Season 3. Episode 2: Transparency to the Bone: Rethinking Remote Aid with Ina Bluemel

Hisham Allam: Hello everyone and welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues, where we discuss closely the realities and the challenges of humanitarian aid today, I'm your host, Hisham Allam. In today's episode, we are tackling a topic that goes to the heart of how aid is delivered in the world's most dangerous and inaccessible places - remote humanitarian aid. With more areas becoming impossible to reach in person, remote management has rapidly grown, but how effective is it in practice? And when aid workers can't set foot on site, how can we be sure help is actually reaching those who need it the most? To help unravel these complexities, I'm pleased to be joined by Ina Bluemel, a seasoned humanitarian professional with over 20 years of experience leading emergency health WASH and logistics operation and disaster and conflict zones worldwide. Ina's roles with the WHO and IFRC, and multiple NGOs specializing in healthy cluster coordination, program evaluation, remote monitoring and capacity building. Hello Ina, welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues.

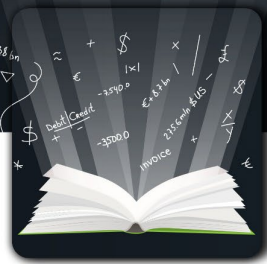**Ina Bluemel:** Thank you so much for having me.

Hisham Allam: Ina, what are the main challenges humanitarian organizations face when managing aid projects remotely, especially in conflict or hard to access areas?

Ina Bluemel: Oh, that's a very big and really important question and one that we can talk about for hours on end. I'd say the challenges alone are enormous. There is the fact that you are so remote from the scene that you need to use a lot of different tools. Modalities different level of trust and experiences to be sure that you get as close as possible to the needs that you want to meet.

And you will have to have, relationship building happening at the same time as getting a response going and all of that without being on the ground, being able to foster the networking, the coordination and the actual starting of the, of the operation physically present. So, it's a can of worms to be honest.

And depending on multiple factors. I hope we can dive into some of those with more questions.

Hisham Allam: Yes, please. Go ahead. I'm curious to know these factors that could help us explain these challenges.

Ina Bluemel: For starters let's just use an imaginary scenario here. A sudden onset is always interesting to discuss because the lower onsets are the ones where you have time to prepare, where you've got probably a network established already, situation deteriorating over time, and you have a little bit more structure in place already.

But sudden onset is always quite a challenge to get started, especially when you can't access the area yourself and you haven't established networks. So, relationship building, identifying partners who would be able to conduct the work that you would normally doing physically yourself, or physically as a team is a key relevance going through national authorities- always a very important requirement. Being sure that you remain impartial and neutral maintain your humanitarian standards while working with diverse actors that you aren't familiar with requires effort, a lot of effort. I think one of the things that, doesn't differentiate but sort of intensifies when you work remotely, you have to have a huge amount of trust for starters in people that you haven't met, but you also have a huge volume of different things that you need to consider from various different angles, working with your team that's likely also remote, but also working with your counterparts in country.

And that's I think one of the key issues that we're looking at is that we are pushing a responsibility towards people that we aren't able to or willing to take physical risks exposure to threats that, we need to consider just as much for local partners as we would for ourselves. So, this is never a one-man show.

You can't have one person remotely managing a response. You need to have all the different aspects covered by a team that's working remotely and knowing their work and knowing how to integrate their component of the work into a sort of a network of different support mechanisms to partners who sometimes aren't very experienced and sometimes are very experienced in the way they work, have established working mechanisms that are very often very well-functioning.

And tapping into that, not overriding it, learning from it. And growing with that is, as you can hear it's really very complex.

Hisham Allam: I'd like to reflect this on your rich expertise as a partner first, what would you do to gain the trust of the donors to cooperate with you remotely?

Ina Bluemel: Ah, yeah, that's the key factor actually, because without the donor on board, you can't really operate, can you? And very many donors have recently I think come up with their own strategies and mechanisms to support or reject supporting remote management operations.

So, they have frameworks in place, and you have to fit into their frameworks so that you can access their funding. Which is fair enough- you want to be accountable towards the donors, much as you want to be accountable to the people receiving the aid you're giving. However, those frameworks are very often quite strict and difficult to adapt to a context, which is something that I'd like to say has taken shape over the last 20 years in humanitarian aid in a way that I found increasingly difficult to align myself with. We have become more and more structured and structured and structured systems have come in place that are of course helpful when you are trying to apply aid at scale. But at the same time, the downside to it is their lack of adaptability to a local context.

The limited ability to actually have a local context in form and shape. The framework vice versa. So, you, you might find yourself having a very specific context and a very rigid or globally thought of and structured mechanism that you're trying to apply to that very specific context. And this is very much my personal observation that I'm sharing here with you.

What I have seen unfortunately is the structured support that is developed, the frameworks. Mechanisms. The strategies are very, very helpful for the donor side, for the aid-worker side, for even things like prepositioning, your stocks, having items in strategic locations to deploy them, the ways they are being deployed.

All of that is mechanized and structured. And it's meeting a situation where none of that really does fit to the benefit of the beneficiary to the best outcome of the situation you're trying to address. So, you have people going out assessing a situation. Collecting data, formulating answers as to what is needed and that is now meeting a structure.

And if I want to be snips here in industry and aid industry that has become so rigid that it doesn't really have the ability to adapt to the outcome of the questions you've asked. So somehow in that is this huge risk of you're asking questions. Your answer is A, but your structures are only providing B, C and D and it doesn't fit A, and somehow in the middle there are people depending and hoping, and people we want to be accountable for. People who we've asked questions and know the answers that we give are not really corresponding to the needs that we have assessed.

Hisham Allam: On the other side, what about the donors who are responsible for the money that they are spending? So how can they guarantee that the information and the data are correct, and this partner is trustful?

Ina Bluemel: Well, the answer to that is the core of what I love doing, which is monitoring and accountability. I never thought I would say this because I'm a passionate assessor.

Lots and lots of times I was, first on the ground or with the first on the ground, and assessing a situation, understanding the context and being able to provide the questions and the answers, and then sort of shape the aid around that has been my passion. But my passion now has become how can we be providing information, providing monitoring, providing analysis that is accountable towards the donor as much as to the beneficiary.

And unfortunately there is there's so many hurdles in the way of quality monitoring and evaluation in the field. One of them, I think the one that I have witnessed most often is really organization internal. Hasn't got anything to do with the context, but with the fact that teams are trying to get it right, really, really working very hard to get it right, still get it somewhat wrong because there's nothing like a perfect response. It's never perfect. There's always challenges. There's always lessons to be identified and lessons to be learned. And that's, I think, the way that we improve. But being transparent about those means being transparent towards the donor who has a natural skepticism towards what you're doing in the field, who requires an accountable response who requires us to be transparent about what we are doing with their money.

At the same time, if we admit we've got it wrong, the likelihood that we are gonna get money in the future is reduced. And that's something that is an inherent fear that many programmers are carrying with them, that if

they're transparent about the challenges faced along the way the donor will distance themselves for lack of better wording or withdraw, funding in the future.

It's not been rare that I have actually spoken with donors saying, oh, I know your organization did this and that in the South zone in 2013, and therefore we are naturally skeptical. So, people carry this fear of being transparent about the hiccups, the challenges, the misuse, the misappropriation that took place along the way.

All of which need to be, of course, limited to a minimum, but happen nevertheless, they keep us from being open and transparent with our donors and if we turn away from the donors, which I know we shouldn't, but we also need to look at our accountability towards beneficiaries the amount of times that I had challenges in my own teams, in my own organizations, in the operations I worked in to set up quality feedback mechanisms to actually gather feedback from the beneficiaries to who we are as accountable as we are to the donors so that we can capture what they perceive as going wrong including you're not meeting my needs - it meets reluctance because it means we expose ourselves, we make ourselves vulnerable to criticism, and that often defines whether or not you gonna be successfully evaluated with your program and get money for the next round. So, transparency is a major issue, I think, in the accountability that we have towards those, and the fear of punishment if you get it wrong.

Hisham Allam: So, can we say that these are only the main risks that come with relying on secondhand data?

Ina Bluemel: No, there's, there's so much more. Sort of the, what I think the mainstream concerns about remote support is that there is misappropriation, that there is misuse of funding, that there's not the most efficient and effective implementation in the way that we perceive it as necessary. The risk of not being physically on the ground means we might overlook needs. We might rely on the wrong voices and only hear the perception of a certain group that's affected or a certain part of the population.

To be 100% certain that what we see, what we hear is matching the needs on the ground. And very often to the benefit of people who are particularly vulnerable. But there are multiple mechanisms that can be implemented, old school as well as new school. That can all be put in place.

What it does mean. And I think sometimes people think remote working is a bit like you can squeeze your couple of hours of work in between doing your laundry and having a fun afternoon in the garden with your kids is, it takes an enormous amount of extra work in making, getting things right. The gateway to getting things right is relationship building is strongly believing in the concept of localization.

Not for, you know, the, the term, not for the theory of it, but for really knowing without your local partners, you're dead in the water. And investing in them in the emergency is extremely time intensive. It can be really frustrating as well and there can be a lot of misperceptions, misunderstandings, but at the same time it is real push towards localized response. You have the advantage of, being able to engage your partners to the point where they take up responsibilities that they wouldn't if you were on the ground, where they feel the accountability, not just on paper, but they feel accountable for the work that they are personally doing. And all of that, I think is a real strength in remote support.
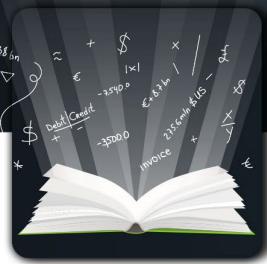
And something that can lead to something beautiful. As well as that said, that's the sudden onset response where you are literally having to make things up on the fly, sometimes bad enough as it sounds. Something that I think we can get stronger and better at as well is pre-investing, pre-positioning, pre capacity building.

Hisham Allam: How do the current guidelines, such as those from the EU, fall short, in defining and overseeing remote humanitarian aid and also what consequences does this have for monitoring, reporting and accountability?

Ina Bluemel: As I had described before, the rigidity of tools that are in place to prevent misappropriation and abuse of aid work, et cetera are so rigid that partners are spending a lot of time trying to fit their response into that very rigid setup that's established, especially by the EU. But there's others as well where you really are trying to put a square block into a round hole. I think that the tools develop, the mechanisms established need to become more adaptable to specific context, whether it being a context of conflict or a cultural context, or the combination of both and localization is the key to that.

Hisham Allam: Yeah. Back to the positive part, what are the key advantages of remote humanitarian aid, or in what ways has it enabled, continued assistance during crisis while physical access is impossible or highly dangerous?

Ina Bluemel: Well, the answer's almost already in your question. It's the ability to continue to provide aid. You are depending on local partners to take the risks for you. You have to be mindful of the risk pushing that takes place there, but you are able to continue reaching vulnerable people in contexts where you otherwise have lost the ability to provide aid. And that's, I think, an outstanding advantage over packing up and just accepting that you can't help.

And leave people to fend for themselves.

What I really like as well is the necessity for local capacity to thrive and to support local capacity that's already on the ground to build it and also to learn from it because it's a two-way story you may sit there as a humanitarian aid worker with 20 years of experiences, yet there is a context that you've never experienced before, and you have people who live in that context who can actually share and learn and teach you which then influences your, your own capacity to respond stronger and better in the next crisis.

So the localization I think is such an essential aspect of what we do, whether we are on the ground or we are not on the ground, is that we work with local knowledge, with local experience and make sure that is influencing and shaping the response just as much as our experience of working in different contexts across the globe.

I think something that we haven't touched upon yet is that we've got old ways and new ways to ensure that it can actually work to support humanitarian operations remotely. And the good old school is triangulation. Even if I have my physical presence in the context, I would still make sure that I validate information through very different avenues, different sources.

And being sure I get it right by not just listening to one voice, but multiple voices asking not just one question, but multiple questions or sometimes the same question in three different ways. So, triangulation, I think is, for me, probably the longest standing tool that I've been working with. But we also have modern technology that I don't think many of us, including me, have a full grasp of its capacities and, and the downfalls to it as well.

So, the usual ones being using digital assessment tools using mobile data, using GIS data and spatial data and so forth, but also using artificial intelligence, which I think is a strong push a direction that's strongly pushed.

Hisham Allam: Given your background in establishing MEAL frameworks and remote monitoring for complex emergency projects such as your work with WHO in Ukraine and Bangladesh. How do you ensure the accuracy and reliability of data collected remotely, especially when difficult access is limited.

Ina Bluemel: Secondary data has a bad rep. And I have been as skeptical of secondary data as anyone. Primary data is always to be preferred, but secondary data to triangulate the data you're collecting primarily.
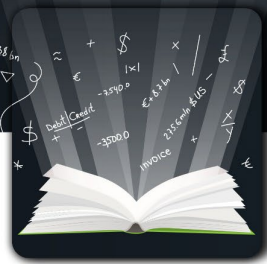
Hisham Allam: And then, if there's a conflict between the primary and the secondary. What can you do?

Ina Bluemel: Do your research, work hard, ask different voices, look into history. Look into what happened in similar contexts and then really dive into the fact that, sort of new technologies are more and more accessible to more and more people.

The amount of context in which I didn't expect. Digital availability of, you know, just even people having a mobile phone, people being able to provide, interview feedback from focus group discussions through mobile data has been enormous and I feel like I'm the one on the back foot not knowing how to tap into the various different means of, data collecting modalities that have become available recently. And, and I think this is where there's a point that I was having in the back of my mind in preparation for this conversation- there's a new possibility of diversifying your teams on both sides local as much as on the organizational side by having technical experts that you would normally not have on board. Someone who knows about artificial intelligence and how to apply it, how to be cautious about it. GIS, data experts, mapping experts. We've seen them become a lot more present lately in your teams and having sort of the holistic approach to collecting data informed by a monitoring framework.

But being open to new and alternative tools to the good old is crucial.

Hisham Allam: The EU audit highlights, risk of fraud, diversion, and reputational harm. From your perspective, how can agencies better protect humanitarian funding and maintain transparency and trust in remote operations?

Ina Bluemel: I think the gateway to that is and will always be transparency, which is probably one of the most challenged aspects of it all together. But as long as. There's, even if it's just the perceived feeling of playing with your cards, with your deck hidden it there will, you will always find skepticism on, on one side or the other.

And to me, I've always operated on the principle of being transparent to the bone, including we have run into trouble, we have made a mistake. This is how we are trying to correct it. You are not just transparent for the sake of sharing your perceived failures, but working towards answers, working towards answers collectively.

And that requires donors to be present and awake and interested and. Ideally on the ground and engaged so that there's a clear and transparent understanding of what's going on and not just a very rigid online system where you have to put your monitoring data in and hope that there's not a red light saying you've got to, you've entered the data wrong.

But it also, I think. As a matter of respect towards the people receiving the aid, it requires transparency towards what is being achieved or what is trying to be achieved with the aid that you're providing. Then needs to be feedback mechanisms, which are still surprisingly, often not included sufficiently enough or practicalize even enough in a humanitarian response to have not only acceptance, but buy-in and support to what you're trying to achieve, both from your local partners, the beneficiaries who have to receive the aid as well as the donor who's giving them money. And unfortunately, I've seen transparency being perceived as vulnerability which of course it is, but at the same time, it is, for me, the only way forward in overcoming the skepticism.

And my frank opinion is that many of the challenges, especially raised in the order of the EU framework, I see those, if you have people on the ground or not, doesn't really make that much of a difference. And some things are possible to institutionalize and I wish they would frameworks for transparency, for example.

And the perception that being transparent doesn't mean making yourself vulnerable to punishment but open to learning. Moving forward jointly.

Hisham Allam: So, you are speaking about the strategy and the framework and this, this could put the main principles, or we can say the strategy of the work, right?

Ina Bluemel: Yeah. That's my firm belief and I feel like I'm swimming a little bit against the tide with that. I think there are certain things that are really difficult to institutionalize as such. And it almost needs a radical rethinking of how we perceive the provision of humanitarian aid.

And that is actually probably a very timely subject given the political, global context we are operating in at the moment. And the uproar that goes through the sector, given the fact that funding has become so scarce and, deploying or not deploying is now a question of whether funding is available and not, whether there are needs or there are no needs.

That a rethinking of how we transparently deal with the issues that create concern and skepticism in remote management, just as much as when you're in the field is something that needs to be looked at.

Hisham Allam: You know, with your leadership experience and coordinating multi-partner health responses remotely, including during the COVID-19 pandemic what are the most effective strategies for maintaining a strong coordination and the assurance across diverse actors working from distance?

Ina Bluemel: I've operated like this my entire life. It's basically the principle I try to live by, which is having trust, building trust is one thing, and building trust is a huge amount of work sometimes.

Hisham Allam: But how, how do you build trust? How do you build trust?

Ina Bluemel: It's interesting. I think the way I was able to experience the world is by being fairly passionate about what I do and hoping that compassion and passion for what I'm doing is inspiring to others who also give their ultimate best to achieve a common goal. And so, we keep coming back to the question of vulnerability but also skills and skill sets.

Something that I find important is to approach people, not with people, teams, organizations, not with looking at what they don't have, but looking at what they have. Look at what you bring to the table and not what you don't bring to the table. Very often you throw into something, and you have to make something from it.

And you come with all your bit received ideas of how things should be done. And you'd like people to dump your way of thinking, and you are cut short on the fact that there are other people with different experiences in the context that you may or may not know. And being able to establish the confidence in the situation that everyone knows they can bring the best they have to the table and collectively, collaboratively you make something out of it that points towards the direction you want to take.

That sounds very clouded, but it actually does work in my experience. Winning by giving being present, being hardworking, being committed, being curious things that I would want to bring to a context where I hugely depend on other people to do work, the work that I would love to be doing but can't because I'm not physically present.

Yeah. And then there's a lot of experience that comes with asking the right questions, having made experiences in the past that you've learned from that something that is difficult to institutionalize again, that comes with the variety of people you have around the table.

Hisham Allam: Speaking about asking the right questions, how have the recent aid funding cuts, such as reductions by USAID and other international donors affected the humanitarian sector? Do these financial pressures push organizations more toward remote management, or do they create a new obstacle for effective aid delivery?

Ina Bluemel: Well, the obstacle is clear. When there's no money and no means to provide aid, then people won't be reached. So, I think there is a very tragic restructuring of humanitarian funding going elsewhere which is to the detriment of the ever-growing number of people in. So that is very concerning development that needs to

be addressed by the humanitarian sector in the most creative and hopefully novel way of thinking. Something that every emergency has opened up in my perspective. And this is an emergency, we don't need to look at one in particular, but the withdrawal of humanitarian funding is a humanitarian emergency that needs to be addressed. There was sort of deterioration, but then there's this very sudden change as at the beginning of this year that opens up this opportunity to reshape and to rethink. And that's where I'm a little pessimistic because I have seen those windows, those opportunities opening up in every single emergency I've been, whether it was, small flood in Namibia or the COVID pandemic where rethinking becomes possible, where, which is that we've previously not heard. Were now being heard where concepts that haven't been trialed and tested are now being put to a test. However, in the humanitarian world as much as in all other contexts, there are very strong, very traditional, very loud voices, and power is a place that tends to somehow feel that space very quickly and very dominantly.

And I can only wish that there is enough shakeup, enough momentum gathered for new voices and other voices to be heard. And rethinking of humanitarian aid is possible. Something that I have seen. I was very fortunate to do a few analyses of projects and programs in the past where the actors weren't the traditional ones were young and upcoming agencies were the non-traditional humanitarian space, so to say. New actors started to think and there's been really great novel ideas which weren't able to come to the surface because there is the big old system in place that has become more and more filling the space and becoming rather rigid and not very adaptable and not very flexible. There's little wiggle rooms that have opened up in the past on small scales, if we could look at them, analyze them, and bring them more to scale without having the good old come back strong. That would be something I'd really like to see. I'm far from having the right answers here, but I have seen opportunities growing and developments happening that make me hopeful that something new will emerge, hopefully more inclusive.
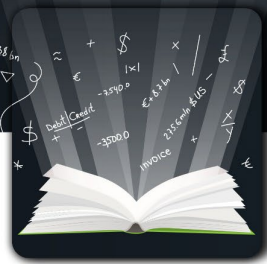
Can I actually add something onto this? That I find really important you know how we all speak of lessons learned as we do an evaluation, and then there's lessons learned and there's recommendations.

I almost get this knee jerk aggression when people tell me, but we've got lessons learned and I think you need to actually prove that you have learned the lessons before you claim you have learned them. You've identified them very well in monitoring. Evaluations are your tools to identify lessons unless they are being implemented and put to the test, they're not learned.

And it's something that had frustrated me for all my career is that we identify things small and large and they are almost stuck in the container. They hardly ever make it outside of the organization. Let alone into the sector and let alone accessible in a way that people can actually take those lessons identified forward and put good use on a larger scale.

That again, to me has a lot to do with some of those lessons, not necessarily being positive but negative. The more important that we learn from them, but they are kept sort of out of the limelight because it makes, potentially makes the organization look bad or the individuals involved or the project itself or the donor might be upset.

But we really seem to struggle in the humanitarian sector to look at the at the ColdStone truth, to be honest, which is the results of monitoring and the evaluation and the learning process that we are all starting. And then we don't take the step forward to have we actually implemented those lessons.

And then there's, out of that yes, comes more learning. So, we claim, we learn, we tick the box. It's so often M&E has got this rep where we have to tick the box. It's necessary and it's daunting and people don't like it. It's so amazing how beautiful M&E can work, especially if you have it combined with the feedback mechanisms that make sure that people are hurt, that are at the receiving end, and not just the donor is happy that you've ticked the box of having distributed something in a certain timeframe.

So, M&E can be this exciting, exhilarating project enhancing and possibly future influencing aspect of a humanitarian response and it, it regularly falls short of taking lessons forward to the point where they're actually learned and not just identified.

Hisham Allam: Thank you Ina for your words and this is very impressive.

And thank you to our listeners for joining us on this episode of DevelopmentAid Dialogues. A heartfelt thanks to Ina Bluemel for sharing her extensive expertise and firsthand experience and the challenges and innovations of remote humanitarian aid. Today's conversation shed light on both the complexities and the critical importance of delivering aid in hard-to-reach areas and the need for trust.

Coordination and adaptability in an ever-changing landscape. If you found value in today's discussion, please subscribe to DevelopmentAid Dialogues to stay connected with frontline experts and fresh perspectives shaping the future of humanitarian action.

We would love to hear your thoughts and suggestions for future topics. Reach out to us on our website or social media channels. I'm Hisham Allam, wishing you continued engagement and meaningful dialogue. Until next time. Goodbye.

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