



Reflections of a humanitarian aid worker: an interview with Tom Bamforth

By Tom Bamforth and Margaret Callan

Tom Bamforth was in Pakistan on an archaeological tour when he first started to work in natural disaster and conflict areas. From Pakistan he went to Darfur, then Mindanao and the Pacific Islands. His book of reflections on humanitarian work, [Deep Field](#), was published in 2014. Tom now works as Program Coordinator for the Pacific Disaster Management Partnership at the Australian Red Cross.

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Date downloaded: December 12, 2019

Development Policy Centre Visiting Fellow, Margaret Callan, met Tom at his Melbourne office to discuss some of the issues raised in the book.

Margaret: *Let's start with your experience of the response to the Pakistan earthquake. I was struck by your description of the fairly chaotic situation when you arrived, then a period of transition after which "it all came together". How did that happen?*

Tom: When I arrived it was about 3 weeks after the earthquake had hit. I was with IOM, the organisation designated to take on a shelter cluster coordination role. A number of NGOs had been there for a few weeks and they felt very strongly that coordination was needed. Many were genuinely angry that the UN coordination mechanism hadn't been there right at the beginning. So there was an uphill battle to gain credibility, legitimacy and respect.

There were about 60 INGOs in a small town in the North West Frontier Province (now known as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or KPK). At the start of the response they had probably had some ad hoc meetings but then they just got on with providing an initial response. They were very concerned about the coming Himalayan winter-many people had lost their houses- and they feared an ongoing humanitarian emergency if steps weren't taken quickly to start the recovery phase.

We were able to bring everyone together once we established a presence, and we brought people in from Islamabad, so we looked more like a sizable team. That was a turning point. There was a real appetite for coordination, sharing assessments and resources, developing a multi-agency response strategy, advocating for appropriate technical shelter standards and linking with other areas of the response such as camp management, protection, education, water and sanitation, and donors.

Link:

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Margaret: *Ideally it is the local authorities who should coordinate the response after a disaster. Why didn't that happen in Pakistan?*

Tom: Firstly, the local authorities had been affected by the earthquake very significantly and there was a lot of damage to civilian infrastructure. Moreover, Pakistan had a military government and the capacity of the local government was very low, certainly much lower than the capacity of the military to respond. But this raised political questions for the humanitarian response.

Margaret: *That brings me to my next question. In such a situation, how do humanitarian organisations develop a shared understanding of the local context, in this case: political, military and civilian?*

Tom: In the Pakistan context, long-term development agencies had a sophisticated understanding of the context. Also, institutions like the International Crisis Group did a lot of advocacy to build understanding about the possible long-term political consequences of humanitarian work there.

However, after the earthquake struck, there was an influx of people from pretty much every UN agency and NGO. A lot of these people bring sectoral and technical expertise, for example in water supply, health, shelter and community mobilisation, and they know how the humanitarian system works. But many knew little about the local context and politics, so they risked playing into the political objectives of the military government through working with its representatives and not local civilian counterparts.

A very important issue in Pakistan was the targeting of beneficiaries and the extent to which the military directed this targeting. This was very complex because Afghan refugees from the conflict in Afghanistan and refugees from India who were displaced by the earthquake were also in the area. So humanitarian agencies were faced with multiple ethnicities and political views, those who

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supported the government, and those who didn't.

Moreover, prior to the earthquake, the government had described the tribal areas where the earthquake struck as being beyond the "writ of the state". So they weren't eligible for assistance, and they weren't regarded as part of the government system. Humanitarian agencies made the case to the government that all affected people had rights, so while they advised strongly against it, permission was granted for NGOs and other organisations to go in and distribute assistance.

Margaret: *That experience in Pakistan must have prepared you somewhat for your next assignment in Darfur. However, in the book you describe Darfur as a completely different situation. Could you draw out the key differences?*

Tom: Darfur was infinitely more complex, because it's a conflict. At least with natural disasters there's an element of physical destruction, with areas that are destroyed and areas that survive, so to some extent the damage is finite and you can go about trying to fix it by providing relief and recovery.

But the conflicts in Darfur affect the whole area, and are part of a bigger regional conflict, so everything, everywhere is affected by conflict. And it's ongoing and inter-generational, so it seems to have no limits, no way to move from humanitarian response to recovery.

In such situations, humanitarian organisations tend to focus narrowly in accordance with their mandates, and assistance is delivered mainly in refugee camps.

Margaret: *How do organisations decide how long they'll stay and work in such circumstances and whether they'll engage in advocacy about the underlying drivers of the humanitarian disaster?*

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Tom: They tend to stay, as long as there's a humanitarian need they can address and funding available to support their work. In South Sudan there's been humanitarian operations for about 30 years, and many humanitarian organisations have been there the whole time. What organisations do about this kind of permanent state of crisis depends on their mandate and resources.

In terms of advocacy, aid organisations take different approaches. Organisations like the Red Cross will not talk publicly, but will advocate informally with militia and governments about the conduct of war, protection of civilians and humanitarian principles. [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#) has 'bearing witness' as a core principle, so they provide medical aid, but also collect evidence and bear witness to what's going on, so that they can report this to a wider international community. Oxfam has a commitment to public campaigning and advocacy. But others focus solely on assisting people and do not comment publicly. Field workers generally understand and respect the institutional mandates of their fellow humanitarian workers.

Margaret: *Let's turn now to fundraising by humanitarian organisations. In the book you talked about organisations "manipulating compassion" by deciding what images of disasters or need they will disseminate in order to elicit donations. This sounds a bit cynical. What do you think is the right approach to fundraising?*

Tom: It's tricky. Raising funds is important and useful. But it is also unpredictable, so NGOs need to take advantage of opportunities that arise when there's been a catastrophe and a public appeal is launched. In order to get funds, you have to make a case for it, and more often than not that involves presenting tragedy. I don't want to be critical of these things because I think it is all generally for good reasons. And I think organisations are very sensitive about how they use people's images so as not to be exploitative.

However, fundraising in this way also creates a problem: humanitarian events are

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portrayed as an endless succession of crisis and this does not really engage people with the fact that so many in the world live below the poverty line. The real challenge is to engage people in a more long-term and sophisticated way about the complex problems of development. That's my concern. I don't really know how you get around that.

Margaret: *Another issue I want to explore is the emerging concept in military doctrine of 'force multipliers' that is, mixing aid with military operations. Can you describe how this works in practice and how humanitarian organisations have responded? Two aspects of it interest me: first, to what extent does having a military presence actually create opportunities for humanitarian work? Second, to what extent does a link with the military imperil or compromise humanitarian action?*

Tom: It depends on the situation. Having a military presence can make some humanitarian work possible, because the military can provide all sorts of resources that NGOs don't tend to have, logistics primarily. In Pakistan, I don't know what we would have done without the hundreds of helicopters (from Pakistan's military and NATO) that were able to fly shelter and relief items into the mountains because the roads collapsed after the earthquake. Similarly, after Typhoon Bopha in the Philippines the military was present and played a role in the relief distribution. They brought huge resources.

But the military also brings problems that aid agencies have to be careful about. Firstly, there's a danger that agencies can be co-opted for military ends. That's particularly the case in Afghanistan, where 99% of the NGOs come from countries that make up NATO forces and usually they're funded by the same governments. This association with the military has been fatal for some humanitarian workers in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I think the association creates another danger for aid organisations. Military

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organisations are not development organizations: they don't have the same skills in designing and delivering aid and they have been responsible for many development project failures.

Margaret: *Do some aid agencies choose not to work in areas that require them to cooperate with the military on the grounds that this compromises their mission and their work?*

Tom: Yes, a number do. One solution to this dilemma that we see with large and well-resourced organisations, like the Red Cross and MSF, is that they provide their own logistics (planes, fleets of trucks etc.) and security to protect the safety of staff. It is because of this need for very substantial resources that we tend to see only the bigger organisations in conflict zones; smaller organisations usually realise that working in these settings is too complicated, too dangerous and too expensive.

Margaret: *One issue that you did not explore in the book was the role of women in humanitarian situations. What did you observe about women as victims of humanitarian disasters, and as actors in the response?*

Tom: I don't really talk about it that much in the book. But a clear majority of aid workers are women, probably 60-70% (although this depends a bit on the sector: disaster management is often quite male-dominated). And, as victims of natural disasters, in cases like the Pakistan earthquake, more women died because of cultural reasons, that is, they were confined in their homes and buried. And in conflict zones, Sudan for example, gender-based violence is a major concern.

Whether women take a leadership role in the response depends on the context. In the Philippines and throughout the Pacific, you get more women in formal leadership roles (both community and government) and they play a very strong role in directing a response. But in Pakistan and Sudan, typically not. However,

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what tends to happen is that through informal structures women play very strong roles everywhere: looking after family, keeping in touch with relatives and friends, keeping social networks going, and adapting to the new realities of life, for example, camps for displaced people and refugees. These roles tend not to be ones that are formally acknowledged or supported.

Women often have better coping strategies, are essential to social cohesion and are involved in a dozen different kinds of tasks where men typically are not. Humanitarian funding doesn't necessarily support those women, so in a sense they're a victim of their own resilience: they're often overloaded, especially where people are displaced, in camps or in spontaneous settlements.

I think this is an ongoing issue for humanitarian organisations. We've got better at social analysis, understanding and differentiating socio-economic roles, and targeting those who are going to be the most effective in supporting life. But this remains a challenge.

Margaret: *The final issue I wanted to raise is the role of private philanthropists in international development. You expressed strong views about this. You argue that there's something wrong with a few wealthy individuals having the power to influence global development priorities, and you contrast their resources with the budgets of development agencies.*

But I think there are examples of private philanthropists who have been prepared to provide funds for important development work for which official development agencies provide too little support and/or it is subject to the whim of national politics, for example, family planning and reproductive health services. Could you elaborate on your concerns?

Tom: While I agree that private philanthropists can help compensate for some of the weaknesses in official development institutions, I think it's also important to

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ask questions about the rising role of private philanthropy. In the US, for example, there's a collection of billionaire philanthropists who have committed half their wealth to aid and development programs.

There are currently 69 people who have signed the '[Giving Pledge](#)' and when they meet, their collective contributions are four times more than the budget of the entire UN system. So they have incredible resources, power and influence. But who are they? And how did they get to that position? What did or do they make their money from? What is their purpose in undertaking development work? There seems to be a democratic question you can ask about who these people are and on what basis they decide to allocate resources.

It may be for worthwhile causes. But how do we know? And how do we know this is always going to be the case? I think there's a question worth asking about their basis for legitimacy, whether or not you agree with the individual programs that they run. They're spending funds in order to affect the lives of others. To what extent do the people whose lives are being affected participate in decision-making about how funds are spent?

One aspect of this question that set me thinking was a comment by Bill Gates on [Q&A](#). He said that he believed in leaving simple tasks to government and complex tasks to the private sector. But in fact, it's actually the other way around. Governments are responsible for the fundamental questions of war, peace, stability, security and order. And in these arenas, they can never be supplanted by the private sector.

I think one of the sad things about the dismantling of AusAID was that it had a group of people with experience of development programs over a long period and the lessons to be learnt from this experience. In order to be able to address the really difficult development questions of our time, you need that long-term experience and that knowledge, and I'm not convinced that this is readily

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available in the private sector.

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About the author/s

Tom Bamforth

Tom Bamforth is a writer and aid worker. He has worked in humanitarian response and international development since 2005, and is the author of 'Deep Field: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Aid Relief'.

Margaret Callan

Margaret Callan was a Visiting Fellow at the Development Policy Centre. Prior to this, Margaret worked for AusAID in various senior management positions. Her research focuses on the role of the private sector in development.

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