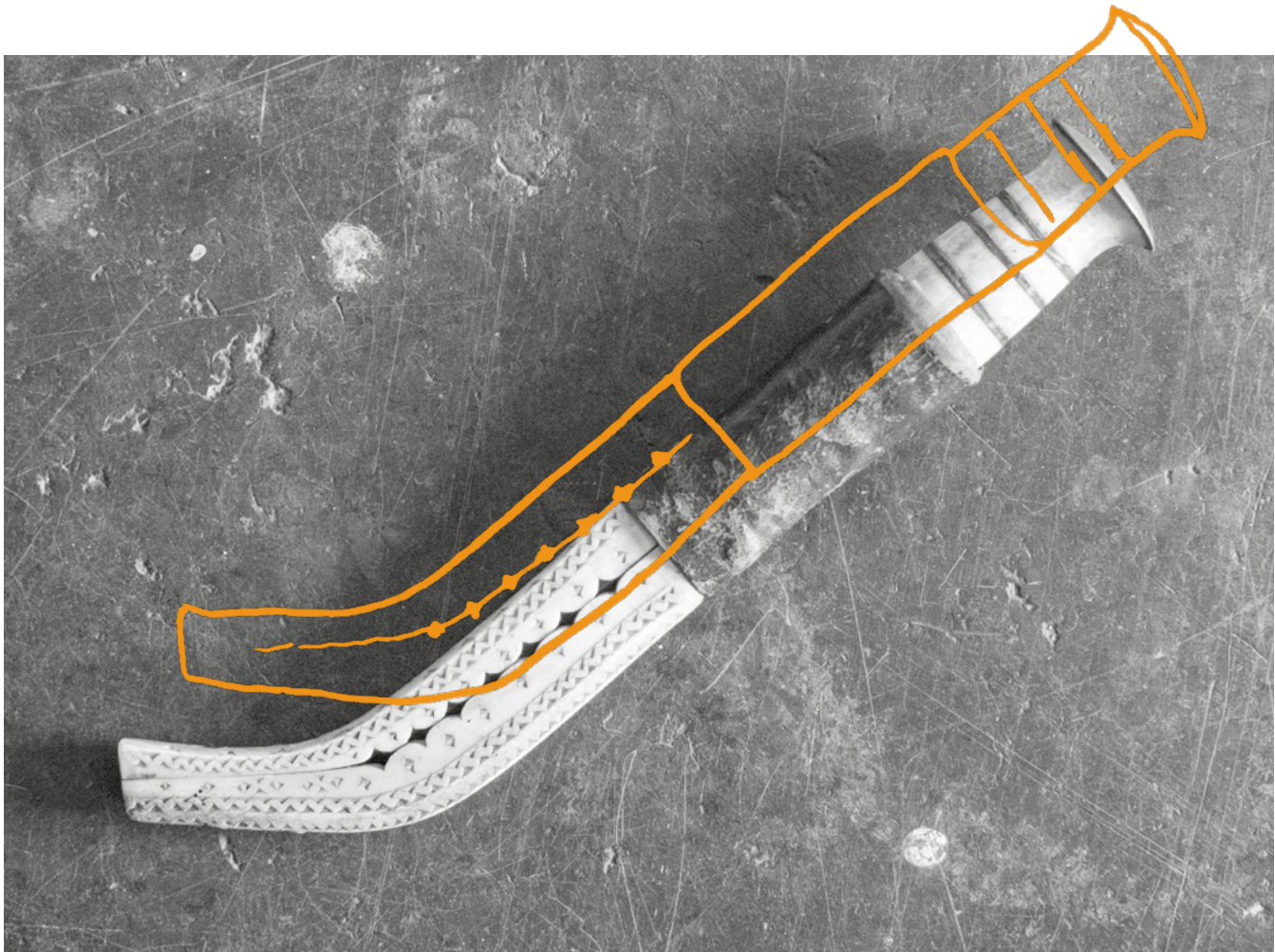


Humanitarian leadership under pressure

Angelita Caredda



The Sami knife. The Sami knife is an indispensable tool, woven into the fabric of everyday life of the traditional indigenous community. Serving as an extension of the hand, whether used for marking reindeer calves, preparing food, or fulfilling other tasks, its enduring sharpness and versatility makes it essential. Similarly, humanitarian leaders rely on such steadfast support. Angelita Caredda addresses the realities faced by humanitarian workers in conflict zones, grappling with ethical quandaries surrounding the safety of staff, and the complexities of organisational alignment amid strife.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Having worked for almost two decades in the humanitarian sector in different contexts has given me some exposure to the terrible human suffering experienced by communities around the world, often caused or fuelled by armed conflict.

To say that every context is unique and that every crisis warrants being prioritised by the international community to alleviate humanitarian emergencies and to address risks to global peace and security is stating the obvious. That said, there are some cases where the uniqueness of a context and the severity of a crisis, which threatens to have grave and lasting consequences, makes this particularly true.

The current war in Gaza is such a case.¹ It provides a pertinent context for examining challenges to humanitarian response and leadership by the United Nations (UN) in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Security and ethical dilemmas as key challenges

One cannot overestimate how the fluidity of a situation affects the ability to operate when considering the challenge of security dimensions facing humanitarian actors. In previous times, being an international humanitarian worker gave you a certain sense of protection.

One could, even if it was a false sense of security, assume that there was no direct threat to one's person. As a humanitarian worker you did not expect to be targeted. Today, in Gaza for example, this is not the case. Responders are now just as vulnerable as everyone else and yet they still have the responsibility to serve populations that rely on their humanitarian support and relief. We have a duty of service.

Adopting the 'context is everything' mantra, the imperative to be flexible and responsive, means sometimes doing something today that even yesterday you decided could or would not be done. When the situation is

changing day by day, or even hour to hour, you need to find a way to work in this reality while doing your best to address the criticality and urgency of needs.

Another skill that is critical in fragile settings is the ability to plan five steps ahead and to take calculated risks, documenting as you go what factors informed your decisions. And at the same time this needs to be balanced by the modesty to go back and revise your decision as needed.

A second critical challenge is found in the ethical dilemmas brought about by the distinction that is made between national and international staff. This becomes particularly evident during a crisis.

While it is not new, for those involved the experience is terrible every time. In the wake of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021, or the Turkish military operation in Northeast Syria in 2019, or even currently in Gaza, international NGOs and UN agencies had to evacuate international staff for security reasons, while national staff were often left behind.

We can provide various forms of financial and psychological support, but we cannot take all our colleagues to a safe place, and they must fend for themselves. Although this is clearly stated in our security plans and the national staff express an understanding of the situation, knowing we are leaving colleagues behind is devastating, primarily for them, but also for those who lead the operations. This is why decisions on physical presence and movement in countries receiving humanitarian assistance are not left up to an individual.

These are difficult issues raising complex questions. At what point do you ask people working in the humanitarian sector to risk their lives to go back to work? How do you decide what is most important when asking them to take those risks? What is truly lifesaving? Is it the delivery

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of water? Is it education? While we normally consider education lifesaving, in the context of the outbreak of the Gaza war, for example, its criticality was lower than that of other interventions and every single movement and operation had to be approved based on its criticality and our capacity to deliver. Five months into the war, the context and capacities have changed.²

Overall, having Standard Operating Procedures helps to guide the humanitarian sector, but it is still challenging for those in leadership positions to make decisions in individual situations.

There is also the question of what your responsibility is vis-à-vis the rest of the population who do not have any connections to international organisations. What is the impact on those who are less fortunate?

When considering the ultimate risk faced by humanitarian and development workers of losing one's life, the UN has been hit harder than anyone else in the current war in Gaza. Among the over 13,000 UN staff working in the Gaza Strip, fatalities occur almost every single day. More UN aid workers have been killed there than in any comparable period in the organisation's history.

Leadership amidst a tsunami of information

Reflecting on what has changed over the past 15 to 20 years that has had an impact on leadership, one of the most significant is the impact of media. To be more specific, it is about the quantity of information and the diversity of sources as well as the speed at which it is all made available. There is now a constant flow of information and updates from a tremendous diversity of sources.

Processing this amount of data in real time and then knowing how to translate that into action is a daunting task. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by the information and to worry about the risks of having missed something.

Additionally, what I know now may not be the same as what I will know in a few hours. It might be difficult to make decisions with limited information, but doing so with an overwhelming amount of data is almost harder. There is a risk of getting stuck in thinking that perhaps more information will be made available soon that will allow for an even better decision. That mindset can almost be paralysing.

This is compounded by the social media effect which manifests itself in a constant anxiety about being exposed or shamed on social media about what you have done or did not do and why you have or have not done those things.

We saw this at the beginning of the current crisis in Gaza. UN leaders were criticised from all sides – including by their own staff – for the positions the organisation was taking.

Several international NGOs experienced a tremendous outcry for not making stronger public statements or taking positions on the situation. UN agencies who did not speak up right away were harshly criticised for that and faced a backlash. This is a very fine line to walk.

In a turn of events, three weeks into the war, the UN Secretary-General's public statements on Gaza were remarkable when he described it as a crisis of humanity or when saying that the October 7 attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum and voicing concern about the clear violations of international humanitarian law witnessed in Gaza.³

He has since gained enormous popularity in the region but paid the price for this outspokenness; the UN as a whole is paying the price. The previous UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Palestine did not have her visa renewed. When Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, wanted to visit Israel and Palestine early on in the crisis, he had his visa denied. It cannot be ruled out that this

was a result of having been quite vocal about the events unfolding in the region.

Navigating the stormy waters of neutrality

Never before has there been this kind of pressure for humanitarian responders within the UN and among NGOs to take a position in a conflict or crisis situation. Perhaps the context of conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region can be compared, but many consider the situation in Gaza to be extreme. There is a feeling of deep anger towards the UN for not being able to make it stop.

It feels like neutrality is out the window. As humanitarian actors we are impartial and independent when it comes to parties in a conflict, but there is increasing pressure from activist groups and also from within parts of the humanitarian sector to take sides.

The Norwegian Refugee Council takes the view that as a humanitarian organisation we are bound to the principles of humanitarian action, including the principle of neutrality, meaning that we abstain from taking sides in hostilities. However, we are not neutral to the suffering of a civilian population. Being neutral does not mean that we will refrain from advocating for the rights of the civilian population and from commenting on the humanitarian implications of conflict, or against violations of international humanitarian law. Regrettably, in today's reality every word and every statement may be misconstrued or used to label you one way or the other.

Social media platforms exacerbate this dynamic. They create a feeling that everyone is 'on the same level' when it comes to knowledge and experience on a certain topic, and communicating in front of a large audience seems to entice people to be more aggressive, provocative, or less respectful than they perhaps would have been otherwise.

Navigating all of this requires a new approach and different kinds of communication skills, especially among those in leadership positions.

Leaders need to show that they are sensitive to the situation and to others' experiences and perspectives and not react immediately. Where a strong leader perhaps before would be expected to respond swiftly and harshly to behaviour that challenged their authority – especially if done so in front of a large audience – what is expected or needed now is a display of empathy and the strength to be able to absorb critique without seeing it as undermining one's leadership. This is not easy when working in fragile and conflict-affected situations where stress is high and the context constantly changing.

Teamwork and diversity in decision-making

What is important in navigating any of these challenges is to make sure you are not an individual making decisions in a vacuum, but rather to ground your decision-making in deliberations with a group of people who are thinking together. You must surround yourself with people who have diverse backgrounds, complementary skills, and experiences to help analyse complex situations in all their dimensions, give you input that brings different perspectives, consider various options, and avoid tunnel vision.

In thinking about the leadership skills needed in conflict-affected or fragile settings, one of the more important ones is the capacity and the willingness to consult others and to genuinely listen to different views and to make decisions that you then own.

At the end of the day, you need to take charge and be accountable for your conclusions and stand for them whether they turn out to be good or bad.

A wide diversity of experiences is important since you can draw on what you and others have seen and learned in other situations in order to anticipate what will or should be done next. That said, it is critical that you don't put too much trust in what has worked before, even in the same context. A malnutrition crisis that took place and was responded to in Haiti will not be the same and does not call for an identical response replicated in Kenya.

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In the case of Gaza, some who have worked there for many years are acknowledging that the situation and what is needed is unlike anything they have seen before.

So, decision-makers and practitioners with lots of professional experience need to learn how to draw on their learning with the humility of recognising the uniqueness of each context. Working with and consulting a diverse team of colleagues is crucial in that regard.

Leadership into the future

In the wake of events like the war in Gaza, large segments of societies in countries across the world are challenging the multilateral system centred around the UN. They accuse it of being too risk adverse, too slow to adapt to changes, and too zealous in following its internal norms without providing viable alternatives that can contribute to solving the multiple crises facing the world today.

In my career, I have had the privilege to work alongside UN leaders who have demonstrated unwavering commitment, principled action and capacity to navigate the complexities of humanitarian diplomacy. In an ever changing and ever more demanding world, where the authority of the UN is called into question and traditional parameters are under stress, it is crucial that the system integrates the invaluable lessons learnt in fragile settings and conflict-affected contexts.

Embodying the humanitarian principles, fully embracing diversity, fostering genuine inclusion, being accountable, demonstrating modesty and empathy – these are some of the skills that the people we aim to serve and those we work with expect from us. These are some of the characteristics and competences that the excellent UN talent coaching and mentoring programmes should actively promote at all levels and that modern UN leaders must demonstrate, now and into the future. ■

Endnotes

- ¹ An Israeli military operation in Gaza in response to a violent attack on southern Israel by Palestinian militants on 7 October 2023 has resulted in more than 30,000 Palestinians killed at the time of writing and nearly all of Gaza's 2,3 million population internally displaced. Some analysts within the UN and media outlets, including BBC, AP News, The Washington Post and Al Jazeera among others, have described the rate and scale of destruction of infrastructure in Gaza as the worst in modern history.
- ² At the time of writing in early 2024.
- ³ United Nations, 'Amid Increasingly Dire Humanitarian Situation in Gaza, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Hamas Attacks Cannot Justify Collective Punishment of Palestinian People' (New York, United Nations, 24 October 2023) SC/15462, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15462.doc.htm>.