

## **RE-THINKING HUMANITARIAN AID – AGAIN**

### **Rwanda's lessons for today's Ethiopia crisis**

Neighbors butchering neighbors with machetes, mass graves and bitter hatred are images of the Rwanda genocide, which moved me and many others into action 26 years ago.

Rwanda was among the world's most horrific events, which - at least in theory - altered humanitarian response. Hundreds of studies and reports analyzed the actions, or inaction, of governments, aid agencies, the United Nations. The world spoke with one voice, vowing to never again fail in this manner.

Africa Humanitarian Action (AHA), the African agency I helped found in 1994, took a strong lead, insisting on the need to strengthen local humanitarian responders, something that eludes us to this day.

Reports are still emerging from north Ethiopia of murdered communities, firing squads, and machete attacks on children and women. Just as Rwandese escaped across borders, Ethiopians have fled to Sudan to save their lives.

Aid agencies in 1994 assisted all those who crossed over, only to learn later that the perpetrators, those who helped murder their fellow Rwandans, manipulated the humanitarian system to escape justice.

Looking at today's crisis, have aid agencies learned from Rwanda after a quarter century? In the absence of the organized local humanitarian capacity that we have long called for, the host community did its best. Among international aid agencies, it is business as usual for this predicted crisis, with the standard saga of appeals and a scramble for resources amid bureaucratic entanglements.

Since 1994, the world has profoundly changed. One may wonder how Rwanda's outcome might have been different if we had access to the internet, cell phones, drones and satellites. It turns out, not much. Despite email, video conferencing and intelligence at our fingertips, we still fail to identify lurking disasters. We still fail to be prepared, especially at local levels, where the true first responders have offered and can better offer prompt efficient humanitarian response that makes the biggest difference.

Besides its genuine efforts for dialogue and peace, the continent's premier institution, the African Union, has yet to engage in a meaningful manner with this emergency. And humanitarian agencies may once again be aiding insurgents to regroup, nestled among their victims.

Hundreds of millions of dollars is being sought by relief agencies to assist the nearly 40,000 Ethiopian refugees (a modest figure thus far, compared to that of Rwanda 26 years ago). In the face of the Coronavirus pandemic, recession and unemployment in donor nations, should we press on with the same formula of fundraising appeals, slow response, and a failure to invest in local capacity? Is our best effort to encamp able bodies and minds idly, waiting for rations until we can no longer sustain them?

There was once a time when humanitarian workers were mainly volunteers, genuinely motivated by the plight of victims, fostering innovative thinking, progressive and efficient. These days it seems aid agencies are in the business of perpetrating the problem, not seeking sustainable solutions.

Today's humanitarian response is riddled with self-serving employees working in ways that alienate national engagement and promote northern actors. We even provide monetary incentives to refugees so they do their part in the camps. International aid has become a trillion dollar business.

Our approaches to disaster in 2020 should not repeat 1994, nor should they be self-serving. We should not be eager to begin the vicious cycle of refugee dependency on aid agencies. The world is better off if we focus our energy on development work, pushing for repatriation, and rebuilding devastated areas.

There is a disturbing disconnect between aid agencies and what is happening in Ethiopia. All Ethiopian schools are closed due to Covid-19, yet aid agencies are running make-shift schools in the Sudan for recently displaced Ethiopian children with little regard to the pandemic. When Ethiopia is taking steps to repatriate its nationals, aid agencies are hindering that return by raising funds for permanent structures in the Sudan. Whose interests are being served by the humanitarian community?

Africa is a long way from taking ownership of humanitarian actions on the continent. Africans continue to be used to stir sympathy, yet only receive assistance that barely keeps them alive, leaving them dependent while aid agencies and those who keep them supplied continue to thrive.

We know nothing good comes from protracted humanitarian assistance. If Ethiopia is to get back on the track of development, aid agencies must listen and act in the interest of the people they serve.

The time has finally come to put all the lessons learned from Rwanda into good action: vet those for whom we provide safe haven; coordinate our efforts, and stick to the mandate at hand.

As a veteran in the field, I say the time has come to return to the basics. The parade of experts and agencies is unnecessary. Instead, focus on swift and practical assistance with local actors and local mechanisms - mosques and churches, clinics and vendors - not to keep people trapped, but to help them return to rebuild their lives, in their own country, in their own homes.

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