MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES

DIALOGUES SERIES

TWO SPEAKERS, TWO STATEMENTS, TWO RESPONSES = *DIALOGUES*
A series of discussions aiming to promote debate on some of the pressing issues facing humanitarian action

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WHOSE STANDARDS?
STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HUMANITARIAN AID

All views expressed in the **Dialogues series** are those of the authors, and are not necessarily representative of the organisations for which they work. We have asked the authors to give their personal perspectives, respond to one another and thus begin a debate.

Most of the issues discussed in this initial series of publications were first explored at the discussion evenings arranged by MSF London in the spring of 2006. They cover matters of continuing concern to the humanitarian community and prompt questions to which there are no easy answers. We hope that these publications will encourage others to join the debate.

A forum is available at www.dialogues.london.msf.org for you to respond and exchange views with others.

Whose Standards?

The debate on standards in humanitarian action has been on the agenda of donors and humanitarian organisations for some time now. Is there an urgent need to reorganize and reframe an apparently confused and incoherent system of aid?

This debate continues to raise a number of questions: Who sets the standards? What are they being set for - meeting the needs of a population or furthering political priorities? Would standards improve on-the-ground action by sharing experience or would they bring about a lack of innovation?

Behind the debate on standards lies the notion of accountability. Is there a global accountability that INGOs should aim for? Or are there various 'accountabilities', relating to different stakeholders, contexts or periods of time? Does accountability support or run counter to basic humanitarian principles?

In this discussion, Marine Buissonnière outlines the initiatives that have been launched since the Rwanda joint evaluation and questions their success. Maurice Herson maintains on the other hand that the aid system needs cooperation and standardisation as much as any other professional sector.

Marine Buissonnière
International Secretary, MSF

Marine Buissonnière joined Médecins Sans Frontières in 1996 and has worked with the organisation since, holding coordination positions in numerous countries including China, Palestinian Territories and Korea. She held the position of Operations Director in Japan until 2002, then in 2003 became Secretary General of MSF international. In 2005, she published a book describing the plight of North Korean Refugees entitled "je regrette d'être né là-bas".

Marine Buissonniere says:

In 1994, the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda concluded, among other recommendations, that efforts were needed within the NGO community to improve performance through the development of standards and self-regulation mechanisms. It also stressed that commitment should be shown by donors, UN agencies and NGOs to improve accountability. Humanitarian organizations were criticized for a lack of professionalism, efficiency and accountability, and various initiatives aimed at improving NGO performance followed as a result.

For many, Rwanda's crisis saw the failure of humanitarian actors to perform adequately (e.g., cholera in Goma camp). But, more than anything, the reality of the genocide sends us back first and foremost to some of the largest political failures of our time. The critical flaws, in that instance, lay not in the humanitarian domain but in the political, diplomatic and military ones. Rwanda was a sobering reminder that global powers-that-be are capable of almost infinite indifference to human suffering if political interests are not at stake. Yet, since then, the proliferation of initiatives , including those of states, has concentrated on trying to address the failings of the humanitarian community. Most initiatives proposed technical answers, focusing around increased coordination, the participation of beneficiaries and the development of sector-wide standards and codes. The Sphere project, ALNAP[1] and HAP[2] can all be traced back to this evaluation; or were significantly influenced by these post-Rwanda introspective efforts.

Roughly three types of initiative can be distinguished:

- Those devoted to the development of standards, performance indicators or impact indicators (e.g. the Minimum Standards in Disaster Response of the Sphere projects).

- Those that have tried to (re)define common principles of intervention, including codes of conduct (e.g. Red Cross and Red Crescent Code of Conduct).

- Those devoted to the development of accountability mechanisms, including frameworks for involving communities and partner organisations in all aspects of the work, quality management and accountability indicators etc (eg. ALNAP, HAP).

All three would merit their own discussion, but my argument concentrates on the relationship between standards / indicators and accountability.

[1] Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
[2] Humanitarian Accountability Partnership

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What has come out of such initiatives?

The first question is whether all these initiatives have actually contributed to a better response for the most vulnerable. It is striking to see that conclusions, which replicate those of the Rwanda crisis, can be found in recent publications addressing the performance of the international community in Darfur. Browsing through the press, it seems that critics of humanitarian actions have become increasingly numerous in the recent past. In July 2006, the Jakarta Post ran an article denouncing NGOs for running reconstruction projects as "battlefields" to compete for donor funding, which they misused for their own benefit, leaving locals to fend for themselves. "Another project, another new flashy car", the title eloquently denounced. Later in the summer, a report by the UK-based Centre for Policy Studies criticized large charities for paying average top salaries of £83,000 to their most senior executives and queried the increased expenditure on fundraising and publicity.

Maurice Herson responds "... I, for instance, would like to move on from the dialogue that 'the critical flaws' at the time of the Rwanda genocide, as in many other cases, were not humanitarian but political..."
See page 10 for Maurice Herson's full response...

There is not a week that passes without NGO critics voicing their concerns and it seems that all have become preoccupied with poor performance, low quality and absence of transparency. Commentators are beginning to conclude that a lot of money has been spent attempting to coordinate, standardize and reform humanitarian action with few results. NGOs have bought heavily into this agenda and developed huge policy infrastructures around accountability, quality and standards. Indeed one may wonder whether the rise of the accountability agenda itself took resources and

focus away from the core work of NGOs, leading to the operational crisis[3] illustrated in Darfur by the absence of actors on the ground in the first few months of the crisis. It is difficult to call upon standards and focus on quality when no actors are in place to deliver anything.

Standards and indicators

It is important to recognise at the start that standards do serve a purpose, and no field is better suited than the medical one to illustrate this. MSF devotes a significant amount of resources and energy to developing medical guidelines, medical policies and protocols. There is no significant operational intervention that is not carefully looked at by epidemiologists and ensuring drug quality, for instance, is at the heart of MSF concerns. Obtaining quality clinical results while maintaining respect for the patient must be the major criterion used to evaluate the progress of our medical practice. Yet, when it comes to medical action specifically, protocols and standards capture a current state of knowledge and naturally deteriorate over time. Tension between standardized, calibrated and measured medical action on the one hand, and innovation on the other, is incessant, and mostly a source of operational creativity and energy. If MSF had blindly followed mainstream standards, it would not have started treating HIV/AIDS patients with anti-retrovirals in resource-poor settings, nor would it have decided to challenge the Tuberculosis DOTS orthodoxy, which excludes from care a good chunk of TB patients. The risk is always present to see standards anaesthetize reflection and stifle innovation.

The standardized approach is strongly supported by institutional donors. First, it is a useful tool allowing donors to show to their civil constituencies the return on investment for

[3] See ALNAP Darfur Review by Larry Minear

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their tax money. However, though standards can show that something is wrong, they do not show how things can be fixed. Logframe indicators, for instance, measure the combined impact of all actors present and therefore make it difficult to argue that one particular agency can be held to account for 'poor quality'. Second, and more questionably, standards have been used to qualify or disqualify certain types of intervention based on political interests and foreign policy agendas rather than a population's needs (e.g. Sierra Leone, Niger). Standards seem to have often contributed to achieving the priorities of donors and governments rather than those of other stakeholders, pushing NGOs towards the development of programs matching donors' criteria rather than independently assessed field needs. It is therefore not surprising that for many actors fulfilling standards has become an end in itself, as it is a sine qua non condition to secure further funding. This has led to a paradoxical situation where the most complex crises to address - and therefore those less likely to require "standard" interventions - will be less well funded, while the "easiest" operations will continue to receive satisfactory evaluation and be readily financed.

Maurice Herson responds "Recent moves to use humanitarian action as an instrument in the service of (geo)-political ends concerns all of us..."
See page 10 for Maurice Herson's full response...

Finally, standards and indicators fail to measure what remains central to humanitarian action, the act of being in solidarity with the population. No standards will ever measure the impact of humanitarian actors' presence with the Sudanese population facing attacks from the Janjaweed. No standards will adequately capture the "human output" of humanitarian action. Standards reduce humanitarian action to a set of technical actions, and feed into the rhetoric of organisations such as private delivery contractors or the military who aim at winning hearts and minds, yet claim to be humanitarian.

What is at stake when talking about Accountability?
In the past 15 years, we have witnessed an exponential increase of NGOs around the globe. The Economist estimates that the number of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) rose from 6,000 in 1990 to 26,000 in 1996. The focus on NGO conduct and

accountability also reflects the fact that they are now seen as exercising unprecedented influence in the national and international political sphere, and are thus able to draw on considerable financial and other resources. The massive growth of NGOs is changing the institutional landscape of countries worldwide. With their place in world politics now firmly established, the majority of NGOs have moved from protesting on the streets to contributing to policymaking in the boardrooms of the United Nations, World Bank, World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, increasing the pressure to be accountable. The challenge today is less to debate whether accountability is a "good" thing but more on who decides who is accountable for what, to whom, and how they are being held to account.

Accountability to donors has traditionally been well developed among NGOs, related to the fact that one of the most important bargaining assets and sources of influences for NGOs is public trust. Allegations of corruption, bad governance and misuse of funds can prove fatal to individual NGOs (exemplified by the 1996 scandal surrounding the French cancer research organisation ARC) but also pose serious challenges to those who depend on upholding the reputation of the sector. If accountability to donors has been well developed, there is still ample space for improvement, as accountability can turn into a brand protection exercise. The Tsunami is a good illustration, where all evaluations were appalling, yet NGOs glorified themselves about their own performance. Being accountable and transparent also entails being ready to communicate about one's own failures. In MSF, though a lot remains to be done, efforts around the certification of international combined accounts for the whole movement and their publication[4] attest to a willingness to nurture a culture of transparency and account-ability towards the public at large and our supporters. The decision to communicate with donors seven days after the Tsunami to explain that we could not guarantee the use of their funds for Tsunami related activities springs from the same desire.

Maurice Herson responds "...but I also would argue that it is a good thing to be caught out behaving wrongly. That is accountability..."
See page 10 for Maurice Herson's full response...

[4] Since 2004

Accountability to beneficiaries has certainly been less developed. Often portrayed as "Tell us what you want", it presents a number of risks, especially in the medical field. There is also danger in oversimplification. A handful of problems related to putting accountability to beneficiaries into operation are described by Austen Davies in his paper *"Accountability in Humanitarian Action – An Unquestionably Good Idea?"*:

Participative approaches have shown that channels of participation are most often captured by elites. Organizing positive community participation in predatory and unregulated environments, and more generally in crisis zones, can be extremely challenging.

Accountability to beneficiaries performs best where there are standardized and repetitive interactions between provider and community over time; unlike most humanitarian action, which is by nature multifaceted, contextual, time-limited, and information short.

Accountable systems tend to undervalue things they cannot measure. What is a good service? Is this the one that provides the best treatment? A good treatment? A cost-effective treatment? A treatment well received by the patient? Systems have tended to measure efficiency and efficacy, sidelining medical humanism and the ethics of care.

Accountability in the medical field will have to move away from an obligation of means to an obligation of results, and to explore the notions of efficacy of care as perceived by the patient himself.

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Finally, a simplistic application of beneficiaries' wishes raises the question of global accountability. Humanitarians vow to help those most in need and have a duty to actively seek out the most vulnerable and assist them. The NGOs will have to decide when to close a program and exit an area. And in that sense, if the local community it is helping is weighing in on the decision, what about the community in need that it has vowed to assist elsewhere?

Beyond the problems of over simplification, there is still ample space for improvement.

Accountability in MSF

The word accountability has also made its way into the MSF movement, not because of external pressure but due to the now well-rooted conviction that accountability is an essential means to improve the quality of our operations. It has, for the first time, been referred to in an internationally agreed upon document. MSF's La Mancha Agreement, signed by the 19 MSF sections in July 2006, states that "MSF is accountable and actively transparent to those we assist, our donors and the wider public. [...] This external accountability is also essential to improving the quality of our interventions." The La Mancha Agreement also refers to MSF's own governance system, and to the fact it needs to be driven, at sectional and international levels, by mutual accountability and active transparency since it is an essential means to improve the relevance, effectiveness and quality of our interventions. A culture of self-criticism and honesty about one's own failures, a critical look at the sections' operational choices and an improved analysis of our programs and decisions should contribute to further developing mutual operational accountability. Tools such as the MSF international typology of operations or the international combined accounts, attempting to link reasons to intervene, resources used and output achieved, aim to assist in this effort. As for accountability to beneficiaries, it lies for MSF at the heart of the patient / doctor relationship[5]. The diversity of contexts, circumstances and cultures in which we practice requires us to turn each medical choice into a singular act rather than a mechanical application of principles. As strongly restated in the La Mancha Agreement, we must make such choices together with those we assist and with a careful consideration of the possible

[5] This also encompasses other medical personnel

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alternatives and a grave concern for the potential consequences. This entails being explicit in our choices and dilemmas related to medical ethics, which remain, for us, core points of reference.

At the community level as well, work needs to be pursued. The La Mancha Agreement, though recognizing that it may be difficult to achieve in certain situations, urges us to be actively transparent about the choices made and the limits of our ability to assist. We need to be explicit about what we can and cannot do, about our operational choices and their consequences, and develop an increasingly coherent discourse on reasons for coming and leaving. A disciplined and rigorous interpretation of our social mission, the responsibility we claim to uphold and our limits is necessary at all levels, as accountability can only be understood within the realm of what each NGO has defined as its own responsibilities.

In that sense, the key guarantors of the MSF endeavour are the 19 national associations, which bring together field and ex-field volunteers. The associations and their boards, together with the International Council of MSF, play a central role in overseeing the implementation of the MSF social mission and reviewing critical operational choices and public positions. Association members and elected administrators are independent warrantors guaranteeing that MSF is actually doing what it claims to, holding the MSF executive to account for its stated mission: assisting the most vulnerable in situations of crisis.

Maurice Herson
Senior Projects Manager, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP)

Maurice has worked on emergency and post-emergency responses to a range of natural and conflict situations across four continents and across the range of natural and conflict situations. He has worked at field and headquarters levels at middle and senior management levels and in a policy environment. He has in the past been on the Editorial Advisory Board of the journal *Forced Migration Review*, and on the Board of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International. He worked for many years for Oxfam GB.

Maurice Herson says:

It's my impression that the debates about standards in the humanitarian world have not really moved on much in the past few years. But it also seems that some of the harder edges of the disputes have softened. In my more cynical moments I attribute this to despair at finding answers, at other times to an accretion of good sense and maturity about the so-called humanitarian community and the humanitarian enterprise. Nevertheless evaluations and commentators tell us that many of the same issues of 'quality' remain, although of course that doesn't mean that things may not have got better.

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Is it too obvious to need stating that emergency work is difficult - most especially for those who, like MSF, might actually be dealing with saving lives. For, to tell the truth, most of us who talk of 'saving lives' rarely come that close to it. Not that we don't get the chance to make a real difference - for good or bad - to the lives of real people, and can't at least reduce people's suffering, in its gravity, length or both.

Is it also too obvious to need stating that humanitarian work takes place in some of the most complicated situations - turbulent, violent, chaotic, abnormal situations. Straightforward it can never be, for that reason - indeed it's often just a matter of managing the dilemmas that are inherent in the situation. But if you deliberately take on the responsibility of working at the point where real differences are being made, you must do it well. If only there were an easy answer to the question of how to ensure that people affected by crises and disasters, people caught up in the effects of war and violence, should have their basic needs met so they could survive and live with dignity!

From the common-sense point of view the obvious lines to approach the problem on are:

● preventing, mitigating or otherwise lessening the causes of such suffering and threats to life;
● reducing the suffering itself (and stopping it getting worse) by treating the effects of the causes;
● making sure that such work is done professionally and in the right spirit;
● having some sort of monitoring system to boost or reduce the response as it fails or succeeds at the tasks in hand.
● and finally, having a feedback loop in the system to create improvements on the back of experience - what we tend to call 'learning'.

This shopping list is recognisably more or less what we habitually struggle to achieve. Some of these things are fairly unique political tasks and not really subject to rules or standards, but some of the others are subject to a more formal approach.

The tasks that I have called unique political tasks are mostly those to do with addressing the causes of suffering, although many of these also impinge on the treatment of such suffering. Things such as ineffective or corrupt administration are both circumstantial causes of disasters and also remain in place even after rapid-onset disasters. These sorts of 'political' factors have been a major motivation for attempts to rule that humanitarian actors should follow the principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence, and even, I suppose, humanity.

Marine Buissonnière responds "The banner of global accountability seems to have made humanitarian action less politically challenging by serving the institutional interests of large NGOs, international organisations and donors, rather than those of the people at the end of the line."
See page 9 for Marine Buissonnière's full response…

Others of these tasks are of a nature that is also shared by people and organisations engaged in unrelated or only partially related work. Making sure that the work is done well and in the right spirit comes much closer to the aspirations of the better-inclined practitioners of many enterprises that are part of our economic, social and political lives.

And depending on the specific history of such professions, there are more or less well-established rules and standards and more or less well-established ways of enforcing or monitoring them. Society lends a hand, and creates sets of rules. This happened in relation to lawyers and engineers, for example, but also in the case of doctors who, as you no doubt know better than I do, started, at least in the western tradition, to develop guiding principles many centuries ago; guiding principles that have been subject to development and re-interpretation, but have broadly stood the test of time remarkably well. The Hippocratic Oath, through its modern derivatives, is one of the more profoundly tested and longest lasting cultural artefacts that we possess. Presumably we take this as some sort of evidence that such codes have proved themselves useful, in this case at least.

Leaving aside instances of laws being passed to govern trades and professions with the aim of preventing fraud and corruption or abuse of power, there are all sorts of codes of behaviour and standards and principles. Nowadays we have such organisational standards as ISO 9000/9001, which attempt to treat a problem by defining and managing

the processes that operate in an organisation, whether it be an accounting practice, a manufacturer or an estate agent. In my opinion we should not focus too much on the internal workings of organisations, as that is only indirectly related to performance.

Such setting of standards deals at the individual or organisational level. But what of the 'the humanitarian system'? It's a phrase in common use to refer to the whole lot of the institutions and organisations that take part in responses to crises, disasters and emergencies. This refers not only to the individual components of the 'system' - NGOs, donors, UN agencies, etc - but also to the modalities of linkage, such as coordination mechanisms and so-called 'initiatives', such as Good Humanitarian Donorship, the Sphere Project etc, and even umbrella organisations and networks such as the UK DEC, Dutch SHO, ICVA, InterAction, SCHR, ALNAP, Coordination Sud, HAP International, and many more, the whole caboodle. And hardly a coherent caboodle, is it?

Marine Buissonnière responds "...accountability can only be understood within the realm of what each NGO has defined as its own responsabilities..."

The internal reality is that the 'humanitarian system' is held together by its own complexity and internal dynamics more than anything else. That is, the parts really do interact and affect each other, but it's not full of direct and predictable linkages and effects. It really is a system but it operates systemically rather than systematically.

It is not uncommon to hear it said that it is not much of a system, indeed that you wouldn't design it like that if you were starting from scratch. This is another way of pointing out that the 'system' is not very effective, or efficient, and certainly not well organised. It implies that the system's internal means of self-organisation fail to deliver an effective system. It also implies that it can be, or could be, better organised. But let's not go there; rather, lets look at why it is as it is, and what implications follow from this.

Historically the components of this 'humanitarian system' have been driven by changing contexts within which their core functions have had to adapt and change in the way they are put into operation. Think about all

the debates in recent years about so-called 'humanitarian space'. And recent years have also seen the almost organic growth of mechanisms that link up bits of the system along axes that provide channels for humanitarian energy, of which ALNAP where I work is one example.

One of the facts about a system that works in this way is that the barriers to entry are very low, as we see every time there is a major crisis. Anyone can drive a truck of old clothes to the Balkans, or build houses in Sri Lanka. All without proper consideration of the shopping list of concerns I mentioned above. This should cause us to worry.

The external reality is that much of our work is conducted in complex situations. However well we do our work, we have this as the intractable background - the very thing that gives moral justification for our work is simultaneously often the greatest challenge to our ability to deliver it. This is not an explanation of the complexity of the system, although even if it were it wouldn't help us; it is another dimension that we have to take into account when trying to deal in a non-random way with the reality of a complex system.

So there is the external *raison d'etre* - that is, humanitarian 'events', or disasters - and internally there is the inertia or momentum that constitutes the system's complexity and inter-relatedness. What brings the external and the internal together in responses to crises is the idea of maximising the utility and effectiveness of the system's humanitarian response capability. This depends on many things, including attitudes, modalities of co-operation and also recognition of systemic links between different parts of the system, rather than imposition of processes and structures.

Given the complexity of the external reality, what this kind of system needs is some kind of matrix that will enable us to translate the motivation (la bonne volonté) into effects of our actions on the world in a consistently effective manner. That's what standards, codes, etc do - they are a means of making a difference not only to our practices and behaviour but also to the depth and quality of the impact that we have for people suffering from humanitarian disasters.

Standards and principles are tools that serve to bring some sort of order to the chaotic complexity of the system by reference to this requirement for the external focus. (We all are instinctively referring to this when we pay our lip-service, or more, to our accountability to those affected by disasters.)

Alongside the continuous efforts to deliver technically better programmes, various codes of practice, standards and so on have been developed - and widely adopted - as part of humanitarian organisations' drive to adapt ourselves to changing contexts. These have challenged us to do our job better; and in a way that is increasingly accountable, in the specific sense that we can be judged against what we explicitly aspire to do and how we aspire to act.

Given the fact that the elements of the 'humanitarian system' are individually governed and that the whole is a disordered system, it is not unreasonable to want to have a variety of standards, codes etc. It is questionable what advantage there would be in an 'all-eggs-in-one-basket' approach, even if it were attainable. The nature of the 'system' is to tend towards

organic growth of the parts, largely independently of the growth of the whole; and growth of the links within the system almost independently of the changes occurring within many of the individual organisations. This is despite the likelihood that the causes of growth in the different parts are similar or linked. This is not simple stuff to think about, which is maybe why many people seek simplicity and many others rebel because simplicity is so obviously not helpful. Even language conspires against us - standards might help but not standardisation, because reality demands bespoke solutions.

Which leads me neatly to my final point, which is shorter but also important.

Among other things that they do, standards encapsulate experience. The big agencies are in a relatively privileged position in this respect, in that they can draw on a lot of current and past experience. One of the things that standards can do is serve to support and guide others also to build on that research and experience. Doctors are trained, not just taught anatomy and physiology. Print-workers are judged on more than whether they know how to operate their machines safely. And so on.

As humanitarian organisations, we are constantly faced with the question of how we know how well we are doing. If we take smiling faces as reassurance on this score, we might be mistaking amusement for satisfaction. Thunderous looks might be signs of overwhelming anxiety rather than disapproval. In short, we need to have more external or objective ways of judging reactions than we need in our everyday social relations. Standards support evaluation and learning.

All the above is about the proper function of and need for standards etc. But the really important question is of course whether humanitarian action has been improving? If not, why not? If yes, is it despite or because of standards, codes etc? These are questions for which it would be hard to provide evidence-based answers.

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Marine's response:

Dear Maurice

As you rightfully stress, standards need to be looked at not only from an individual and organisational perspective, but from a "humanitarian system" perspective as well. Indeed, one cannot conclude on standards and accountability issues without taking into account the broader scheme of how standards fit in the "humanitarian system" as seen from a UN and a donor perspective.

Most governments have always been required by law to ensure the effectiveness of their aid money. This has naturally led them to focus on the efficiency and efficacy of the operations developed with the funds provided, as well as management systems and simple standard outcomes. It seems, however, that institutional donors are now after a system that not only performs, but can also be directed to achieve strategic ends. Since 9/11, new and overbearing political motives for aid related to security agendas have appeared more blatant. The events of 9/11 reinforced the links between assistance and security. Policy statements of the EU (2001), OECD Development Assistance Committee initiative on difficult partnership (2002), USAID white paper on foreign aid (2004) and the Australian government counter-terrorist agreement all highlighted how assistance is now expected to contribute to counter-terrorism efforts. Donors want a system that can perform and achieve within a wider framework and for some this clearly includes that of transforming failing states into law-abiding members of the international community. They want new accountability mechanisms that enable them to have greater control over the UN and NGO community so they can direct the entire effort towards intended goals. In that sense, donors have spent much effort trying to contribute to the reform of NGOs and the international system, and less on the external factors and challenges which lead to the creation of desperate situations. This includes, in Britain, DFiD, which has taken a leadership role in the benchmarking discussions.

Global accountability ambitions have tended to erase differences between actors and have further attempted to crystallize all actors around a single, well-organized system with the UN at its core, delivering a predictable and measurable answer and holding all its parts to account. Yet is there such a thing as a humanitarian community with all actors in the same boat, aiming towards similar goals? Is there a unified community to which standards can apply and which can be made better by improved accountability? The aid world is composed of diverse actors with different legitimacies, funding, ideals, methods, experience and technologies. A system of accountability that treats everyone the same, asks everyone to be accountable to a centralized over-arching power and expects them to do the same job efficiently will create a technical and safe depoliticised response. Today, through the implementation of the cluster set up, we are asked to be accountable to a UN-led system and to co-manage an international response.

For 15 years there have been attempts to make the humanitarian community act as a single system. There is no institutional donor, no United Nations agency, no NGO coalition that has not begun thinking about how to improve the early warning systems, the exhaustive mapping of intervention capacities, standards of assistance, coordination systems, influxes of money and evaluation mechanisms. Surveys, independent research evaluations and consultancies have sought to develop a global system to prevent crises and respond to all the needs in every situation. Yet in what way have these attempts to improve the system enabled reactivity and the increased relevance of the international community in the crises of recent months? The evidence is cruelly lacking for substantiating success. The banner of global accountability seems to have made humanitarian action less politically challenging by serving the institutional interests of large NGOs, international organisations and donors, rather than those of the people at the end of the line.

Maurice's response:

Dear Marine

I found your statement very interesting, partly for the way that the conclusions you draw from history differ from the ones that I think I know. For instance, despite the fact that "the critical flaws" at the time of the Rwanda genocide, as in many other cases, were not humanitarian but political, I would emphasise instead that the valid criticisms of the humanitarian response then, and in many other situations, must be taken seriously. Briefly, we need to take responsibility for what we do and can control, and make efforts to do better. I'm sure you would agree.

For the reasons that I already wrote, I think that standards, codes etc are one of the ways that we can sincerely and also effectively do that. I have no doubt that they are not a panacea, and also that they must be properly used. Where I think that I disagree strongly with you is that the standards themselves are inherently at fault for being used "blindly", a word you use several times. Of course they need to be used and used well and properly. And they are not sufficient, without reflection on the relevance and the context within which they are applied.

Your use of the idea of stanadardisation also rings the wrong bell with me. A doctor applies protocols for treatment badly if they do not also look at the person - people are not mere human organisms. And the application of those protocols cannot be an end in itself any more than fulfilling standards should be. Those who do that are not doing their job well enough. I agree, that would be "reducing humanitarian action to a set of technical actions". But don't, please, blame the tool, a useful tool, for its misapplication.

The area where we are most adrift from each other, though, is on the question of accountability - not surprisingly, as MSF has until recently stood largely aloof from engaging in these issues, while I've tried to be a champion for them. My hackles also rose, by the way, at the jargon you put around the idea when you used the phrase "mutual operational accountability"; it's complicated enough without falling into that trap. You say that "allegations of corruption, bad governance and misuse of funds can prove fatal" - I doubt that, literally, but I also would argue that it is a good thing to be caught out behaving wrongly. That is accountability.

Recent moves to use humanitarian action as an instrument in the service of (geo-)political ends concern all of us. They do, however, also persuade me that politics is in some way a link between standards and accountability. Politics provides a key for us to try and ensure that we are doing our best in many of the parameters of accountability: to our humanitarian principles - maybe particularly neutrality and independence; to our standards; to our donors; and of course to that most important constituency, those we set ourselves up to assist and protect. Politics is the real world, the context that we both insist we must not ignore in the application of the codified standards that I see as one of the useful tools in our kit of accountability.

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ANY THOUGHTS...?

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