

The Geography of Knowledge in Humanitarian Action

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Dr. Hugo Slim, Head of Policy, International Committee of the Red Cross

Thank you for asking me to give this keynote address. It is an honour and a pleasure to be part of the launch CERAH's humanitarian Encyclopaedia. I have taught a course at CERAH for the past few years and I particularly enjoy working with CERAH's students – a truly diverse range of humanitarian professionals from around the world. I am also very pleased to congratulate Professor Doris Schopper and her team at CERAH for bringing this project to fruition.

A Humanitarian Encyclopaedia is a very good idea and Geneva is the right place from which to do it. And I mean *from* – having been at the ICRC for two years now I have learnt to choose my words carefully! As my title suggests, a diversity of different places to co-create the knowledge necessary for this Encyclopaedia will be the key to its success. So – as the team envisage - it is important that the Encyclopaedia is not created *in* Geneva but *from* Geneva. The Encyclopaedia will need to draw on a wide geography of knowledge. It is this geography of knowledge I would like to talk about this evening.

Knowledge in its various forms

Ethically, we can talk about the purpose of knowledge as involving two basic goods. The first is pleasure. All intellectual traditions have talked about the joy of knowledge – the sweetness and satisfaction of learning and knowing new things, and the delight in understanding. The second good is utility – the fact that knowledge can be useful and applied beneficially to bring about good things for others. A good Encyclopaedia embodies both these good things.

Scholars and epistemologists talk about different kinds of knowledge, distinguishing between various ways we know as human beings: we know-that; we know-why; we know-how; we know-where; we know-when, and we know-who. A Humanitarian Encyclopaedia will need to engage in all these different forms of knowledge as it maps and collates distinctly *humanitarian knowledge*.

For example, *know-why* is essential to humanitarian action as it tries to understand the causality of things like why people are hungry or sick, why violence is taking certain forms and why people are displaced. *Know-who* is important if humanitarians are to understand who is affected, who is responsible, who is vulnerable and who is capable. *Know-that* in humanitarian action is the base knowledge of certain facts, particular humanitarian disciplines and the laws and rights that govern armed conflict and displacement. *Know-how* represents the art of practice in humanitarian action – the skills, practices and expertise which help to protect, assist and respect the human being in extremis. All these different types of knowledge come together to form humanitarian knowledge – a body of knowledge that is the opposite of ignorance in humanitarian action.

By collecting this knowledge, a Humanitarian Encyclopaedia may develop and formalize a *humanitarian science*. This science may tend towards and tempt us into certainty, which is not always possible or wise. Therefore, a good Encyclopaedia should be a living document – like this one intends to be. It needs to retain a spirit of doubt which resists absolutist and singular definitions and is open to diverse thinking, the adaptation of knowledge and the curiosity of new discoveries. A

humanitarian encyclopaedia, like any other, must exhibit different views and be able and willing to change its mind and update its evidence.

Distinguishing between values and facts

The Humanitarian Encyclopaedia will also need to be alert to a possible confusion in humanitarian science between knowledge and belief. To know is not the same as to believe. Nor is to know the same as to value. Many of the fundamental assumptions and basic rules of humanitarian action are beliefs not knowledge. Our core humanitarian principles – like humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence - are beliefs and values which we hold around what is right rather than what is reality *per se*. These values are agreed and elaborated in law but they are not facts.

Humanitarian principles are not scientific in the same way as medical knowledge or engineering knowledge. We cannot say that humanity and neutrality exist in every armed conflict and will be naturally and consistently replicated in every armed conflict and humanitarian programme. Our principles are not a predictably recurring phenomenon like bacterial contagion in public health or gravity in engineering. Instead, they are values which we choose and which we struggle to realize in particular situations, always with a considerable variation of success. Many other people do not choose them. They do not find them convincing or do not know them as values.

This means that some of the most basic and defining features of humanitarian action are value choices not empirical knowledge. They are conviction not expertise, norm and law rather than hard physics. The Encyclopaedia must recognize them as such and understand them as contested values not given phenomena.

The spatial distribution of knowledge

So, now to geography. Where will we find and make this humanitarian knowledge? The short answer is everywhere. This is why it is very good to see that the project document for the Encyclopaedia talks about drawing on a wide variety of “knowledge points” around the world. We can perhaps take an early alphabet word like *hunger* and then a late alphabet word like *resilience* as examples of the necessary geography of humanitarian knowledge.

- **Knowledge about hunger**

What is the proper geography of knowledge needed to understand hunger? Where do people know about hunger? The first place to look must be with those who know hunger because they are hungry themselves or at risk of being hungry. This requires an appreciation of the knowledge of hungry people and of farmers, herders, food processors and market makers. Their empirical knowledge will be key and the first place to look for humanitarian knowledge must always be with those who have direct experience of the subject. Then there are those who study hunger more formally than live it existentially – agronomists, nutritionists, historians, anthropologists and those who politicize hunger as hunger activists to find collective ways to stop it. Humanitarian knowledge of hunger needs to be *co-created* by all this different knowledge.

And one cannot do this knowledge gathering once in just one place because food economies and food cultures vary enormously from place to place as sedentary, pastoralist or urban. This means that the *contextualization* of knowledge is rightly identified as a key principle in the method of this Encyclopaedia. Some things can be generalized but there is much that will need to be nuanced in the collection of humanitarian knowledge about hunger.

As we look at hunger in different places today like South Sudan and Yemen, we notice something else about knowledge. Knowing is only a part of the solution. We understand the causes of hunger and how to stop it in South Sudan and Yemen. Indeed, we know how to stop many things that continue to get worse. Cholera in Yemen is another example today. So knowledge does not necessarily “work”. This tells us that while an encyclopaedia will be very useful it is not a silver bullet to increase humanitarian outcomes. Other things than simply knowledge and ignorance are in play.

- **Knowledge about resilience**

What about the spatial distribution of knowledge for a more synthetic concept in humanitarian action like resilience? Where shall we find the necessary knowledge to spell out this potentially complex idea? Instinctively as human beings, we know that resilience is a vital ingredient in living, surviving and thriving. Any one of us who has been through a hard time or a crisis of some kind knows that our resilience (and the kindness of others) played a big part in getting us through. But how shall we think about resilience and who will think about it best for humanitarian purposes? Where should we look for the appropriate evidence and mental map to supply us with a workable concept of resilience from which we can plan and programme?

Here, in more abstract concepts of humanitarian action we are naturally drawn into intricate *theories*, and these theories are usually shaped by *paradigms* and *models*. When the human mind thinks complicated things which it cannot taste or feel as physical objects, it turns poetic and thinks in metaphor, simile and analogy. It imagines. We start drawing things we cannot see, saying “I think resilience is like this...”.

If, like me, you have ever done theology then you learn about mental models quite quickly in the attempt to grasp abstract concepts. For example, the wonderful idea of heaven which is somehow deeply known but never seen or felt, is modelled in a great variety of ways. Heaven is a mustard seed, a place in the sky, a beautiful garden with fountains flowing with cool water, a pearl of great price or simply “within you” as the still point of eternity.

The conceptualization of things we know to be important but cannot see in the same way as we see starvation or a cholera bacillus is inevitably exploratory and indirect. This means that an Encyclopaedia must be open-minded and offer various readings of such concepts. It must not run the risk of idolatry by confining them to a single image, but always leave room for mystery and alternative interpretation.

Thinking about resilience needs many knowledge points and must draw on a wide geography of knowledge from people “living resilience” in hard places like protracted conflict, poverty, droughts and fragile ecologies. We must also listen to those who explore resilience in material science and understand how things are bendy, supple, strong and re-creative. And we must listen hard to plant scientists, urban planners and psychologists. We will need all these points of reference if we are to understand the sources of resilience and model them in a way that enables better humanitarian programming of various kinds. And we need to do the same with other synthetic concepts in humanitarian policy like localization and the humanitarian-development nexus.

But the Encyclopaedia will need to recognize that sometimes our concepts fail. They do not hold as models or these models become too obscure to implement. We struggle with these concepts more than we are helped by them. They puzzle us for decades like the humanitarian-development nexus. Sometimes people are not resilient or do not live in the sunny highlands of the nexus. Instead they just need urgent physical help – food, water and medicine – without a complex metaphysics of humanitarian policy. The Encyclopaedia needs to ensure a practical balance between both kinds of

thinking in its gathering of humanitarian knowledge - basic humanitarian physics and humanitarian metaphysics. Too much of the latter may confuse more than it enlightens.

Knowledge and Power

The relationship between knowledge and power is well known and must be taken seriously by any Encyclopaedia. The relationship was famously summed up in the Renaissance by Francis Bacon – a truly political scientist – who said *ipsa scientia potestas est* (knowledge itself is power). In our own day, Michel Foucault has merged both words to create the important hyphenated idea of *pouvoir-savoir* or power-knowledge. Bacon and Foucault both observe power at work in defining and imposing knowledge, and shaping it in one's own image and interests. This power gives the possibility of declaring truth and insisting that this is the only way to know things.

The Humanitarian Encyclopaedia runs a real risk of consolidating an authoritarian humanitarian orthodoxy in the interests and at the service of certain humanitarian power(s). But, I think, we have three reasons to be cheerful and hope we may avoid this risk.

First, the CERAH team are intent upon a heterodox analysis and on the presentation of diverse understandings. Their entries in the Encyclopaedia will be critical, opening-up knowledge rather than closing it down. Secondly, Foucault himself reassures us by observing that power is everywhere and arises everywhere, often as contrast and reaction to dominant power. One power leads to another. Here, in the power of definition, I am reassured that the very act of writing an encyclopaedia will focus the emergence of alternative definitions. For example, a moment in the 1980s when one form of development orthodoxy was at its height produced a powerful counter from Geneva itself in the alternative set of definitions in Gilbert Rist's wonderful *History of Development* and then Wolfgang Sachs' *Development Dictionary*. These unveiled much of the parochialism, hypocrisy and self-interest of western development theory. Thirdly, if like the ICRC, you know humanitarian values to be universal and available in every human being, then you do not fear too much if people argue over the finer points of its meaning and intellectual models. You know the fact of humanity to be profoundly persistent even if its manifestations and concepts may be contested and changed from age to age and place to place.

Wisdom

Finally, I want to end by encouraging this exciting new Encyclopaedia to not just focus on gathering knowledge but also on cultivating wisdom. It will do this best by committing to a wide geography of knowledge drawn widely from many places and many different humanitarian spaces. If humanitarian knowledge is sourced widely then it is more likely to be used wisely.

Although this new Encyclopaedia starts today in Geneva, it will spread out to co-create and encapsulate a diverse geography of humanitarian knowledge that extends all around the world involving experience and empirical fact and the reason and moral values of many different people and places.

If all goes well, the Encyclopaedia can then accumulate knowledge, cultivate wisdom and redistribute power. I wish it every success.

Geneva, 13 June 2017