Changing Humanitarian Action?

In the humanitarian system, very little attention is paid to the processes by which change actually happens. The focus of change initiatives is generally on **what** should change and **why**, rather than on **how** this change can be achieved.

There is no 'one right way' to achieve change: every sector and situation is different. Change in the humanitarian system is influenced by the nature of the system itself. Humanitarian organisations are generally geographically dispersed, and have fairly weak command and control systems, which makes it difficult to drive change from the centre. In the system as a whole, no single entity can decree change, so change processes need to be largely voluntary and collaborative. This is made more difficult by high levels of competition in the system, which makes organisations reluctant to support changes that have been suggested elsewhere. It's also made harder by the fact that there's no shared definition of the humanitarian agenda.

The Meeting paper outlines different models to understand change, which are summarised in this discussion starter.

THE MARKET MODEL

- International humanitarian organisations are compared to international corporations.
- They see each other as competitors for 'market share' and change as a process of 'creative destruction'.
- The humanitarian system is not a single centralised hierarchy but composed of a large relatively autonomous group of actors.
- Affected people are seen as customers.

⊕ Reminds us of the importance of competition in understanding the sector.

⊕ Supports innovation.

THE ECOSYSTEM MODEL

- The humanitarian system is a complex adaptive system – like an ecosystem or the world economy. These are composed of a huge number of parts working on thousands of sophisticated operations at the same time.
- Each element of a complex system adapts its behaviour as a result of interactions with other elements: these systems are always changing, but this cannot be accurately predicted.
- Complex adaptive systems are self-organising: normally they organise around the same form and don't change but sometimes they can quickly reorganise themselves.

⊕ Reminds us it is hard to plan change: it can be easier to respond to changes that are already happening.

The way we seek to change something depends, in large part, on the way in which we understand what that thing is.

THE SOCIETY MODEL

- The humanitarian system is seen as a society, with its own politics and culture.
- Considering political processes shows that there are multiple stakeholders with a variety of interests who will attempt to exploit different types of power to create or prevent change.
- Culture is considered an important part of the change processes, although it is hard to define and even harder to change.

⊕ A politics angle helps explain change or lack thereof as a negotiated, fluid process.

⊖ The culture angle reminds us that organisations are not just a collection of individuals but also social spaces (highlighting the social dimension of change).

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY MODEL

- The humanitarian system is seen as a large number of organisations trying to pursue their own interests (not humanitarian objectives but to have more power and/or income).
- Organisations are grouped according to their interests (e.g. traditional donors, large NGOs and UN agencies seen as a 'club').
- Lack of change is explained by big actors wanting to retain power and prevent competition.

⊕ Demonstrates differences of power within the system, and the way that power can influence change processes.

THE MIND MODEL

- Human beings don't perceive the whole reality of which they're part of but unconsciously select certain elements to create a representation of that reality. The mind resists changes to this 'figure'.

There cannot be real change without resistance, a healthy process by which the mind attempts to retain stability and purpose in a chaotic context.

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WHAT WILL CHANGE IN THE NEXT 20 YEARS?

WHY?