

Humanitarian Aid and Musical Improvisation

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Scholarship on international development assistance is fraught with several theories, policies, instruments, and principles on aid intervention. The aid industry has evolved from a program of international support in the Marshall Plan during the Cold War to rebuild and support European countries, to an industry which sets out to support global poverty reduction, military interventions, and financial assistance to strengthen countries and governments. Consequently, foreign aid has become more of a product of the donors and recipients' foreign policy and commercial purposes rather than emphasizing its altruistic and developmental aspects. Oftentimes, humanitarian aid interventions mete out financial assistance based on political interests and economic allegiance. The category of aid highlighted in this paper is that which provides humanitarian relief in the incidence of natural or human-made calamities.

In this paper, the model of musical improvisation, as is lauded in the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) Project, is an interdisciplinary critical approach promoting alternate modes of resistance and dynamic dialogue. George E. Lewis (2002) asserts that improvisation in the musical arena is neither a style of music nor a body of musical techniques. Historically in the United States, improvised music and the various forms of jazz which include styles of "bebop", have been characterized as resistive, and as a black social expression for economic and political advancement vis-à-vis the dominant white American culture (Lewis, 2002). Furthermore, bebop fostered the notion of resistance to Western notions of structure, form, and expression by

bringing a new level of intensity to the improvised musical performance. Admittedly, Godfrey (1992) in Lewis (2002) described the result of a musical experience created through indeterminate means as meant to be "immediate, spontaneous, and unique: a ritual celebration, not a fixed art object bounded by predetermined relationships or notational straitjackets" (Lewis 2002, 230). In the ICASP Project, the performance practices of improvised music enable the creation of "socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural and artistic boundaries" (<http://www.improvcommunity.ca/about>). The project also highlights the impact of policy-oriented research on community formation and social cohesion.

This paper seeks to address how the broad concepts of musical improvisation can be utilized as a metaphor in the disbursement of multilateral humanitarian aid in international development projects and disaster relief interventions. Allusions to sustainability, responsiveness, local ownership, and capacity building will be explored in the life cycle phases of international project management. This paper does this by drawing upon relevant literature in disaster response, and various improvisation techniques, to underscore the benefits of improvised disaster relief interventions. The case of the 2004 tsunami disaster response in Sri Lanka will be used to illustrate the argument. News and images about the tsunami were widely broadcasted as a globalised event. Therefore, I must assume that readers are familiar with the calamity. This article proceeds with, first, the creation of project goals and objectives initiated based on improvisational representations. Second, it discusses the implementation and disbursement of multilateral humanitarian aid, executed with the inclusion and participation of regional stakeholders in the project plan, alongside the notion of musical

collaboration in the practice of improvised music. And third, it suggests that the project's closeout ought to be performed based on citizen evaluation and participatory appraisal in a way similar to the way an audience interacts with an improvised musical performance. Finally, a section on critical reflection explores the benefits of this proposed model of international assistance as a response to the real needs of people.

As an introduction, I will give a brief synopsis of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. An underwater earthquake near Aceh, Indonesia struck the Indian Ocean affecting Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and nine other countries on December 26, 2004. As a result, approximately 75% of the Sri Lankan coastline was affected by the tsunami. Over 250,000 people were killed following the disaster. In Sri Lanka, the total death count is around 35,000 including missing persons 15,000 were injured and 500,000 were displaced. Subsequently, fundraising campaigns for the disaster were marked by the influx of humanitarian aid from Europe, North America, and East Asia, as well as development organizations, relief agencies, and military response teams. There were several development agencies including Save the Children, Oxfam, and CARE, to name a few, immediately on the scene to take stock of the damage and lend a hand in the relief effort. Other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a major part in recruiting and organizing volunteers to take part in the rehabilitation. The following sections will proceed based on the phases of the project management life cycle often utilized by development project agencies.

In the first phase of project initiation, a relief opportunity is identified and various solutions are presented in a summarized plan for implementation. Following this step, a feasibility study is conducted to ascertain the nature of reasonable costs, risks, and

alternate solutions for the project case. Once the previous steps have been approved, a new project may be created by establishing terms of reference and assigning a project team (Wideman, 2007). Most development agencies conducting relief efforts surpass the basic expectations required in this phase. However, in the uncertainty which arises in the proceeding phases, relief NGOs may not be as lucky, efficient, or effective. In a proposed model for humanitarian interventions that draws upon the model of musical improvisation, the unpredictable nature of natural disasters presents an opportunity for ‘maximal innovation’ in the manner in which development projects are created. Michael Zack (2000) asserts that jazz improvisation can provide maximal innovation in musical premise, the harmonic structure, and the tonal language of composition. This assertion affirms the point that collaborative improvised music creates an enabling environment that allows for spontaneous actions. To add to that, G. Ryle (1979) describes improvisation as "the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard" (Ryle qtd. in Zack). In relief efforts context, this implies the need for well-seasoned development agents to act with a reactive rather than an active approach to natural disaster relief, a critique of project creation that appeals for a motion to ‘un-project’ the implementation of projects.

In the second phase of project planning, the checklist of activities includes the creation of strategic plans of action, which encompasses financial, and resource assessments, timeframes, tasks, risks, and communication plans necessary for implementation. These activities are set out to document the successful delivery of the project based on a communications strategy with regional stakeholders – usually government officials, bureaucrats, and institutional stakeholders. In the case of the

tsunami response in Sri Lanka, Jock Stirrat witnessed high levels of competition between relief agencies during development work in Colombo, as well as a lack of coordination in structuring humanitarian assistance projects (Stirrat, 2006). Due to the competition between agencies in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, Stirrat noticed that there was a desperate need to create ties with local partners due to limited capacities and capabilities. This generated a form of tokenism by foreign agencies toward local organizations. Stirrat (2006) noted the prevalence of ‘poaching’ behaviour by late incoming NGOs offering higher salaries to potential Sri Lankan partners in order to fulfill their donor’s wishes of citizen participation and local ownership. This kind of activity undermines the altruism and benevolence in humanitarian assistance as a means of bringing about transformative social change. Learning from the model of musical improvisation presents the opportunity to improve collaborative efforts. Hodgson and Richards (1966) rightly pointed out that improvisation is a “group activity and learning within the group situation leads to a realization both of man’s independence and his interdependence (p. 24). In fostering a true sense of understanding and local ownership in rehabilitation efforts, one can learn from Hodgson and Richards. They assert that we become more aware of the contribution and interest of others, and so learn the value of listening and of giving of ourselves through listening (p. 23). Additionally, the model of improvised jazz presents a conversational framework which does not require any structural or interpretive process to make sense of the moment (Zack, 2000). In the same vein, the model to disburse humanitarian aid presented in this paper affirms that foreign relief agents must accept the model of a chaotic turbulent environment as an approach to the uncertain reality of post-

disaster work. This acceptance enables opportunities for a creative response, characterized by innovation and novelty, to the calamity

The next phase – project execution consists of the implementation of plans created in the previous project planning stage. It includes a series of management processes undertaken to monitor and control the deliverable output by the project (Wetland, 2007). The Logical Framework approach (log-frame) (Rosenberg & Posner, 1979) is often adopted and utilized by international development initiatives in project management but an alternate and more sustainable approach, based on the model of musical improvisation, could also ensure project viability in relief efforts. In comparing the performance of improvised jazz to symphonic orchestras, Zack (2000) puts forth the example that jazz is like a conversation while orchestrated music is “like delivering a prepared speech” with a minimal amount of improvisation (p. 232). He asserts that:

“...preallocating the order and length of turns is characteristic of ritualistic or ceremonial interaction (Schegloff, 1987). Spontaneous conversation, on the other hand, implies a local, unpredictable, emergent, and mutually constituted allocation of turntaking, complete with interruptions, digressions, side quips, nonverbal cues, and remarks made out of sequence or embedded within other sequences” (Zack, 2000, p. 232).

Orchestrated music is representative and analogous to the log-frame approach used by development agents. A matrix of temporal contingencies is created, outlining goals, specific objectives, expected outputs and activities, alongside various assumptions and means of verifying information. As a result, relief efforts are confined by premeditated goals and objectives which often deviate from the reality on ground. To those unfamiliar with improvisation, the absence of predetermined objectives and timeframes may present the appearance of disorder and purposelessness. Nevertheless, improvised techniques

provide a dynamic chaos or “functional anarchy” in Zack’s (2000) words, which give emergent, spontaneous, and interactive insight into the organization and management of humanitarian assistance.

Improvisation also presents an alternate approach to ensure projects are viable and that they are hinged upon the notion of sustainability even after the development practitioners return to home-base. Theoretically, ‘capacity development’ enhances the ability to “evaluate and address the crucial questions related to policy choices and modes of implementation among development options, based on an understanding of environment potentials and limits, and of the needs perceived by the people of the country concerned” (<http://www.gdrc.org/uem/capacity-define.html>). It should be noted that ‘capacity development’ also encompasses the utilization of capacities that already exist in the community. For this case in point, it was noted that as several foreign organizations became rapidly involved and influential in the relief effort, Sri Lankans subsequently became less active. Over time, local organizations were reduced to the status of junior partners dependent on foreign agencies (Stirrat, 2006). This illustrates a contradiction in the mantras of ‘participation’, ‘local ownership’, and ‘sustainability’ lauded by international development agencies as they failed to cultivate leadership in the local partners. Through the lens of musical improvisation, it is worthy to note that improvised organization techniques highlight the need for individuals to expand their set of competencies in order to take on a variety of roles, and that there is no defined leadership role (Crossman, 1998). Therefore, seeing through the glass of improvised musical performance practices, I must question the value of disaster relief efforts which

seemingly set out to fail because they cannot foster the local ownership necessary to ensure that the project is sustained after relief workers leave.

The final phase of project closure involves releasing all final output, documents, and project resources, and notifying all project stakeholders of the project's termination. A project review is conducted afterward to evaluate the success of the initiative, and to share lessons learned. This post-implementation phase of the project is crucial because it presents the opportunity to provide recommendations for further action. However, success is relative. When a foreign development agency outlines a hierarchy of needs with matching timelines for accomplishment in its log-frame, it bounds itself within the confines of certain assumptions. Lessons from the field have demonstrated that program activities usually do not go according to the initial plan. For example, disaster impact assessments conducted following the influx of relief agencies and volunteers revealed that the disease burden would likely be higher than expected (Morgan, Ahern, and Cairncross, 2005). The surge of diseases transmitted by the faecal-oral route, mosquito-borne diseases, and other infections posed new threats to the effectiveness and efficiency to disburse the humanitarian aid. Another small glitch came up when relief workers were surprised by two other surges occurring momentarily after the initial Indian Ocean earthquake. The initial earthquake brought in tsunami waves of about 2-3 metres high, but the subsequent surges brought in waves of about 5-7 metres high (National Geographic News, 2005). This exemplifies the constantly evolving terms of reference in disaster response, and therefore, it should not be confined to the rigidity of the log-frame and similar methods that assess for success. Sometimes success is not a readily available, tangible product to present to donors and multilateral agents back home. According to

Vera and Crossan (2005), improvisation focuses on the creative process and not on the creative outcome. The performance practices of improvised music require some tolerance for error without compromising the creativity borne out of the experimental solution. If relief agents can learn to accommodate this uncertainty it holds the potential to enhance the quality of disaster response. Just as musical performance practices are borne out of the interactivity between the performer(s) and audience, the last phase in the project management life cycle ought to be evaluated based on the participation of local stakeholders in citizen appraisal practices.

Criticisms of the humanitarian aid industry contend with the high moral tone of philanthropic relief, and the self-interest of relief agencies. On the one hand, philanthropic motives encourage donations to disaster response. Yet, on the other, competition between relief agencies predicates the initial inefficiency of disaster response and undermines the altruistic intentions of philanthropy. Other criticisms claim that foreign aid has become highly politicized to the extent that it stifles growth and its disbursement is dysfunctional, expensive, and unsustainable (Meerman, 1972; Collier, 2007; Moyo, 2009; and Singer, 2009). Ultimately, catastrophes warrant humanitarian assistance because of their devastating impact on local livelihoods and human life. In the end, the utilization of ‘improvisation’ as a metaphor in international development projects ought not to be purely construed as a catch-all phrase like ‘green-washing’ or ‘sustainability’. In terms of humanitarian aid, it should encourage relief efforts to be spontaneous and responsive to the real needs of people. The value of improvisation in disaster management is underscored by maintaining the sacred balance between pragmatic and philosophical conceptualizations of situational decision-making in disaster

rehabilitation. I have hope that the lessons learned from the 2004 tsunami tragedy will inform the theories, principles, and practices for emergency preparedness to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters.

At the helm of this approach is the use of improvised performance practices as the lens with which to invoke dynamic policy transformation, and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of disaster management projects. Rigidity and stringency cannot take centre stage when it comes to the volatility of disaster management. The ICASP project is underpinned by a model of musical improvisation which cannot be compelled into orthodoxy yet remains dynamic, and critical of knowledge, cultural forms, and civic engagement. Humanitarian assistance may fall short in its response to real human needs if it cannot subscribe to these elements of spontaneity, true participation, and partnership.

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