

Waste, the bête noire of humanitarian aid

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For almost three years, as responsible of the Mission Structure of the Department in Colombo and of the all activities carried out in Sri Lanka, I found myself reliving in a new uniform experiences and situations that in the past had been my daily life for decades, dedicated to humanitarian aid and international cooperation. I found myself in a position of responsibility that enabled me to contribute to designing how we would manage our activities in Sri Lanka, coming to terms with a series of behaviours, choices, and strategies for international humanitarian aid that were, in my view, dated, old-fashioned and difficult to accept in the new conditions of the world created in recent decades.

In particular, one aspect of what we carry out in Sri Lanka and the approach we adopted gave me special satisfaction: the daily attention we paid to avoiding waste, a dimension that strikes many as an inherent aspect of any international aid operation, that depending only on old bad habits that are hard to die. Waste goes hand in hand with humanitarian aid in many ways, taking on forms that only experience helps you identify. The first source of waste is the acceptance of operating costs that are disproportionate to the benefits expected from any effort. Too often, we accept that the big NGOs and international agencies have structural and operating costs exceeding 50% of the total value of the efforts undertaken. There is often the risk of finding pseudo-solutions to reducing those costs: recruiting young, inexperienced people with on-

call contracts and then throwing them into the fray as mission chiefs and operations managers in difficult situations; pretending to overcome the problem by ignoring it; accusing those who try to give an economic value to solidarity of “impropriety”; turning an organisation created on a voluntary basis into a specialised services agency which, by their very nature, cost a great deal, as the market knows. In Sri Lanka, both as Department and in individual relations with our partners, we faced the problem with eyes wide open, managing together to contain operational cost within acceptable limits, around 13-14% for the Department

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and similar percentages for the NGOs and other partners. I also include in this category of waste certain costly forms of presence that border on the ostentation. You don’t always need an off-road vehicle to get across Sri Lanka, although in some areas and in some seasons a 4x4 may be necessary; but most of all, it is not necessary to announce one’s presence with brand-new vehicles bought specially for the occasion and decorated with logos and insignias. You can find transport vehicles to lease, second-hand but still perfectly reliable. We used such vehicles, driven by local drivers accustomed to the dangerous and slightly

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crazy driving habits in use on the roads in Sri Lanka, and we were never stuck walking.

The second source of waste is not taking time into account. The source of this error is often the rigidity of donors, demanding to know beforehand and in detail how they will be spent. This creates a sort of sacredness of the “cooperation project” that makes it untouchable and unchangeable, even if during implementation, as almost always happens, it is discovered that there’s a need for changes and adjustments to an changes , changing context that gets modified for a thousand and one reasons. We resolved this problem by the presence in the field of the Department, the “sponsor” on the NGOs on the one hand but on the other hand directly involved in the field. In that way, we had the same information in real time; we experienced the same events on the same side of the barricade, being able to interpret the facts and understand them, both for us and for the NGOs, and decide together with them how to proceed in each circumstance.

In this way, the “Programme” was never a stationary but rather a work tool that we modified whenever it seemed worthwhile and necessary to avoid waste. The NGOs generally reacted positively to this way of managing an operation with which many had never had any experience in the past with other “donors”. In a few cases, the NGO projects underwent direct, severe cuts, major changes and resizing, but no NGO was able to claim that these were arbitrary decisions made without considering the facts; rather, many of them thanked us for having given them a constant, 360-degree point of reference.

The third source of waste is the useless donation. We must not confuse the utmost respect for the intentions

and motivations of the donor, which are always guided by solidarity and the desire to help, with any evaluation of appropriateness. Obviously, in the case of a catastrophe, one of the first problems to be faced involves supplying potable water to the survivors. But it is clear that sending a load of bottled mineral water to the far end of the world makes the water more expensive than champagne, and it becomes a waste, especially because there is always a less costly way to solve the problem and because it isn’t always possible to get the champagne-water out of the arrival airport to distribute it to those who need it. Many people can

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accept these considerations; it’s more difficult, however, to explain how collections of medicines can be useless. In this area, waste in humanitarian aid operations is a real threat, because very little is known of the needs for first-response medical intervention abroad. To be useful, a medicine has to be usable by the person receiving it, at least in two respects: the local physician or nurse has to be able to read what the vial or bottle contains and must have confidence in the active principle that it contains. A big box of medicine samples, unlabelled and packed loose, is not a help but rather a real drama for the person who receives it: he needs drugs, he has them in his hands, but he needs to study to figure out what it is, and he has no time to do that. And it’s a terrible

waste if medicines are sent that aren't suited to local health conditions: the antibiotics we use may in the long term have negative effects in other countries, where less sophisticated active principles are used. Of course the patient responds to the treatment if treated with our drugs, but the next time he's sick he won't be treatable with the medicines he can find in his country, because they were "burned out" by our latest-generation medicines. In these cases, avoiding waste means also avoiding collateral damage. That is why, in the first days of the emergency, we issued precise instructions to prevent government bodies and volunteer organisations from starting drug drives. A few did not appreciate this, but I am convinced that it was very useful to try to keep control over this delicate subject.

The fourth source of waste is the donation disproportionate to the context. The equipment we normally use to equip a hospital, school or home requires maintenance, consumables, and energy to function: in Sri Lanka, the budgets of public institutions and families are quite different from ours. Donating an car in that context may be a huge waste, if the recipient can't afford the luxury of buying fuel. Better a tuk-tuk, to pursue the analogy, than a big-cylinder car, even though it may seem stingy to give a three-wheeler.

The fifth source of waste is presumptuousness. Much humanitarian aid proves useless because it was designed and made "for" the victims, but without involving the recipients in the process of designing the aid project. In Sri Lanka we saw whole villages of temporary shelters without a single inhabitant, because they were built in unsuitable, inaccessible places that were not functional for the lives of the supposed beneficiaries. There are organisations from other countries that built schools

and other facilities that remained closed and unused because they did not match the needs, habits or lifestyle of the local population. We avoided this type of waste by always working "with" the local institutions and authorities and with the future beneficiaries of what we were building, even though, in the difficult context of the east coast, our contacts were not always better informed and more realistic than we were.

The sixth and final form of waste involves the costs of corruption, which Italians do not have a patent on; it is unfortunately a widespread practice in many countries. In Sri Lanka, especially in the first few months after the tsunami, big delegations of donors of varying

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importance and with wallets of different capacities were all meeting with a great many central and local government officials who presented themselves as contacts. The donor representatives were seeking opportunities and spaces for their promises and programmes, and the representatives of the local authorities were careful to evaluate proposals from more than one point of view. We experienced this firsthand, and our appointment book was gradually reduced and resized once it became clear that we were not handing out money but intended to carry out works at the lowest possible cost. Only those local authorities who were generally interested in our commitment

remained attentive to our work: we discussed with them every aspect of the projects, without the topic ever slipping towards the temptation to co-manage the available resources. And this was a good thing for all, the final proof that waste is not an inherent aspect of humanitarian aid but a cost that can truly be reduced to a minimum with a little attention, a lot of patience and respect for all, a bit of frankness, a lot of determination and a direct and firsthand presence in the field.

Civil Protection in humanitarian aid

VINCENZO SPAZIANTE

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I have always thought that you don't need to seek out challenges but rather accept and win them when they present themselves. The more difficult, unexpected and complex they are, the easier it is to take them seriously, increasing the likelihood of success: these were the characteristics of the Department's commitment in Sri Lanka, and we know and can state that we took it seriously. Many people did not believe that the Department was the ideal institution to assume responsibility for a grant of almost fifty million Euros. We always thought it was, and today no one among us is amazed by the positive results, because we know how they were achieved.

Reading the financial report published herewith, I think it is worthwhile to underscore a new factor that we managed to introduce into the management of our Sri Lankan efforts, which I will summarise as having managed to integrate work plans that are generally kept

separate, by innovating with respect to the models normally in use in humanitarian aid operations abroad. Of course it was not new to proceed by project, but it was new to use the same method and standard for projects that we managed directly and for those assigned to the NGOs and other organisations that collaborated with us. For many partners, dynamic management of the projects was a new experience; we changed management whenever we thought we should to keep from losing time, to avoid waste, to better meet the requirements of the beneficiaries. Equally new was the relationship between the implementing partners and the donor, i.e., the Department: we were not elsewhere but rather in the field, easily reachable both in Colombo and in Rome,

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committed to dealing with the same problems and the same uncertainties. We visited every single work site, held meetings, checked every step taken, cooperated with everyone who worked with day by day, from the time we started the first plan phase through all the hand over ceremonies that marked completion of the projects.

W I T N E S S E S

We organised an absolutely strict and rigorous system for monitoring, auditing and certifying what was happening in the field, even the documents produced; we even wrote up regulations to govern our behaviour and that of others, to set criteria and procedures valid for all. We demanded respect: this rigour generated our ability to save and economise in managing the works, the work sites, and the projects. We set up special procedures to make use in real time of the result of every inspection and control; here, too, we innovated in a practice that usually relegates auditing

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to some future time with respect to the occurrence of the facts, making it useful perhaps for journalistic purposes or for responsibilities undertaken by someone with the institutional task of overseeing but essential when it is a matter of improving management and avoiding damages and waste during construction. I found myself in complete harmony with advisor Angelo Canale, with Guido Bertolaso and my colleagues in the Department. We all found ourselves in agreement in our concern for not separating action and control: who was working for us, who was auditing us, and who was called on to assure millions of Italians about our work. We managed to get

unanimous consent from the Trustees Committee and donors, devoting one of the General Programme's activities to outside monitoring of what we were doing. The reports of Action Aid, Sim and Punto.sud helped us understand how we were getting on, identify critical issues, change course when necessary, and respond promptly to more problematic projects. We believed it was necessary to publish on the Department's site, as they came out, all the official documents regarding our efforts in Sri Lanka, the Trustees' decisions shared with the donors, the changes made to the General programme, the documents produced by Sim, and those delivered by the implementing partners. And that is what we did. I went to Sri Lanka so many times, alone in most cases, sometimes with delegations of Trustees, journalists, donor representatives, audit and monitoring bodies, and authorities interested in seeing firsthand how our projects were advancing. I learned by heart the route from Rome, the stopover in Dubai, the time difference with Colombo. It seems only yesterday that I spent so many days visiting the construction sites, in meetings, having discussions with those working in the Sri Lanka Structure of Mission, with the NGO representatives, with the Sri Lankan professionals and companies we contracted to do the work, with Angelo Canale and the directors of our Department. When I left the Department to accept a new challenge in Calabria, the Sri Lankan projects were not yet all finished. But the good final result was already in sight; the ship was sailing safely, the route had been mapped out and followed faithfully, and there was no more need for me to get to port. What I was able to contribute was already on the record,

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entrusted to the navigating rules we set for ourselves, to the travel maps and documents, to collective memory and to the personal recollections of a story experienced with passion and, in the end, what really counts, with results that did not fall short of expectations and promises.

