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A Blueprint For Professionalizing Humanitarian Assistance

ABSTRACT International humanitarian response to crises employs 210,000 people and accounts for nearly $15 billion in spending globally each year. Most action is carried out by not-for-profit organizations working with United Nations (UN) agencies, military organizations, and commercial entities. UN agencies employ many technical experts, often retaining them for five or more years. As yet there is no international professional apparatus to promote the quality and integrity of this workforce. This paper reports on research exploring the case for professionalizing humanitarian action through an international professional association, the development of core competencies, and the creation of a universal certification system for aid workers.

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Humanitarian aid used to mean the provision of lifesaving material assistance—and, where possible, protection from violence—to civilian populations caught up in the nightmare of war and insurgency. It also typically encompassed assistance to help the affected populations rebuild. The reality today is that emergency interventions following conflict or natural disasters often fail to put people back on the path of development, placing them instead in a holding pattern.

Humanitarian aid now is predominantly long term, with assistance for the same people in the same countries, year after year. In many cases, the populations that require aid live in failed states or regions that serve as potential sources of terrorism. Increasingly complex and politicized contexts have created a need for humanitarian workers who can display a wide range of skills that are normally associated with an independent profession. This paper reports on a study carried out in 2009 and 2010 to explore the possible creation of a profession of humanitarian aid worker and on subsequent work to develop an accepted model for the professionalization of this workforce worldwide.

Background

GROWTH OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE
Humanitarian assistance is a growth business. Official funding for such assistance—flowing from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to foreign governments, the United Nations (UN), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement—has steadily increased from $6.5 billion in 2000 to $14.9 billion in 2008. That sum accounts for 10 percent of total overseas development assistance. In addition, the general public contributed $3.1 billion in humanitarian aid in 2008.[1] Although aid agencies keep good data on the sources of their funds, they lack access to comparable data on the numbers of their beneficiaries.

The number of people employed in the humanitarian assistance field has increased tremendously. Today 210,000 people worldwide are employed in humanitarian aid programs,[2] with a growth rate of about 6 percent a year. Although in the past most of these workers came from the northern hemisphere, today they come from all over the globe. In an online survey for the study discussed here, more than 22 percent

of respondents said that they were from Africa and Asia.[3]

Once arguably a sideshow to events around the world, humanitarian assistance is now a substantial economic and political factor in some of the poorest countries in the world. Aid workers provide life-sustaining assistance to some of the most at-risk populations.

Aid workers operate through organizations that have grown in size and complexity to match the increase in the populations served. The big aid agencies of today are transnational, multi-million- or even multibillion-dollar, not-for-profit corporations. Inevitably in such a growth market, a plethora of new actors has emerged, including small local NGOs; mega-churches and mega-mosques, each of which provides millions of dollars of assistance; and military operations that have blurred the line between campaigns for civilians' hearts and minds and traditional humanitarian aid.

Thus, today's aid workers must operate in a far more complex and more challenging environment, over far longer periods of time, than their predecessors did. In a recent survey, aid workers said that the biggest challenge to humanitarian action was "poorly coordinated response efforts and lack of effective leadership."[4]

In a recent article, Frederick Burkle wrote: "Those who define themselves as humanitarian professionals have doubled from a decade ago to almost 200,000 today. They are eager and well traveled. But like us all, they do not know what they don't know. Much of the education and training remains outdated. The humanitarian community, policy wonks, and the military have entered the 21st century unprepared to protect the urban public health or handle emergencies of scarcity."[5(p197)]

OTHER DOMAINS The domain of humanitarian assistance overlaps with others, including disaster medicine, emergency preparedness, prolonged postconflict interventions, and public health emergencies. Initiatives to professionalize and identify the intellectual base of all of these domains are surfacing in Europe and the United States. These efforts began after a series of widely publicized disaster responses—to the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005, and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti—that raised serious questions about the effectiveness, cost, coordination, and impact of such responses.

These questions were not new. A number of other initiatives began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, aimed at improving the quality and reliability of humanitarian assistance. These initiatives represented the first steps in the professionalization of the humanitarian aid system.

They focused on strengthening three different aspects of the aid business: institutional capacity to deliver services; governance, management structures, systems, and policies; and professional skills and competencies of staff.

Progress has been made on the first two aspects. One of the earliest initiatives, the Code of Conduct for NGOs,[6] focused on individual aid workers rather than the institutions that employed them. Aid agencies quickly adopted the code as a symbol of their competence. Four later initiatives arose from within the aid community and focused on improving the quality of humanitarian work. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP),[7] the Sphere Project,[8] People in Aid,[9] and the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP International)[10] all promote notions of professionalism but do so through the agency of the employing institution.

THE MEANING OF PROFESSIONALISM If humanitarian aid workers are being urged to be more professional, what does this actually mean?

Donald Schön[11] observes that professionals are required to do more than simply apply their specialist knowledge unthinkingly to their practice. The true professional has to think like a professional. Schön describes what he calls the reflective practitioner as somebody capable of thinking on his or her feet, essentially developing a new understanding in response to every professional situation.

Julia Evetts argues that professionalism is an ideal that transcends national boundaries: "The expansion of the service sector and knowledge work in the developed world and the growth or reemergence of professions in both developing and transitional societies, indicate the appeal of the concept of 'professionalism' as well as the strength and persistence of 'professions' as an occupational form."[12(p399)]

Richard Cruess and colleagues suggest that professional associations are vital to professionalism. Associations, in their view, have a dual role: to ensure standards within the profession and to "discipline unprofessional and incompetent behavior."[13(p156)]

Also crucial to the notion of professionalization is the certification of a person's skills, knowledge, and abilities. According to the Institute for Credentialing Excellence, "The certification of specialized skill-sets affirms a knowledge and experience base for practitioners in a particular field, their employers, and the public at large. Certification represents a declaration of a particular individual's professional competence."[14] The ability of a professional association to certify its members is a vital part of guaranteeing their quality and competence.

There is reluctance within the humanitarian sector to have a series of standards or overarching requirements.

Professional certification of individuals occurs through three general routes: a portfolio, or the collection of someone's experiences and work; competency, proven through either examination or documented experience; and curriculum, or passing courses.

Challenges

Given the previous background, the challenges now are as follows. Can a professional association of humanitarian aid workers be created to safeguard the profession's integrity? Could such an association safeguard the profession's integrity, through certification of its membership? Could it do so by using processes that are recognized by appropriate credentialing bodies, whose training and education could be obtained internationally and in an affordable manner?

With no such professional body yet in existence, individual organizations have built their own competency frameworks and are providing in-house training, often in collaboration with academic institutions. The so-called scoping study described here includes a list of more than 130 short-term training opportunities and 80 master's degree programs offered worldwide. Despite the availability of all of this training, a series of obstacles exist to the creation of a coherent professional path that an individual could pursue throughout his or her career.

For example, most countries have no association or agency that could assume responsibility for overseeing the credentialing of individuals or training programs in humanitarian assistance. In addition, it would be difficult to create a series of standards or overarching requirements for such programs, given the proliferation of training for different specific purposes offered by international NGOs and universities. Another complication here is the need to make any such standards compatible with requirements such as the congressionally mandated Emergency Preparedness and Response core competencies for all US humanitarian aid after September 11, 2001. Paying for the development of standards and monitoring adherence to them is yet another obstacle.

Given the proliferation of both specific-purpose training programs embedded within international NGOs and universities, there is reluctance within the humanitarian sector to have a series of standards or overarching requirements, even if voluntarily agreed on. Funding the additional cost of development and adherence is an obvious obstacle. Harmonization with other initiatives poses additional challenges.

Individual aid workers face different barriers, including gaining access to training, paying for it, and the lack of universally accepted credentials. Workers, aid organizations, and training programs alike have no way to evaluate, use, or benefit from a coherent career path in which new experiences fit into or build on prior knowledge to create a portfolio.

Study Data And Methods

The Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance (ELRHA) project[15] commissioned two of the authors of this paper—Peter Walker and Catherine Russ—to conduct a study to provide the analysis and conceptual thinking needed to move the professionalization of the humanitarian aid workforce from discussion to action. We sought to pull together a considerable body of work and opinion from humanitarian agencies and individuals from around the world.

Specifically, we aimed to identify a set of core competencies for the humanitarian worker; propose a certification system involving a series of recognized professional qualifications; explore the potential for new organizational structures, such as a professional association for humanitarian workers; and provide a road map for achieving these three goals.

The study was carried out between October 2009 and March 2010. It employed a combination of online surveys, focus groups, individual interviews, and a literature review.

ONLINE SURVEYS We conducted two online surveys using the Survey Monkey platform.[16]

The first survey took place over eight weeks at the end of 2009 and was targeted at individual aid workers and academics. We sent a link for the online survey—available in English, French, and Spanish—to 4,500 people listed in the databases of the humanitarian research center and the humanitarian training center that employ two

of the authors (Walker and Russ).

We had a 30 percent response rate, with 1,366 people completing the survey (1,166 in English; 194 in French; and 6 in Spanish). A total of 60 percent of the respondents were aid workers (40 percent had at least five years of experience, 15 percent had two to five years, and 5 percent had less than two years); 7 percent were people hoping to do aid work, and the remaining 33 percent were from academe or research and training institutions associated with humanitarian work. We did not collect data on respondents' disciplines.

We sent a link for the second online survey to sixteen universities in North America, Europe, Africa, and Asia that we knew offered master's degree courses in humanitarian studies. Fourteen of these universities completed the survey, describing the courses they offered. (They also provided information about their students' careers, but we do not report on that information here.)

FOCUS GROUPS We conducted fourteen focus groups. Four groups were in London. Two groups each were in Islamabad and in Geneva. The remaining six groups were in Colombo, Sri Lanka; Lyon, France; Oxford, England; Washington, D.C.; Boston, Massachusetts; and New York City. At each location we sent a general invitation to the local humanitarian aid community. A total of 106 people participated in the focus groups, which included three to forty individuals each.

We chose Geneva, Washington, New York, and London because they are major centers for humanitarian agencies and donors, and the groups there were dominated by donor representatives and managers of aid agencies. Conducting focus groups in Islamabad and Colombo allowed us to talk to aid workers active in the field; those groups were divided almost equally between international and local workers. The Lyon focus group took advantage of a gathering of French aid agencies and allowed us to tap into the francophone voice. Conducting focus groups in Oxford and Boston allowed us to contact students taking courses in humanitarian studies, and students made up the majority of the focus groups there.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS Walker and Russ conducted thirty-seven individual interviews in person or by telephone, using a standard list of questions. Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. We chose interviewees who had a pivotal role in the humanitarian aid system or a track record in the field of professionalizing humanitarianism.

The group contained people who had been active in formulating global humanitarian standards such as those of the Sphere Project.[8] Also included were individuals who designed and taught humanitarian training courses, and others who were seasoned leaders of humanitarian crisis response teams with major aid agencies. In addition, we interviewed people involved in coordinating efforts to improve the delivery of food, water, shelter, and health care in major, complex emergencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW We reviewed a wide range of documents on human resource management, professionalization, and core competencies in the humanitarian sector, including published literature and agencies' internal documents. In all, we examined about ninety reports from aid agencies, aid commissions, and working groups. We also reviewed the academic literature on modern professionalism, certification, and accreditation.

Results

Key results from the first online survey are summarized in Exhibits 1 and 2.

We invited approximately seventy experts from aid agencies, donor institutions, governments of countries that had experienced crises, and academics to a meeting in London in June 2010. We presented the results and recommendations of our study, and the experts generally supported the seven core recommendations described below.

INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION Our first recommendation is to create an international professional association for humanitarian workers. In our survey of individuals, 92 percent of the respondents favored putting humanitarian action on a more professional footing (Exhibit 1). Participants in the focus groups generally supported the creation of an independent professional association for aid workers (data not shown). When given a choice of five different such organizations that could be created, more than half of the survey respondents chose an international professional association for humanitarian workers (Exhibit 1). The creation of a national professional association ranked second. Respondents preferred an international association to a national one because the humanitarian endeavor almost by definition involves the transfer of resources and workers across international borders.

An international association would promote the basic values of humanitarianism and work with its members, academics, and training institutions to devise criteria for entry, mid-career, and higher levels of certification for humanitarian workers. It would also be able to expel and remove certification from workers. An associa-

Support For Creating An International Humanitarian Aid Profession Among Survey Respondents, 2008

Question/response	Percent of respondents
Do you think that humanitarian work should be professionalized?	
Yes	91.9
No	8.1
What do you think is the main advantage of making humanitarian work more like a profession?	
The quality and consistency of services delivered by humanitarian workers will go up	52.5
It will make humanitarian workers more accountable to beneficiaries	29.7
Career paths in humanitarianism will be better defined	8.4
Humanitarian work will be more independent	7.5
Accountability to donors will be better	3.6
Which of the following categories would you like to see it being possible to obtain an internationally recognized competency certificate in?	
Master's degree	51.2
Mid-career level	27.3
Entry level	21.5
What sort of professional supporting bodies would you like to see?	
International professional association for humanitarian workers	57.0
National professional association for humanitarian workers	19.5
International humanitarian studies and research association (for academics and practitioner-researchers)	11.7
International association for employers of humanitarian workers	9.1
National associations for employers of humanitarian workers	4.0

SOURCE Authors' analysis of online survey data. **NOTE** Not all percentages equal 100 because of rounding.

tion of, for, and by individual workers, it would be independent from employers and states.

CERTIFIED TRAINING Our second recommendation is to establish certified training programs. The consensus from all of the focus groups was that a more global, standardized system of certification—including internationally recognized training programs—for humanitarian workers would greatly enhance their professionalism.

Participants envisioned four levels of certification. At the entry level, a worker would have acquired a basic understanding of the key values, skills, and knowledge areas at the heart of humanitarian action. At the project management level, a worker would have one or two years of field experience. At the country management level, a worker would have more than five years of experience. The fourth level would involve earning a master's degree in humanitarian studies.

Interestingly, many survey respondents rated the creation of more master's-level programs as the most important educational need. However, when we discussed this concept in focus groups, it quickly became clear that the master's degree is important because it is universally recognized and the only current route to international recognition. Most aid workers in the focus groups strongly supported the notion of more vocational-level training, to be available and recog-

Key Humanitarian Values, Skills, And Knowledge Areas Listed By Survey Respondents, 2008

Top 3 humanitarian values	1. Respect for victim and community 2. Independence from political, financial, religious, and other pressures 3. Accountability to beneficiaries
Top 3 skills	1. Multitasking 2. Negotiation and mediation 3. Team building
Top 3 knowledge areas	1. Needs assessment 2. Security and safety issues 3. International humanitarian law

SOURCE Authors' analysis of online survey data.

nized internationally, and at prices more in line with the compensation rates that humanitarian workers typically receive.

ROUTES TO CERTIFICATION Our third recommendation is to create standard routes to certification. The literature on certification recommends three common routes, as noted above—based on completing a curriculum, demonstrating competency through examinations or experience, and producing a portfolio to document the acquisition of competency. The participants in our focus groups regarded all three routes as appropriate and useful to the humanitarian profession.

The certification process presupposes that recognized organizations will create a list of competencies, do the training, and accredit the training institutions. It also assumes the existence of a labor market that recognizes the certificates. Some of this structure is already in place, with recognized designers and deliverers of training such as RedR[17] and Bioforce.[18]

The creation of recognized content would eventually be driven by the international professional association discussed above. But until such an association is created, the process could be driven by any one of a handful of umbrella organizations, such as the UN Inter-Agency Steering Committee (IASC)[19] or the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response, which brings together the seven largest global humanitarian nongovernmental organizations.[20]

Independent training agencies already exist in a number of countries. However, our hope is that vocational training institutions around the world would take responsibility for the agreed-on core competencies and the overall certification process, so that training would be offered locally and at prices that local people could afford. These institutions might include university public health departments, programs that already offer degrees in management, and national institutions of civil defense training.

For this to happen, there must be a process to accredit training programs. We recommend an international accreditation body that, in turn, would be accredited by an organization such as the International Association for Continuing Education and Training[21] in the United States, which accredits providers of courses, not the courses themselves. Many professional organizations around the world recognize its accreditation.

Finally, the job market in humanitarian aid is dominated by a small group of agencies. Perhaps a dozen NGOs and UN agencies provide 90 percent of humanitarian aid. These organizations have come together in the past to recognize new sets of global standards.

At this stage, it is important to note that certification should not be mandatory. Our respondents expressed no desire to move toward anything like a licensing system. Instead, their goal is to increase the quality of the aid workforce.

CORE COMPETENCIES Our fourth recommendation is to identify core competencies. Certification as a humanitarian aid professional would be based on a proven understanding and acquisition of such competencies. We derived the competencies listed below from the survey responses summarized in Exhibit 2 and expanded on in the focus groups. Survey respondents highlighted the need for competencies in skills related to working in teams, working with less-than-perfect data, and working in insecure and dangerous environments.

In terms of values, skills, and behavior, core competencies might include integrity (being ethically motivated and following the accepted principles of humanitarian action, including impartiality and independence); accountability (taking responsibility for one's actions, being accountable to and respectful of beneficiaries and their communities, being accountable for the resources one is entrusted with); empathy (demonstrating respect and concern for fellow workers, beneficiaries, and host countries); resilience (being adaptable); teamwork (being willing to learn and practice new skills to help get the job done); diversity (demonstrating awareness of cultural differences); communication (speaking, listening, and writing in a way that respects humanitarian principles and those in need of aid); and technological skill (seeking to master and use advances in technology that could improve the provision of aid).

Core knowledge areas might include understanding the structure of the humanitarian sector; having a firm grasp of international humanitarian law and refugee law; understanding basic safety and security issues; and being aware of the mandates and principles of the key humanitarian organizations.

ACCREDITED TRAINERS Our fifth recommendation is to provide accredited trainers around the world. Our discussions in the focus groups, and with institutions that already deliver certified training in public health fields, suggest that the core competencies listed above would be acquired in several ways. These would include supervised experience and training provided by accredited training institutions.

A fundamental point here is that by establishing an internationally accepted set of core competencies on which to base training, and an internationally accepted way of certifying training courses and accrediting training institu-

Concentrating on professionalism would make the provision of humanitarian aid more evidence based.

tions, the field of humanitarian training would be opened up to competent institutions worldwide. No longer would aid workers feel compelled to seek out expensive training from traditional institutions. Certified training from accredited institutions in countries such as Ethiopia, Thailand, and Venezuela would carry the same weight as that from institutions in Europe and North America.

ACADEMIC ASSOCIATION Our sixth recommendation is to support the International Humanitarian Studies Association, a recently established multinational group of academics and practitioners working in the humanitarian field.[22] In February 2009 the association held its first international conference in Groningen, the Netherlands. The meeting was attended by more than 400 people, and roughly 200 papers were presented. The association plans to have its second conference in June 2011 in the United States.

The scoping report on which we report here and the conference supported the association's work. They also provided ways in which to increase the evidence base for humanitarian action and to create a set of common core-course offerings in the plethora of humanitarian master's degree programs now springing up around the world.

RECOGNITION FROM EMPLOYERS AND STATES Our seventh recommendation is to seek recognition from employers and states. Once a professional association—of certified members who have been trained via accredited training bodies and have acquired proven experience—is created, employers, donor governments, and states that host aid workers should recognize the association and accept the certification it provides.

To translate good intentions into systematic, high-quality interventions and support, the movement to professionalize humanitarian assistance will require four critical ingredients. The first two are support and participation from the major stakeholders and, even more important, individual aid workers; and participation and meaningful input from beneficiaries. The

third is a clearly articulated strategy to achieve the worthy goal of improving the well-being of disaster victims. The fourth is sources of funding to complete the articulation of core competencies, create the mechanisms for credentialing individual workers, and enhance the capacities of international NGOs and other institutions to conduct training, both online and on site—in community- or university-based centers.

Conclusions

Over the past fifteen years, humanitarian aid has changed from a fringe activity in crisis environments to a mainstream concern. It now employs hundreds of thousands of workers, affects the lives of hundreds of millions of people, and spends billions of dollars each year.

Today the endeavor, and the individuals engaged in it, are under more pressure than ever before to put the politics of national security or the organizational imperative for cash flow first, and the humanitarian imperative of impartial aid second. All efforts so far to improve and safeguard the quality and integrity of humanitarian assistance have focused on changing the organizations that provide assistance. With the increased individual-to-individual connectivity provided by mobile phones and social networking, now it is time to focus on the individuals and their integrity, competence, and skills—in short, their professionalism.

Incorporating international accreditation and certification, this shift in focus would also open up the professional levels of humanitarian work to a far more diverse and international population. Expensive and exclusive training at institutions and agencies based in the northern hemisphere would no longer need to be the norm.

The cost of establishing a system of accredited training would not be inconsiderable, but donors, aid agencies, and individual workers would all bear a share. For instance, a professional association of aid workers would be funded out of membership fees and the licensing of its certification programs to training agencies. Training is already funded by aid agencies, albeit in a very ad hoc way. Our hope is that they would continue to fund it.

The money that aid workers now spend on acquiring their master's degrees in Europe and North America might be better spent on lower-cost, locally provided vocational certificates for various levels of accreditation. In the short term, this might reduce university revenues from master's students. However, it might also prod universities to change the ways in which they deliver their educational product, offering more dis-

tance learning and a more-appropriate mix of undergraduate and graduate-level programs.

Concentrating on professionalism would make the provision of humanitarian aid more evidence based, reflecting exactly what has happened in the field of medicine. This would strengthen the links between university-based research programs and agencies' practices, leading to more-appropriate aid and more knowledge about the true impact that aid has on at-risk populations. ∎

NOTES

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15 ELRHA: Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance [home page on the Internet]. London: ELRHA; [cited 2010 Oct 27]. Available from: http://www.elrha.org

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