

Five things I wish someone had told me when I started working for an NGO.

- Who's who in the zoo
- Know before you go
- Be safe
- Do less, be more
- Being a humanitarian is a life journey not a job title

Who's who in the zoo

Develop a database of contacts, keep it updated and relevant. Every community of professionals is small and incestuous. The NGO community is more so. You know that when you arrive on the scene there are going to be the Usual Suspects. Jim from CARE, Jane from CRS, Bob from OXFAM, and Barbara from MSF. Next year, next disaster, it's Barbara from CARE, Jim from CARTAS, Jane from World Vision and Bob from OXFAM. (Someone had to stay in their job one year...)

Unlike an office job where you might assess your worth by the size of your cubicle, distance from the boss or view from the window, career development in the humanitarian field is measured by your ability to work with an ever-expanding circle of colleagues within increasingly difficult and complex situations. So you've learned how to share new agricultural techniques with local farmers. Can you accomplish those goals in an area full of unmapped mines? Is the program still effective where there is civil strife? Will the entry of foreign troops into the region derail your program? No?

In the development world, you advance by being able to accomplish more with fewer resources. Your colleagues will help provide the expertise you don't have. Knowing how to match your limitations and weaknesses with other people's strengths and abilities will allow assistance to be effective through increasingly dynamic and complicated environments. Improvise – Adapt – Overcome.

Know before you go

Study the economic underpinnings and political ramifications, as well as the cultural and social histories surrounding each operation. Socio-economic imbalances do not happen overnight, nor are their roots completely unreasonable. As a disaster responder or development specialist, it helps to understand the myths, traditions, histories and logic behind why "This is the way we've always done it."

Simple things like ignoring the elders, disrespecting the females, or circumventing traditional power structures can retard or derail the most well-intentioned program. It's said that the art of diplomacy is letting other people have it your way. Thus the key for a Greek is not to promote Zeus, Hera, and Ares to the Romans, but to advance collaboration by discussing Jupiter, Juno and Mars. If you're going to work in Afghanistan, Iraq or Sudan, you might want to study the roots behind concepts like zakat, sadaqah and futtuwa or perhaps the nuances between jihad akbar and jihad asghar. Knowing the local terms will reduce hours of discussion over whether it's aab, mizu, eau, voda, agua, or Wasser and allow work to begin providing 15L./person/day to all concerned.

Be safe

One of the first things they teach you in lifeguard school is: don't drown trying to save someone else. Army Ranger School instructs students "don't ever take a chance you don't have to" or, in dysphemistic terms, "don't get yourself killed killing someone else." A harrowing food delivery to a besieged refugee enclave may be the highlight of your career and heralded on CNN as a mission of epic courageousness decorated with strokes of genius, but will do little to change the long-term overall conditions. Heroic adventures are nothing more than lucky escapes from poor planning.

The inequalities of society have roots that are decades, generations, and sometimes centuries old. Unless those underlying causes are addressed, the injustices will continue to thrive. If you want to survive and have long-term successes in the field, you need to calculate the costs, benefits and risks of your strategy in detail and then rehearse your primary and secondary courses of action when the worst-case scenario arises. A dead humanitarian is useful to no one except those who would like to stop the operation.

Do less, be more

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu teaches that the acme of generalship is not defeating the enemy in war, but achieving your objectives without ever taking the battlefield. The first question that needs to be asked is: have we done everything we can to curb our desires here to ensure that we do not create inhumane conditions over there?

Are sanctions contributing to the rise of rebel militias that destabilize the central government and result in food insecurity or civil strife? Have arms sales emboldened foreign government policies of increased discrimination against minorities? Have diplomatic maneuverings to support multi-national corporate interests rendered local social support structures ineffective? Will the pursuit of terrorists limit journalists' freedom of speech or encourage the restriction of civil liberties in the name of security? Will toppling a dictator result in anarchy? Will reconstruction efforts establish a government with even greater inequities than the deposed regime? Will the cure kill the patient?

Have we done all we can in the United States to reduce the waste and systemic inefficiencies that cause externalities borne by developing nations in the form of disease, starvation and increased mortality? A humanitarian's job is as much to mitigate the negative impacts of their own lifestyle on others as it is to change the world in the model of their values. If we truly become a sustainable example of a successful life, others will follow us naturally out of self-interest.

Being a humanitarian is a life journey not a job title

Inequities have existed since the creation of honor and rank. Being paid to feed people in Burundi is no more commendable than volunteering to deliver food to the homeless in Boston or working three minimum wage jobs to feed your own children at home. Being a humanitarian is not defined by what you do so much as how you approach your life. There are people in the humanitarian field who are mean, heartless, greedy, uncharitable, and power hungry; just as there are people who serve in the military or businesses who are kind, gentle, abstemious, charitable and humble. The key is not where you are or the title of your job, but what you do with the talent and resources you have and the intent with which you employ them. As long as what you do is impelled by a oneness with humanity, you can call yourself a humanitarian.