Matthew Carter – Parliamentary Discussion – 20 June 2013

Have things really changed and got any better?

Sitting in this historic building where the destiny of the United Kingdom has been shaped for many generations, we are reminded how history is important in determining and shaping the action of the present day. In the humanitarian community we often refer to what era or part of our shared history we come from or shaped us as individuals. I, like I know a number of people here today, began our humanitarian working the 1990’s, one of the most stark and devastating periods in humanitarian and our global human history, and a period in which our system and its capacity was tested to its limits and found wanting. It was a decade that saw the civil war and food crisis in Somalia, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and the devastating war particularly the Srebrenica massacre, as well as the Rwanda genocide and huge movements of people into Eastern Congo which triggered a situation of uncertainty and conflict in Eastern DRC that continues to this day.

One fifth of the entire population of Lebanon today is a refugee, and with numbers rising in thousands every day fleeing into Jordan, and Turkey as well, once again host communities risk being dragged down by the burden they are being asked to carry.

The situations we faced and the experiences we went through in the early 1990’s brought about a great call for change and renewal of the humanitarian system from the UN downwards. Was this the dawning of a new or revitalised humanitarianism? Has it made a difference?

Over the past two decades we have worked to address the failures of the 1990’s through working to place people and communities more firmly at the centre of all we do and giving them greater voice. We have talked about the shifting of power, working more effectively with civil society and building new local, national and global partnerships. There have been endless discussion on trying to redefine humanitarianism and the need to ensure ‘humanitarian space’ – the formal and also informal space that for years humanitarians had held and through which they had been able to deliver aid under the principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality.

As a sector, we made significant steps forwards since the 1990s with initiatives like the creation of the Sphere Standards and Humanitarian Charter. With the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) we saw the creation of a standard putting the voice of disaster affected people at centre of what we do. People in Aid, creating a global human resource standard. Today I am proud that CAFOD is a part of the leadership of the Joint Standards Initiative, seeking to bring together these three areas of standards, to harmonise and extend the reach of these key commitments.

But the shift is not and cannot be simply about systems and procedures, handbooks and checklists. It is also about the shifting of power, turning the tables and us listening to the
people we serve - men, women, children, the elderly and vulnerable and working for greater equity. Fundamentally I do believe this shift has been about seeking justice, solidarity and from which the routes of humanitarianism was originally born.

It is somehow fitting we are having this discussion in the year of the 150th Anniversary of Henri Dunant’s forming of the Red Cross. At the weekend I re-read his memoirs of travelling through northern Italy and the battle of Solferino and was struck by the similar dilemmas he and we face.

Are we better able to provide assistance in Syria today than we would have been in a similar crisis of the early 90’s? Do we have the ability to access affected populations? Twenty years on how is a large proportion of aid provided into crises such as Somalia? It is provided by local actors.

This is not to dispute the vital need for the large INGO’s but CAFOD would increasingly argue we must be working to much, much, greater levels to better support community based and civil society organisations and those who are there before, during and after a crisis. All too often however, those agencies are confined to a role which is mislabelled as “partners”, delivering the “last mile” services but with no role other than as a subcontractor of services. CAFOD would argue that ultimately strong and effective partnership is primarily part of putting in practice our principles of empowerment, part of making sure that disaster affected communities are not simply passive recipients of aid but engaged actors in their own destiny. Alongside this it is a practical mechanism for creating responsive and relevant global capacity to relieve suffering and loss of life.

Do INGOs have partnerships to protect their dominant role or do we believe and accept that partnership may one day do ourselves out of a job? We need to ensure that independent local actors are allowed to grow and real investment is made and power is shifted. To do this requires funding. In a new report which CAFOD will be publishing shortly on humanitarian financing to southern NGOs, we will argue that there is a gross disparity and insufficient funding made available to southern NGOs both directly and through north-south partnership. In 2011 we estimate that bi-lateral donors channelled a mere 17 million US dollars directly to southern NGOs, a figure which is in stark contrast to the bulk of humanitarian money which goes to the UN agencies and the international NGOs, some of which then ends up with southern NGOs as contracting partners. This is not about one sort of actor or the other dominating but about far greater balance.

The stories of the first phase in the response in Haiti are familiar to us all and don’t need repeating, of local NGOs feeling unwelcome or even excluded from co-ordination mechanisms, from taking genuine responsibilities or from planning the reconstruction.

In Lebanon today we can see strong national civil society organisations, including CAFOD’s own partner, Caritas Lebanon, that have been at the forefront of responding to the influx of
refugees from Syria since the start of the conflict. Despite their strength, experience and excellent capacity however they are marginalised by the international response, a partner of last resort, only to be brought into funding and partnership streams if no international NGOs are available. That however doesn’t stop the same international NGOs and UN agencies seeking to tempt away their staff, both managers and field workers, with inflated salaries.

CAFOD like many here today has been an active participant in the Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies since its inception. The CBHA is working collectively to develop a new vision, moving away from our current paradigm – of humanitarian NGOs as purveyors of high quality technical assistance. We are moving towards NGOs as the agents of a vibrant, diverse, decentralised humanitarian civil society that places empowerment of people at its core. It is a vision based around reducing vulnerability in a broad sense, not narrowly focused on physical humanitarian response.

I believe that the years of ahead will see a dramatic and exciting change in the humanitarian environment and landscape. Some agencies will go, there will be mergers and new forms of collaborative action. It won’t be about reclaiming the past but will be about finding new ways and means to provide assistance in complex crises. This will be through recognised international bodies, through agencies that have niche and added value and fundamentally through working through global partnerships and a much stronger focus on southern actors. We have to challenge ourselves to bring about this change and not keep the current status quo. A real transfer of power, leadership and responsibility to the south and to the crisis affected communities.

Despite the efforts of many, even though millions of Syrians are displaced and in need of assistance, the world still sees the crisis in Syria as primarily a political or even military issue and not a humanitarian crisis affecting a whole region. Around the world, forced displacement is at its highest level for over ten years according to today’s UNHCR report for World Refugee Day. As a humanitarian community, we are beginning to once again feel powerless in the faces of the odds against us in responding to those real needs, in saving lives and in reducing suffering. Will those field workers today, in local NGOs, in INGOs or the Red Cross movement for example, be able in twenty years time to look back on their work and careers and say that we have simply left them to learn the same lessons and make the same mistakes as we did in the past?