is about making beneficiaries more self-reliant and about putting the label 'humanitarian' onto the customer concept in innovation theory.

Kristin Bergtora Sandvik *bergtora@prio.no* is Senior Researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo *www.prio.org* and Director of the Norwegian Centre for Humanitarian Studies. *www.humanitarianstudies.no*

1. www.alnap.org/resource/9207

2. See IFRC *World Disasters Report 2013* on Technology and Humanitarian Innovation. www.ifrc.org/publications-and-reports/world-disasters-report/world-disasters-report-2013/

3. www.unocha.org/hina

4. www.humanitarianstudies.no/2014/06/17/rcn-aideffect-programme-funds-two-new-prio-projects/

5. www.oxhip.org/2014/07/hip2014/