

LCC: LB2165-2278

## HUMANITARIAN WORK PRACTICE AND THE NECESSITY FOR ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

Dr. S.A. Musa<sup>a</sup>, Dr. A.A.R. Hamid<sup>b</sup>, Dr. M.A. Alghorani<sup>c</sup>, Dr. R. Abu Eiyda

College of Humanities & Social Sciences, UAE University (UAE)

E-mails: <sup>a</sup>saif.musa@uaeu.ac.ae, <sup>b</sup>a.hamid@uaeu.ac.ae, <sup>c</sup>m.alghorani@uaeu.ac.ae

### ABSTRACT

This study aimed at assessing the need of humanitarian assistance for academic programs that could provide education, research, training, and consultation related to the humanitarian work. Forty one participants representing 39 humanitarian organizations and agencies took part in the study. Participants completed a questionnaire specially designed to fulfill the goals of the study. Results showed that 99% of the participants supported establishing academic programs on humanitarian work. All participants (100%) stressed the importance of consultation. Over 92% of the participants supported researching beneficiaries' attitude towards shelter and food provided by agencies and 97% of them regarded training as important. It was concluded that humanitarian work needs to be more extensively incorporated in academia so as to provide better understanding and more efficient services.

**Keywords;** humanitarian studies, education, research, training, consultation, aid workers, disaster, aid agencies/organizations

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and displaced hundreds of thousands of people and became one of the largest humanitarian crises in the United States since the Great Depression [1]. The relief work in response to the crisis was short-handed. Relief workers were unskilled and shortage was observed in handling the crisis. Armed conflict in Darfur resulted in complex humanitarian crisis which necessitated the intervention of both national and international aid agencies [2]. Such natural and man-made disasters have generated a great challenge for relief work as a profession which requires knowledge, skills, and values. Therefore, relief workers need to relate to their clients, listen to, and learn from them. So, if the relief worker-client relationship represents the "downstream" extension of the profession, then the relief worker-academia relationship represents the "upstream" extension of the profession [3].

Through the 1990s, humanitarian practitioners had to reconsider how the complexities of involuntary migration influence the effectiveness of their relief programs. Hence, the rising importance of forced migration to humanitarian practice generates need for new theoretical framework and approaches to understanding forced migration processes, populations, and context [4]. Academia shall familiarize humanitarian work with the historical, political, social, and cultural context of the crises, necessary for providing effective humanitarian interventions. On the other hand, the field of humanitarian work is a great source of data that could be scientifically analyzed to reach conclusions that could contribute to improving the practice of humanitarian work in extreme events.

Research has shown that exposure to natural disaster, armed conflict, violence, and experience of exile consistently jeopardizes victims' mental health [5]. Aid workers operating in war zones are also vulnerable to high levels of distress associated with dealing with victims and being trapped in stressful situations [2]. They further suffer ongoing chronic hassles that could mount to acute traumatic stress [6]. Hence, research needs to focus on different factors influencing mental health of both victims and aid workers. This will, consequently, lead to better understanding of the role of disaster-related and pre-migration experiences in onset of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other health problems facing victims of natural and man-made disasters, and aid workers as well.

Paul Margie, senior Director of Technology Partnerships at UN Foundation stated that "We learn from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that a dollar spent in preparation [ training] for disaster goes much further than a dollar donated after the disaster", [7]. The objective of this study is to assess the need of humanitarian assistance for academic programs that could provide education, research, training, and consultation related to the humanitarian work.

## 2. METHOD

A random sample of 41 persons representing 39 aid organizations and agencies who participated in Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development conference (DIHAD<sup>1</sup>) in 2006, took part in this study. Participants were requested to complete an exploratory questionnaire specially designed for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire is composed of 44 questions, covering five sections: background information, education, consultancy, research, and training aspects of humanitarian work. The background questions aimed to identify areas of service, length of service, type of agency/organization (governmental or non-governmental), and an estimate of the percentage of employees needing further education and training in the participant's agency/organization. The education section of the survey mainly targeted participants' opinions about the importance of academic knowledge of humanitarian work, the preferred type of education, the language of education or instruction. It further measures whether participants' support such academic programs through recruiting graduates of the programs and encouraging current employees to join these programs. The consultancy section of the survey mainly assesses the magnitude of the organization need for consultation, areas of consultation (actually-sought vs. preferred), and sources of consultation. The research section of the survey mainly gauges the importance of researching popular food, suitable shelter, mental health, and donors' attitudes, expectations, and preferences. Finally, the training section aimed at exploring participant views on the importance of training, existence of plans for training, and source of training.

## 3. RESULTS

Descriptive analysis showed that 25% of the aid organizations were governmental, 32.5% charity organizations, 17.5% commercial, and 25% international organizations. The length of service for these organizations and agencies ranged from 1 to 60 years ( $M = 20$ ,  $SD = 18$ ). About 42% of the participants indicated that up to 70% of their organization's staff require continued education ( $M = 24$ ,  $SD = 26$ ). About 66% of the participants reported that up to 90% of their staff require occasional professional development ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 29$ ). About 32% of the participants think that up to 51% of their staff ( $M = 16$ ,  $SD = 21$ ) have to leave the field of humanitarian work due to lack of knowledge and skills required for this field (see table 1)

**Table 1.** Summary of participants' responses to type of organization

Type of Organization	Governmental	Charity	Commercial	International
N	25%	32.5%	17.5%	25%

Regarding education, the results showed that 93% of the participants believed in the importance of academic qualification to humanitarian work. The establishment of academic programs on humanitarian work was supported by almost all participants (99%). While only 33% are in favor of bachelor degree programs, 68% supported professional training and 18% supported master programs. Advocators of recruiting employees with academic background on humanitarian work were 54%. The preferred language of teaching was English (68%) then Arabic (32%).

Regarding consultation, all participants (100%) emphasized its importance for humanitarian work. They have indicated a need for consultation as follows: 30% always, 25% often, and 45% sometimes. Consultations about administrative issues was needed by 30% of the participants, about policies by 58%, about networking by 38%, and about service or program implementation by 68%. As per source of consultation, 68% of the participants actually got consultation from Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 45% from governmental agencies, 38% from academic institutions, and 33% from private consultancy agencies. However, 55% of the participants prefer to get consultation from NGOs, 33% from governmental agencies, 40% from academic institutions, and 20% from private consultancy agencies (see table 2). Fifty six percent of the participants think that recruiting graduates of humanitarian academic programs would reduce the need for consultation.

**Table 2.** Percentages of actual vs. preferred sources of consultation

Source of Consultation	NGOs	Governmental	Academic Institutions	Private Consultancy
Actual	68	45	38	33
Preferred	55	33	40	20

Regarding research on humanitarian work, results showed that participants consider researching beneficiaries' popular food (93%) and beneficiaries' attitude towards suitability of shelter (92%) as important. All participants are in

<sup>1</sup> Dubai International Humanitarian Aid & Development Conference & Exhibition (DIHAD) is an event which is bringing NGO professionals, UN organizations, as well as governmental delegations. DIHAD has been held for five consecutive years and sponsored by Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Humanitarian & Charity, UAE Red Crescent, United Nations, and Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry. DIHAD addresses the issues of international humanitarian assistance & development, the theme of DIHAD 2006 focused on the coordination of international humanitarian assistance and related operational and policy challenge.

favor of research investigating mental health of both beneficiaries and aid workers. Researching donors attitude, preferences, and expectations are supported by the majority of participants (100%, 95%, and 94%, respectively).

As for training, 97% of the participants consider it important for strengthening aid organizations/agencies and they support continuous training in order to enhance staff performance. However, only 72% of the participants do have plans for having training.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

It is interesting to find out that 93% of the participants were in favor of backing humanitarian work with academic qualifications. This can be attributed to the status of humanitarian work as a profession that needs a repository for knowledge, which will teach and instruct new professionals and help in pushing knowledge and practice to be core of the profession [3].

There was considerable agreement on incorporating humanitarianism in academia as indicated by 61% of the participants. This finding shows the significance of academic programs in advancing the field of humanitarian work because academia is expected to add knowledge and skills to practitioners in the field of humanitarianism, in form of libraries, journals, databases, symposia, seminars, and conferences. Accommodating humanitarianism in academia is expected to provide researchers and academicians with the necessary ability to teach a commonly accepted curriculum, and accordingly allowing students to graduate with recognized and relevant qualifications related to the humanitarian practice.

Results emphasized the importance of identifying popular foods for target beneficiaries as most of the respondents (93%) agreed on that. Usually, aid agencies supply beneficiaries with wheat which may not match with their food culture. That might possibly result in complicated health problems, such as malnutrition. This result is in line with findings from Musa [8]. The majority of the participants (92%) believed that beneficiaries should be consulted concerning the type of shelter provided by aid agencies. This might reflect concerns about some complaints made by beneficiaries in regard to inappropriateness of shelter. For example, Hamid and Musa [9], findings showed that tents provided by NGOs for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Darfur were not protecting against heat, winds, and rains.

It was apparent from the results that the majority of participants believed that researching mental health of both trauma victims and aid workers is important. This echoes the seriousness of traumatic and stressful events encountering these groups and the need to monitor their mental health status. Many studies showed high incidence of mental health problems in aid workers, e.g., Musa and Hamid [2] and in trauma victims, Hamid and Musa [9].

Studying donors' attitude and preference regarding the destination of their donations received strong support by more than 94% of the participants. It is vital to know the donor's attitudes because continuity of relief services heavily depends on their donations. Activities of aid agencies are always restricted by the donors' policy. For instance, some agencies might require NGOs to operate on relief (short time) bases rather than development (long run).

All participants in this study (100%) have reported that they would consult professionals to carry on their humanitarian-related works. Such reported consultations are for various matters of the humanitarian and aid business. Consultation about programs' implementation and policies has the highest frequencies, 68% and 58% respectively. These results might indicate that relief workers lack practical skills necessary for these areas. The need for consultation on programs' implementation could be due to the increase in the quantity of new programs emerged in the field of humanitarian work. The need of consultation on policies could be due to the increase of governmental and international policies regulating the work of humanitarian agencies.

With regard to source of consultation, participants' response reflected some discrepancies between actual and preferred source of consultation. NGOs were the most sought (68%) and the most preferred (55%) source of consultation. This could be due to NGOs being available in the field and/or their cost is affordable. The difference in the frequency between actual and preferred source of consultation could reflect a level of dissatisfaction with the quality of consultations provided by NGOs or the scarcity of other sources. The second most sought source of consultation was governmental agencies (45%); however, only (33%) preferred consulting governmental agencies. This might hint a preference of avoiding dealing with governments which extensively and closely monitor NGOs activity. The thirdly-ranked source of consultation was college professors (38% actual and 40% preferred), indicating the limited involvement of academia in humanitarian work. Consultation from private agencies remained to be the least frequent source of consultation whether actual 33% or preferred 20%, which may be due to either its high cost and/or the scarcity of such consultancy agencies.

The vast majority (97%) believed that continuous training is vital for humanitarian work, both for strengthening the organization and improving staff performance. This indicates the significance of training in enhancing the skills and efficiency of humanitarian workers, lack of adequate training programs, and/or the emergence of new roles of humanitarian interventions. However, only 72% of participants indicated that they actually have plans for training. Training is considered important for aid agencies staff and NGO workers in fields of relief programs management, fund raising, camps administration, needs assessment etc. Training is critical in enabling humanitarian assistance when disaster strikes. That is, providing training and technology to aid workers will secure their effective delivery of the relief as quickly and efficiently as possible irrespective of the environment they have to work in.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It appears that there is a great need for incorporating academia and humanitarian work. Accommodating humanitarianism studies in social work education is expected to advance the field of humanitarian work practice since social work education is anticipated to add knowledge, values, and skills to practitioners. It will also provide academicians with the necessary information to teach a commonly accepted curriculum, and accordingly allowing students to graduate with qualifications related to the humanitarian practice. In addition to that, humanitarian studies help in pro-

viding proper means for assessing the needs of people affected by natural and man-made disasters, and hence, provide an appropriate management and effective interventions. Research is also an effective means of understanding various problems and providing tangible solutions. It can be used to study donors and beneficiaries' attitude and preference; and mental health of victims and aid workers. Although there are some academic institutions that have programs dealing with humanitarian assistance (see appendix), our study suggests an increase in establishing special academic programs pertaining to humanitarian work practice.

### Appendix

#### Directory of Humanitarian Studies Resources

1. The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, USA.
2. The Center for International Emergency, Disaster and Refugee Studies, Johns Hopkins University, USA
3. The Center for International Health and Cooperation (CIHC)
4. The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc., USA
5. The Center on International Cooperation (CIC), USA
6. Disaster Research Center, USA
7. Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, USA
8. Forced Migration Online
9. Geneva Humanitarian Forum, Switzerland
10. Humanitarian Emergencies and Action Resources and Tools (HEART)
11. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute
12. The Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs, Fordham University, USA
13. International Committee on Disasters, International Sociological Association, USA
14. International Crisis Group
15. International Humanitarian Law Research Initiative, Harvard University, USA
16. International Institute of Humanitarian Law, Italy
17. The International NGO Training and Research Center
18. Inter-University Consortium on Security and Humanitarian Action (IUCSHA), USA
19. Relief Web: [www.reliefweb.com](http://www.reliefweb.com)

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