

**2008 ACFID Humanitarian Forum
Resiliency in Africa – Global implications
How advocacy builds resiliency**

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Introduction

I want to start with a rather harrowing story of resilience, what it means in reality.

One day in November 2005 a Darfuri woman arrived at Oxfam's office in Kass, South Darfur. This woman walked into the office with two young children walking behind her and one infant strapped to her back. She had bandages across her chest, her left arm was in a makeshift sling. This woman had been walking, only at night, for 2 weeks to reach the camp after her house had been burnt to the ground and she had been knocked unconscious in a militia raid. Her eldest son disappeared while she was unconscious. This house was not her home, her home was burnt to the ground in the initial wave of attacks that occurred in 2003 when her husband was murdered and burning timber had fallen on her feet literally melting her toes off. She was desperate, alone, fearful, hungry, sick, injured, tired... but surviving, resilient – still, after all is said and done, exercising her capacity to seek and find assistance.

There are various definitions of resilience out there. Cambridge says it is the ability to return to a previous good condition. Merriam Webster says, less optimistically, that resilience is the capability of withstanding shock without *permanent* deformation or rupture. Macquarie, un-emphatically, talks of the ability to spring back or readily recover. I don't know where this woman is now, I can't say with any certainty how well she 'recovered' or if she has returned to a 'previous good position', I'd say, given that the conflict continues to deteriorate that total relief remains well beyond the horizon. Nonetheless, this woman was/is resilient, there is no question, her very survival indicates this, so it is not that clear to me that the dictionary quite sums up the real feeling of the word – the association we're making today.

Reflecting on what resilience looks like in practice, and how we can define the parameters of resilience, I first thought of rubber bands. We don't know how far they stretch before they break – like humans, they will stretch to incredible lengths, but they do at some indefinable point, break. And they do deteriorate, they do get old, they do become over the years, less resilient, just like us.

I came to the conclusion that trying to figure out at what point rubber bands or humans break, how far they can be stretched is a futile and painful game. Do we stretch the rubber band as far as it will go until it ultimately breaks, painfully slapping our skin and then say right – now I know how elastic that rubber band was, pity I didn't know that before I broke it... Similarly, do we stand aside watching the desperate but resilient victims come closer and closer to breaking point before intervening, before asking our governments to intervene? To give some reprieve to the stretching, to loosen the tension.

We have waited too long on many occasions – we have a word for it – genocide. Mass breaking of resilience? Perhaps.

So from the outset, I want to say categorically that we cannot rely on 'resilience' alone – that would be, is, inhumane. External interventions not only support resilience, they have the potential to prevent the breaking of resilience, the breaking of people.

The aim of organizations such as my own, Oxfam, is to reach people well before breaking point. To prevent the stretching happening at all. And to aid that process of rehabilitation so that, as Cambridge says, people can return 'to a previous good condition'.

In a sense, our programs and advocacy aim to support people, so we don't ever have to see just how resilient they can be – so we don't see the breaking either.

We operate on the knowing that all humans are resilient, that it is an intrinsic part of our human fabric. Everyone is resilient, our rubber bands can stretch to unimaginable degrees, we create and respond to adversity in the most remarkable ways – this is our shared humanity.

Resilience is not about the atrocities, it is the response and the recovery. Resilience speaks to the ingenuity, creativity, strength and spirit of people who face and overcome enormous adversity. Resilience is a reflection on the positive.

To return to November 2005 in Darfur, that woman found us, we did not find her. It was a feat of great courage and resilience.

What we did was provide some food, water, blankets, clothes and we took her to a medical clinic run by MSF to attend her injuries. And, and this is a big and – we got a little information from her – where she was from, her name.

Using that information, within a couple of hours our local staff had found sheikhs from her community who knew her, who would help her and her children in a familial way we never could. That information was critical. It facilitated the support, beyond immediate assistance, that is critical to recovery.

I mention this because information is the critical input to advocacy. Broadly speaking, our local staff advocated at the community level that those sheikhs should exercise their responsibility to provide support to this woman. It was advocacy. I say this to demonstrate that it happens all the time. Advocacy is not a mysterious legal or political practice happening in court rooms and at the highest level of government – it happens at every level of society and it happens all the time. It is fundamentally about being seeking

accountability from those people and organizations with responsibility. I believe the recognition of this, and the understanding that we all do it in the course of our work anyway, should give us the impetus to do it better.

We, Oxfam International, are known within the sector for our advocacy – this is, to some measure why I am speaking to you today. With my talk I hope I'll be successful in demystifying 'advocacy' and alerting you all to the possibilities that advocacy provides for building the work that our sector does at all levels – local, provincial, national, regional and international. I hope it will become clear that the strategic use of information provides real opportunities to build the resilience of those communities with whom we work. And, more importantly, to avoid them ever having to test just how resilient they are. I also hope that you will begin to see the kinds of issues that arise in pursuing an advocacy agenda. We all have access to information, and most the time we do something with it – the question is what more could be done with it? How can the information we have be used more strategically – to protect, assist, to bring accountability? Ultimately, to prevent the kinds of atrocities that have become all too familiar in Africa.

Before I continue, just a little disclaimer. As this conference is hosted by ACFID's humanitarian reference group, the parameters of my talk are humanitarian advocacy as opposed to trade, debt, extractives, HIV AIDS or other advocacy topics relevant to Africa. I'm naturally focusing on how we do crisis advocacy. I say this to preempt any criticism that I have contextualized Africa as one big emergency. That is certainly not my, or my agency's belief. The advocacy we have done in some of the complex emergencies of Africa, have provided useful lessons on how we can engage with aggressive regimes, with deeply fractured societies, unwilling or despondent international actors and fluid authorities.

Why is advocacy an important strategy in humanitarian response)?

First of all, let's not overstate the power of advocacy. In supporting the resilience of communities– ie. to quickly rehabilitate from a crisis or to avoid a crisis altogether (yes, this is my nuanced definition of resilience as it applies to our work in humanitarian crises) – we do many things. We support livelihood opportunities, support projects to ensure provision of clean water, minimize public health hazards, provide basic clothing and goods, provide food relief, amongst other critical activities – all of which increase people's capacity to survive, reconcile and move forward in safety and dignity. We conduct advocacy within these sectors and on other priority issues. Advocacy is just one component in an overall approach which includes *mutually supportive* livelihoods, health, infrastructure, water and sanitation (watsan) and advocacy activities amongst others.

NGOs working in the humanitarian sector often hark back to the failures of Rwanda as a seminal moment in our history – the horrors of that event have scarred our industry. It has been well established that our assistance helped to feed, clothe and shelter perpetrators of genocide.

This realisation reaffirmed what many people knew to be one of the great paradoxes of the work we do. That while we make every effort to be non-partisan in our affiliations and impartial in the delivery of our assistance – if we are ignorant of the political and cultural machinations of any given context – there is a very strong likelihood that our assistance will be manipulated by one or all parties to the conflict.

Yet, in the process of obtaining contextual information to improve our programming, for a human rights based organisation such as Oxfam – as opposed to a non-rights based organisation such as the ICRC – it becomes very difficult to remain non-partisan if the information you collect suggests mass atrocities have occurred or forewarns of gross crimes against humanity.

What we do with the information we obtain is a critical decision that can have disastrous impacts upon our staff and those people to whom we provide assistance. It can also jeopardise the 'humanitarian' project that Henri Dunant and others envisioned. The original intent was to alleviate suffering not to prevent it. Yet if we do nothing with such information – are we then complicit in any atrocities that do occur?

With the tide of history, most people now working in the sector do not believe it is enough to just alleviate suffering. Yes we must continue to assist the victims of armed conflict, but we must also do what we can to ensure that future atrocities do not occur, that they have the protection they require.

Within Oxfam, we have a clearly defined focus on trying to ensure that people affected by conflict or disaster are able to access the 'protection and assistance they require, when they require it and for as long as they require it, irrespective of who or where they are or of how they are afflicted'. That is our agreed objective in conducting humanitarian responses and advocacy. Our conscience and our mandate demand that we do more than keep people alive to be slaughtered on some other day.

Rwanda spawned reflection in many of our institutions on modes of decision making and operating. I believe NGOs have made tremendous changes since the mid-90s in the way we provide assistance and in the way we engage with those people and institutions who have the responsibility, capability and/or authority to prevent human atrocities. Overall, I think it is fair to say that the sector is more politically aware and our responses to humanitarian crises are more sensitive to the impacts we have upon the dynamics of the conflict than ever before. But more needs to be done.

Oxfam sees humanitarian protection as a broad concept that involves positive changes in social systems, customs and laws that act to protect people. For protection to be sustainable the interrelated web of social systems, customs and laws that act to provide comfort and encourage peace must be rebuilt.

Situations are declared humanitarian crises when systems have broken down to a point that the international community must provide welfare and protection – the internal will or capacity of a country has failed. We are an agency that is committed to the concept of protection. By this we mean we are committed to assisting individuals, families and communities to strengthen and rebuild their own non-violent protective capacities, to re-establish safety nets and when all else fails we are committed to advocating for international action to intervene to protect people whose lives are at risk.

To this end we have been a strident supporter of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect principle. I'll talk more about R2P later.

Advocacy has emerged within our agency as another technical skill that is required to undertake a best-practice response to humanitarian crises arising out of war or conflict. We are regularly deploying policy officers, information officers or advocacy advisers with our emergency teams and providing training and support for field staff to be effective advocates. The analysis they provide deepens the sophistication of impact assessments and program targeting as well as providing a sound basis for ensuring that international responses are appropriate in size and focus.

The reason for this is simple. When responding to an emergency, we all have a particular job to do, we take a particular perspective and to some degree see what we want to see, within our specified framework. Nutritionists see nutritional issues, water engineers see (or look for) water, public health specialists see hygiene practices, livelihood experts see economic opportunities etc. So what should an advocate see? An advocate should see the root causes of the conflict; the appropriateness of the humanitarian response in scale or focus; the figures or groups who hold power within the conflict; the people, governments or agencies that can exercise influence over the effectiveness of the humanitarian response or the conflict and so on. An advocate sees how power is being exercised in relation to the conflict and the response to that conflict.

This is not to say a public health specialist, engineer, nurse, doctor or logistician will not see these issues. It is not even to say, that these people are not great advocates in their own right, and in respect of the sector they are working within. The point is that advocates are looking for something quite different to a public health engineer, a nurse, doctor, livelihoods adviser, program coordinator or logistician. It is their job to analyse information and seek to use it to ensure a better response and that more pressure is placed on parties to the conflict to ensure the protection of civilians.

The big difference is that it is the job of an advocate to look for those people and agencies who have 'responsibility' to do the things we are often left doing or to prevent the atrocities that keep us doing the things we are doing. The advocate comes to an emergency with a very clear rationale to get the responsible authorities doing the work that they should be doing so we can go home. The responsible authorities may be local female or male leaders (as in the case referred to above), may be police, local government or national authorities, military, UN agencies or peacekeeping troops. NGOs such as Oxfam are non-mandated, non-government and not-for-profit – what this means in humanitarian crisis situations is that we choose to be doing the work we are doing because some other mandated or responsible body lacks the will or capacity to get the job done. Advocacy is one strategy that helps in avoiding these situations becoming permanent – aid dependence.

Can external humanitarian interventions really help to build resilience?

Humanitarian crises, whether driven by conflict or disaster, represent a failure in local and national methods to protect people from famine, disease and/or abuse. Whether there is an intention to violate human rights on a mass scale, or whether government's lack the ability or will to protect people, there is a manifest failure in governance that overwhelms the resilience of people. *People are dying or will imminently die.*

This is not to say that communities are dependent upon government or outside leadership for survival, or that they are not resilient in times of crisis. Resilience is built around the social systems, customs and laws that act to provide protection. These layers begin with the family unit and expand out to the local, regional, national and ultimately the international system. As each layer of protection breaks down and safety nets erode people become more and more insecure and become more and more embroiled in conflict. They become, if you like, less resilient.

In such instances of humanitarian crises – that is when systems have broken down to a point that the international community must provide welfare and protection, external intervention is critical to prevent the breaking of resilience.

In the lead up to such instances, external intervention reinforces resilience. The hope of assistance and protection from the humanitarian community in itself, provides strength, builds resilience.

However, we must be balanced in our assessment of the impacts of external interventions. As stated previously there are good and bad programs and good and bad advocacy. The classic case is the unintended consequences of food aid. The flooding of local markets with massive quantities of food aid can have immensely deleterious impacts on local farmers, merchants and spin off industries. It can, and has, killed livelihoods and created overnight aid dependence, which clearly undermines local resilience.

Nonetheless, what I am talking about today is broader than the nature of the interventions we implement. I don't want us to focus on what a good intervention or a bad intervention would look like. What I'm talking about is the motivation to intervene at all.

I firmly believe based on many discussions I've had with people devastated by humanitarian crises, that the spirit of an international humanitarian intervention does, in and of itself, build resilience.

This gets to the heart or spirit of the intervention. Humanitarianism is an ethic that builds hope, optimism and resilience in all of us. Those affected *and unaffected* by the worst atrocities. It speaks to a fundamental belief in human kind and love for humanity.

This brings me to one other key issue that Oxfam is advocating on and has particular resonance to Africa. It is the emerging norm of the Responsibility to Protect. This principle, in a nutshell, states that where governments do not have the will or capacity to protect civilians from imminent or actual war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide, or

crimes against humanity; then the international community has a responsibility to intervene to protect those people.

We believe this principle, if the political will can be generated, has the potential to provide unprecedented standards of safety and protection for populations threatened by such atrocities. It is well known that responses from the international community to protect civilians from war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing or genocide have been grossly inadequate, usually late and ill-equipped. The principle has the potential of initiating action to stem violence and atrocities well before the resilience of people breaks.

The responsibility to protect, agreed by governments of the General Assembly at the UN's 50th Anniversary World Summit in 2005 outlines a framework of action that will prevent, respond to, and rehabilitate after mass atrocities. It is a framework of international intervention that stresses governmental responsibility in securing the protection of civilians, but in their failure the responsibility of the international community. It is a significant norm when discussing resilience, because it is, in substance, a form of early warning system, with associated actions. It tells us when resilience is low. While the preventative aspects of the principle are yet to be detailed, in time we hope the norm will provide some measure of protection well before mass atrocities and flight are occurring.

To return to a point I made at the beginning of this presentation and one of the fundamental motivations for Oxfam's support of the Responsibility to Protect and protection approaches generally – is that they are focused on building responsibility at all levels of leadership. No individual is resilient in the face of all odds, we all need resilient systems at local, national and international levels in order that the individual is firm in his/her belief that protection can be found. *That their situation is never without hope - hopeless.*

The international humanitarian and development sector plays a critical role in this, and advocacy as one of our key tools can help build the systems and accountable governance that will reinforce resilience. We need mutually reinforcing systems from the family through to the local, state, national and international levels that people never have their resilience tested to breaking point. They can live in full realization of their rights.

Finally, I want to discuss one issue that relates more to how advocacy looks in practice and the perceived negative impacts of advocacy. I want to answer the question **does advocacy endanger? Can it undermine resilience?**

I believe the principal reluctance in 'doing' advocacy from within our sector comes from a belief or perception that it endangers programs. I guess, what I'm trying to get at today is that 'advocacy' approaches are used by all of us to varying degrees. We engage with power holders at different levels and we all try to influence them – whether it is for the protection of human rights, more support, humanitarian access, other pertinent operational issues or on the broader root causes or triggers of conflict. We often, using our different methods and approaches, advocate to ensure that states honour their obligations towards us as the humanitarian sector. None of us benignly program in ignorance of the influence that powerful figures (local, national and international) have over our programs and have over the people we work with.

I think, in some respects advocacy has got a dirty name largely because one of the tools of advocacy – large public denunciations of powerful figures or organizations – is one which many agencies are absolutely opposed to on 99% of issues. For example, this method does contravene the ICRC's principle of humanitarian neutrality. However, just because agencies do not apply this one method, does not mean they are not conducting advocacy. The ICRC has incredible influence and access, it continues to shape international humanitarian law and firmly agitates for state adherence to it. If this is not advocacy then I don't know what is. Henri Dunant's advocacy has had an unmitigated impact on the lives of millions of people and established some basic 'humanitarian' principles that have changed the face of war.

My point is that while we may all apply different approaches, we all have a base motivation to see responsibility holders take responsibility. To protect people from crisis, to assist them when they are in crisis and to provide asylum when the sovereign states' capacity or will is inadequate.

If this is our shared interest, then why not try to do it better.

Poor advocacy can endanger, yes. It can endanger the people who provide you with information, the partners or staff who collect and provide the information and the many people who may be relying, to varying degrees, upon the programs you are running if your agency is forced to close. However, poor advocacy is no more harmful than poor programming – they both hold the potential to have devastating impacts. Indeed the devastating consequences of poor programming are better understood than those of poor advocacy. The entire Do No Harm project was pursued based on evidence of just how dangerous our good intentions can be if they are poorly thought out and poorly implemented. Do No Harm as a principle must be applied to advocacy as well.

In complex emergencies, agencies must be conscious of what and how they are advocating and how it will be perceived. However, this is no reason not to do it. If anything it is a very good justification to invest resources into ensuring that it is done professionally.

The difficulty is what I believe to be an outdated adage that it is better to keep our mouths shut, our programs open and to leave the politics alone. It refers to the myth that in politically antagonistic environments we must make a choice between doing advocacy or doing programs. We must choose between hurling verbal assaults from the outside or giving out food parcels inside. This analogy which I often hear, even within Oxfam, is a gross oversimplification of the tools available to advocates and the political space that is, to varying degrees, always available in complex emergencies.

Humanitarian advocates should, and do, employ a variety of nuanced methods to apply pressure based on a solid understanding of what the risks are, who the key powers are, how they could be influenced and who the best person or Agency is to do the influencing. They will rarely be effective working in isolation and for that reason strategically build relationships and alliances with a variety of actors.

Conclusion

I hope this presentation has helped broaden the conceptualization of advocacy, allay any fears that it is a divisive or antagonistic activity and opened people up to the

inherently sustainable outcomes that can be achieved through 'responsibilising' authorities. Advocacy, in combination with all of our other activities can have the effect of reinforcing resilience at the individual, community and, even, national level. Critically though, it can have the impact of preventing the breaking of resilience. *Resilience is reinforced by the belief/hope that if things turn really ugly, the international community will in a timely way bring sufficient resources to alleviate the suffering and to protect people from mass atrocities.* Resilience is catastrophically broken if we do not. We, the community of un-mandated, non-government agencies cannot physically protect people from genocide. BUT, we can advocate for this principle.