Laying the Groundwork: Insights from Organisational Ethics for Humanitarian Innovation

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Abstract

Humanitarian innovation is occurring in a wide range of organisational contexts, from innovation labs and hubs, to specialised units within humanitarian organisations, to small social innovation startups and through intersectoral partnerships. Ethical considerations associated with innovation activities have been the source of increased discussion, including critiques around inclusion in the definition of problems, imposition of solutions, introduction of new risks for people in crisis situations and potential for exploitation. To promote ethical innovation, various initiatives have sought to articulate guiding values and to create resources and frameworks to integrate values in project design and implementation. A distinctive yet complementary line of ethical analysis is offered by the approach of positive organisational ethics, which considers the features of organisations that promote and sustain conditions supportive of ethical action. In this paper we examine three dimensions of an organisation's ethical infrastructure: the resources that are established, such as policies and statements of organisational values; the practices that are enacted, such as methods of onboarding new staff; and the capacities that are fostered and accessed, including ethics knowledge and skills. Attention to these features constitutes an important means of laying the groundwork for organisational conditions that are supportive of ethical humanitarian innovation.

Keywords: armed conflict; disaster; ethics; humanitarian innovation; organisations; values

Background

How can humanitarian action be more effective, efficient and equitable in responding to the needs of populations affected by crisis? This is a foundational question for activities that are drawn together under the rubric of 'humanitarian innovation'. It is also closely tied with humanitarian ethics, which includes concern for the effectiveness of actions to impartially address suffering and save lives, while treating people with respect and promoting their dignity (Slim, 2015). Acknowledging that humanitarians have always sought to make

improvements to the way they organise and deliver their programmes and provide services, these efforts have become more formal and structured with the rise of humanitarian innovation as a distinctive movement and set of practices from 2009 onwards (Skeels, 2020).

The humanitarian innovation movement has created and opened different organisational *spaces* for innovation. For example, many large humanitarian organisations have created dedicated innovation units or services with mandates to pursue innovation activities.[1] Smaller agencies have been less likely to set up distinct units focused on innovation, but many have created positions or groups to facilitate innovation activities. These efforts have been facilitated by new funding mechanisms to support innovation which have further created space in budgets to pursue innovation projects.[2] Space has also been created between organisations and across sectors in the form of innovation hubs and labs, and new partnerships, for example, among humanitarian organisations, academics and for-profit companies. With these developments, novel or adapted products and processes have been piloted and, in some cases, brought to scale (Obrecht and Warner, 2016; Skeels, 2020). Examples of innovations in the humanitarian sector are broad and range from novel water and sanitation interventions, to new mental health programmes for displaced populations, to Artificial Intelligence tools for mapping migration routes.

As humanitarian innovation has expanded, so too has discussion and analysis of its ethical features and concerns, including critiques of how it is framed, structured and enacted. Questions about which (and whose) values are espoused, realised or thwarted through particular models of innovation are at the core of these exchanges. The experimental nature of innovation has been widely examined, focusing on the additional risk and uncertainty that innovation activities may bring to populations affected by conflict, disaster or forced migration. What is considered to be 'at risk' varies by stakeholder, from taxpayer dollars to people's lives (Ramalingam *et al.*, 2009; Betts and Bloom, 2014). This variation is associated with different levels of acceptance of the risks associated with innovation and for increased uncertainty. However, the ethical considerations in humanitarian innovation are not limited to risks arising when innovations are piloted. They begin with the very process of recognising and defining the problem to be addressed by an innovation process and carry through to efforts to scale up or close down an innovation project. Moreover, problem definitions that lack direction or input from affected populations may fail to effectively address the problem, or result in deepening power imbalances (Sandvik, 2019). A lack of representation or engagement also feeds into a

'solutionist' approach to innovation focused primarily on applying a novel solution that is already in hand, rather than one that is truly responsive to the needs of the community (Madianou, 2019). A particular concern is if novel approaches, and especially technologically oriented ones, are assumed to be better than existing or alternate options and therefore unduly privileged in innovation processes (Scott-Smith, 2016). These patterns may deflect attention from efforts to adapt and learn from existing approaches that can be reconfigured to better address the problem context (Krishnaraj, 2021). Ultimately, some modes and approaches to innovation can be exploitative, calling for critical appraisal of who benefits from and who bears the risks of innovation. There have also been rich discussions on the concept of failure in humanitarian innovation and the link between success and scale. Sheather *et al.* (2016) argue that while many innovation projects will not lead to adoption or scaling of a new product or approach, there is a moral obligation to evaluate and report on lessons learned through these processes. This perspective aligns with the idea of 'good failures' that yield insights that inform future innovation efforts (Obrecht and Warner, 2016) while resisting mindsets and mantras associated with innovation in the technology sector ('fail fast, fail often', etc.) and other domains. These developments and debates point to key features of the ethical terrain of humanitarian innovation.

Multiple initiatives have been undertaken to identify values or develop resources to support humanitarian innovators responding to ethical challenges (Refugee Studies Centre, 2015; Sheather *et al.*, 2016; RIL, 2020). We participated in one such endeavour. Our team was commissioned by Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund to develop an ethics for humanitarian innovation toolkit. Drawing upon interviews with innovation stakeholders, a scoping review of the literature, workshops and other consultations, we developed a set of interlinking tools and case studies.[3] As we worked on the project, a particular need came into focus: to think not just about ethics at the levels of innovators, innovation teams and innovation projects, but also to consider humanitarian innovation from the perspective of organisational ethics. Organisational ethics is the sphere of ethics that considers relationships among an organisation's values, culture and practices, and alignment of organisational values with the actions and attitudes of the individuals who are part of the organisation. In this paper we take up this idea and analyse the organisational settings where humanitarian innovation is occurring from the perspective of organisational ethics. In the sections that follow, we discuss the ways that an approach of a positive organisational ethics can foster conditions that promote ethical innovation, consider three forms of organisational

ethics infrastructure (resources, practices and capacities) and introduce a tool that aims to engage those who use it to identify opportunities to strengthen organisational ethics to support humanitarian innovation.

Organisational Ethics and Humanitarian Innovation

Organisational ethics is a rich domain of interdisciplinary scholarship that draws on fields such as management, behavioral sciences and psychology. It has been a particular focus in the domain of business ethics, but also in healthcare, educational institutions and the military. Rather than examining ethical values and actions at the level of individuals, it takes organisations and institutional structures as its primary sphere of inquiry. Examples of topics of interest within this approach include organisational climate, accountability and procedural fairness, priority setting, resource allocation, strategic planning, collective moral identities, complaints mechanisms and whistleblowing (McLeod *et al.*, 2016; Sekerka *et al.*, 2013; Suhonen *et al.*, 2011). In taking up an organisational ethics approach, we are particularly interested in what has been described as *positive organisational ethics*. Positive organisational ethics focuses on 'people, practices, and contexts that cultivate and sustain individual and collective ethical strength to achieve successful and durable moral performance in organizations' (Sekerka *et al.*, 2013: 439). This orientation is in contrast to a primary focus on identifying and preventing unethical or malign behaviour, as might be undertaken from a compliance perspective. Positive organisational ethics focuses on the conditions and climate within an organisation that foster ethical action and promote attitudes in line with organisational values. It recognises that a diverse set of organisational features are determinants (but not determinative) of the potential for people working in a particular context to be able to act with integrity (Arnaud and Schminke, 2012). As well as promoting ethical action, it is argued that these features contribute to greater organisational effectiveness (Cameron *et al.*, 2011).

Organisational ethics offers an important lens for thinking about ethics in humanitarian innovation as it allows one to step back from a specific innovation project or innovation team, to consider the organisational context in which projects are implemented, teams are convened and partnerships situated. Within a particular organisational setting it foregrounds questions such as:

> What are the articulated aims and values of the organisation and how are they supported or implemented? Are they known and taken up by all members of the

organisation? What are the values and norms that are reflected in members' attitudes and actions?

> What is the ethical climate of the organisation? What are the features of the organisation that foster ethical innovation? Are there gaps or features that act as constraints to ethical reflection and action?

> How do the values of the organisation align with those of collaborating organisations or those of affected communities? How does the organisation ensure that its partnerships and collaborations align with its values and ethical standards?

> What resources or processes could be put in place to better support ethical innovation? Are there capacities that need to be developed or accessed? How can organisational learning around ethics be enhanced?

In the next sections, we consider how positive organisational ethics can be applied to humanitarian innovation.

Ethics Infrastructure: Resources, Practices, Capacities

Many features can contribute to strong organisational ethics through promoting conditions that are supportive of ethical action. These elements have been referred to as the 'ethical infrastructure' of an organisation which serve to reinforce values in decision-making and foster collective practices and individual actions that are ethically robust (Silverman, 2000). Here, we focus on three broad categories of ethical infrastructure: resources, practices and capacities, and consider their relevance to humanitarian innovation.

Ethical Resources

Organisational ethics resources are diverse. At a core level, they include articulations of an organisation's mission and values. They may be specific to innovation activities if the organisation has a primary focus on humanitarian innovation, or have a wider scope if the organisation is, for example, an operational humanitarian agency. In the latter case, services or units focused on innovation within such agencies might have developed their own statement of values or principles (see, for example, ICRC, 2018; UNHCR, 2019). Having a statement of values can be an important starting place for developing a values-based or value-sensitive approach to humanitarian innovation, serving as key reference points for design and implementation (Smith *et al.*, 2020; Brahimi *et al.*, 2023). Many organisations also have a code of conduct or have committed to sectoral efforts such as the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct (IFRC, 1994). An example of an organisational effort to develop tailored ethics guidance is the Response Innovation Labs' development of a statement of guiding principles for its staff, members and partners.[4] To do so, they drew upon

several influential articulations of standards and principles related to humanitarian innovation in order to create their own normative document to orient their activities. Along with the development of the guiding principles, they also offer training on ethical standards for innovation teams and others.

Ethics resources within an organisation are also likely to include a range of policies that have ethical implications, such as ones that relate to conflicts of interest and accountability, or a policy about who the organisation will accept funding from or be willing to collaborate with, or how they will engage in collaboration with affected communities. More operationally focused policies include those related to privacy and data security, seeking and responding to feedback from end-users, and inclusion guidelines. Such policies can also clarify how external regulations, such as those related to data security and privacy (e.g. the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation), are to be implanted within the organisation. It is worth noting another aspect of organisational ethics in relation to policy: organisational ethics encourages attention to 'clarifying and evaluating the values embedded in organisational policies and practices' (Ells and McDonald, 2002: 33). Such attention will help make explicit the role of values in policies and might prompt revision of policies to enhance alignment with espoused values, further advancing a positive organisational ethic.

Ethics resources also include ethics tools or decision-making frameworks. Organisations will benefit from identifying and/or developing resources of this type and providing opportunities for training team members to utilise them. An example of an ethics analysis resource is Médecins Sans Frontières' (MSF) 6-step ethics framework for humanitarian innovation (Sheather et al., 2016). The framework is intended to be used in a self-guided manner by those involved in innovation projects to support reflection, deliberation and learning. It aligns with MSF's human/user-centred approach to innovation. and emphasis on proximity to ensure relevance for the end users of innovations.[5] Though the use of the ethics framework is at the discretion of the innovation teams, Sheather et al. report that those presenting an innovation project at the MSF Scientific Days conference were required to confirm either that their project had undergone review by an ethics committee, or that the innovators had applied the ethics framework. Innovations are not required to be reviewed by the MSF Ethics Review Board unless they involve a formal research component.

Ethical Practices

Ethical practices include activities and procedures that support individual and collective ethical action, and guide how ethical issues are addressed, thus contributing to the overall ethical climate (Teresi et al., 2019). For example, a very important process from this perspective relates to the acculturation and onboarding of new staff. This represents an opportunity to share and, perhaps even more importantly, to demonstrate the values of the organisation. It lays important groundwork for opening ethical discussions, including by providing shared reference points for exchanging around ethical issues. Structured approaches to learn from past experiences, including situations of ethical challenge, are also a valuable form of ethical practice. Such learning can then be applied in a range of ways, such as policy revision, development of training activities, or procedures for the induction of new team members. An example of a structured process to learn from past experiences is reported by the UNHCR Innovation Fund when they utilised a process of identifying 'critical turning points' as part of a case study analysis of projects to identify organisational learning opportunities, including from projects that were unsuccessful.[6] Such practices offer an opportunity to identify and document insights, including how teams navigated ethically challenging circumstances, that can be applied to future projects or to identify the need for policy development or training in specific areas.

Organisations may also create room within the quotidian flow of work for members to consider the ethical features of their activities. These 'moral spaces' represent times and locations within an organisation's activities that support people to reflect on and deliberate about ethical issues (Walker, 1993). An example of making a moral space would be to include discussion about values and ethical challenges as a recurrent item for team meetings or as part of a workshop or retreat. Further examples include creating asynchronous or anonymous means of providing feedback on ethical issues or expressing concerns. The amount of time, format or setting will vary based on organisational context and needs, but the underlying concern is to create room within organisational patterns to reflect on and share experiences related to ethics. Deliberately creating moral spaces is crucial as it acknowledges that people need not only have knowledge and resources, but also the space (literally and figuratively) to periodically reflect on and exchange about ethical dimensions of their work, anticipate ethical issues before they arise, acknowledge and learn from mistakes and consider how they contribute to the organisation's wider goals. When the World Health Organization was establishing its Innovation Hub,[7] a central question that was explored was how to shape and scale innovation projects based on a list of prioritised country-level health challenges. Ethical considerations were relevant to decisions

around the identification of health gaps to be addressed, how to equitably choose appropriate innovations and where to implement them. The space required for these deliberations, including consideration for ethical dimensions, required not only fora for open discussion, but also an organisational culture change that encouraged discussions of failure and lessons learned.

Ethical Capacities

It is important that all members of an organisation are supported to develop knowledge and skills in relation to ethical innovation – that is, to develop capacities to assess and respond to ethical dimensions of innovation activities. Ideally, these capacities are widely spread and widely valued. This observation reinforces the importance of creating opportunities for training and learning about ethics – including through the enactment of ethical practices as outlined above. For example, members of the organisation could be encouraged to participate in webinars or e-learning modules related to ethics, and these activities could be included in the set of induction processes for newly hired staff. Learning can also be fostered in less formal ways, such as by circulating blogs or articles about ethics and humanitarian innovation, as well as taking place in the 'moral spaces' described earlier, where people come together to share experiences.

Some of these considerations are reflected in the work of Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), a major funder of innovation projects in the sector. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund places a strong emphasis on responsible innovation and strengthening ethical capacities. First, Elrha has sought to develop its internal ethical capacities, supporting development of the Ethics for Humanitarian Innovation resource, identifying an ethics lead to oversee implementation of the resource, and ensuring its Innovation Managers are trained to deliver workshops using the associated tools and case studies, and to provide ongoing ethics support as required. Second, Elrha supports ethical capacity strengthening of grantees. The Ethics for Humanitarian Innovation resource is embedded in the HIF's non-financial support offer, with grantees participating in workshops to further develop their own ethical capacities, carry out a detailed review of the ethical implications of their projects and activity plans, and develop further mitigating measures where necessary.

While diffusing ethical capacities widely within the organisation (and not just to be understood as the preserve of designated experts) is a primary goal, organisations involved in humanitarian innovation will also benefit from establishing pathways to access people or groups with particular knowledge and experience addressing ethical issues related to humanitarian

innovation. If there is one or several such people in the organisation it will be helpful to clearly identify them as individuals who can offer input on ethical questions. In smaller organisations, this role may be informal yet understood by all the team. In other situations, especially in larger organisations, formalising this advisory role will be useful, including establishing a mechanism for soliciting support. In other instances, organisations may have an ombudsman, advisory group or ethics committee whose input could be sought regarding ethical questions. Drawing on models of research ethics review, some organisations may require a formal process of ethics evaluation for different stages of innovation as part of due diligence. The form and format for how to access this support will vary, in part due to the size and type of organisation. However, a key element here is a proactive approach to identify these individuals or groups so that their input can be sought when needed to support discussions and decision-making, or to participate in the process of debriefing a difficult situation that has occurred. Over time, they can also have an important role in identifying any recurrent issues and opportunities to address them. Documenting and maintaining an institutional memory of such challenges, and sharing these experiences with others, is important for supporting ethical action in the future.

A Virtuous Circle

Ethics resources, practices and capacities constitute components of an organisational infrastructure that can foster and support ethical humanitarian innovation. They also lay the groundwork for establishing a virtuous circle in an organisation; that is, a situation when ethical acts positively reinforce an organisation's ethical climate to support further ethical acts (Searle and Barbuto, 2010). A virtuous circle stands in counterpoint to a vicious cycle. Both are feedback loops: virtuous circles potentiate positive actions, vicious cycles negative ones. While poor organisational climate and weak structures can create vicious cycles that undermine ethical practice (Kuenzi *et al.*, 2020), positive feedback loops reinforce virtuous circles that contribute to a supportive environment for ethical decision-making and action at individual, team and organisational levels. We drew on these ideas to develop the *Virtuous Circle Tool* which is included in the Ethics for Humanitarian Innovation Toolkit.[8] The tool provides an interactive and dynamic structure for organisations – including people working in projects that cross multiple organisations – to ask themselves questions about the resources, practices and capacities they have in place. The tool consists of a table-top group exercise that invites discussion around the

three infrastructure areas through responding to sets of questions, such as 'How do you facilitate timely access to resources that support ethical innovation practices?' or 'How do you document experiences and maintain institutional memory about ethical issues?' The intent is that this process will help clarify existing infrastructure and identify gaps that might be filled. Within a partnership, it could foster conversation about the different ethics infrastructure in place for each partner, any questions of alignment (for example, in espoused values or processes in place for seeking input on ethically challenging situations) and means to create *moral spaces* in their work together. The activities and outcomes associated with the Virtuous Circle can thus be valuable for communication and exploration of different forms and degrees of alignment in relation to ethics resources, practices and capacities. Where misalignment exists, the tool can support conversations to respond to points of divergence. As we engaged with innovation teams during the development of the toolkit, multiple workshop participants underlined the importance of these sorts of exchanges to create opportunities for improved understanding within teams and across partnerships. Discussions around organisational structures also led some participants to reconsider their understanding of ethics infrastructure as not being limited to ethics boards tasked with prospective review of projects, but as a wider and more dynamic set of structures that could foster and orient ethical practices within organisations.

The notion of a virtuous circle helps to capture important insights for how an organisational ethics approach can be implemented. It emphasises the human and relational dimensions of ethics in humanitarian innovation. Beyond establishing infrastructure, what matters most will be how people come together with a shared vision for ethical innovation, and the actions they take and the actions they see others taking, towards achieving these goals.

Conclusion

The framing of a positive organisational ethics offers insights for how organisations can lay groundwork supportive of ethical humanitarian innovation, including by being attentive to the development of resources, establishment of practices and nurturing of capacities related to ethics. This approach is a helpful adjunct to discussions of innovation ethics focused on design of innovations or implementation of specific projects. As the nature and practices of humanitarian innovation continue to evolve over the coming years, attention should continue to be directed to creating collective opportunities within and across organisations for orienting, sharing, learning, reflecting and supporting ethical innovation.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Médecins Sans Frontières Sweden Innovation Unit, https://msf-siu.org and the UNHCR Innovation Service, www.unhcr.org/innovation/ (accessed 20 December 2023).

2 See, for example, 'Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge', https://humanitariangrandchallenge.org/ and Elrha Humanitarian Innovation Fund, https://elrha.org/programme/hif/ (accessed 20 December 2023).

3 They are available here: https://higuide.elrha.org/ethics/ (accessed 20 December 2023).

4 See 'Response Innovation Lab Ethical Standards & Principles', https://responseinnovationlab.com/tools-publications/ethical-standards-amp-principles-by-response-innovation-lab (accessed 20 December 2023).

5 'MSF SIU Overview', https://msf-siu.org/about-us (accessed 20 December 2023).

6 UNHCR. (2020), *Evaluation of UNHCR's Innovation* Fund, November, https://unhcr.org/5ff855e34.pdf (accessed 20 December 2023).

7 See 'Health Innovation for Impact', https://who.int/teams/digital-health-and-innovation/health-innovation-for-impact (accessed 20 December 2023).

8 It is available here: https://higuide.elrha.org/ethics/toolkit/ (accessed 20 December 2023).

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