

## **“When to stay, when to leave?”**

François Grünewald  
Associate professor  
Chairman of Groupe URD<sup>1</sup>

Contained in this simple question are some of the most critical dilemmas facing humanitarian aid agencies and is only slightly less important than the decision of “when to go, when not to go?”. Rules of engagement and exit strategies are indeed the two sides of the same coin. Political issues, operational considerations, questions related to organisation mandate and inter-agency coordination are some of the issues at stake. But at the end of the day, decision making processes must necessarily take into account the short, medium and longer term repercussions that any decision related to whether to stay or to leave will have on the affected populations, protection issues and access to basic services.

The last decades have been scattered with situations when, suddenly, in the midst of routine management of humanitarian situations, these critical questions have popped up.

### **Leaving when kicked out**

Forcefully imposed non-options have of course regularly made headlines. From the expulsion of MSF teams from Ethiopia in 1985 to NGOs that were asked to leave Rwanda at the end of the 1990s, history is full of PNG (persona non grata) cases.

What is more complicated are the processes that lead to the decision to leave. Most of the time, humanitarian have only unclear exit strategies.

### **Leaving when the situation becomes unacceptable**

When the decision is linked to “a situation”, things are relatively easy. The situation in refugee camps in former Zaire was analysed, reviewed and it was decided not to take part in a process that eventually helped to strengthen the position of former “genocidaires”: MSF left Goma. The fact that basic services were already likely to be covered by other NGOs, helped this decision. MSF was nevertheless quite vocal when leaving the camps. Departure under these circumstances is often accompanied by strong media campaigns in order to both explain the reasons for leaving and to use this position as a tool for advocacy. Another interesting example is when agency staff get in the line of fire. In 2004, after the assassination of 5 of its staff, and in view of a perceived lack of commitment from the Authorities to find the culprits, MSF left the country. It is noteworthy to observe that this assassination resulted in very little signs of solidarity from other agencies, who when on with their job as “business as usual”. A decade ago, when ICRC staff were killed in Novi Attagi, most agencies withdraw from Chechnya. The “unacceptable” became “normality”. The killing of aid staff is less and less seen as a reason to leave, even temporary. My agency Groupe URD decided to discontinue its activities in Afghanistan for a semester after this event, as a sign of solidarity with MSF.

### **Leaving when the organisation thinks that it has achieved its goal**

In some instances, agencies may decide that the “job is done” and leave. The most recent debate on this issue took place in relation to the Tsunami response. While some agencies were still raising funds in order to pursue their activities beyond relief and be in a position to engage in recovery and reconstruction efforts, MSF launched a “mini-bomb” in the sector, asking its network of private donors to stop earmarking donation for the Tsunami response. For many agencies, who see themselves as actors of both the humanitarian relief phase and the transition to development, the needs in Tsunami-affected countries exceeded the MSF humanitarian health timeframe. Even

---

<sup>1</sup> Groupe URD is non for profit, non governmental Institute dedicated to the improvement of humanitarian practices. It operates through a “learning cycle” comprising 5 key functions: evaluation and operational research, capitalisation of experience, elaboration of tools and methodologies, training and, when required, lobby. For more, see [www.urd.org](http://www.urd.org)

though in this way MSF ensured that its own mandate was fully respected, the way this was done was perceived as an attempt to discredit other actors. The reasons for this were not understood. The debate in North Kenya was also interesting. In Marsabit, after three months, MSF closed down its TFC. Although the GAM and SAM improved, the situation remained highly vulnerable and the capacity of local health institutions to respond to people's needs had barely improved after the MSF intervention. Nobody understood why MSF left so quickly and the question on most people's lips was "why did they come in the first place, if it was just to leave like that".

### **Leaving when it is decided that it is time to go:**

The transition to development issue is again one of the factor framing the response "to stay or to leave". In Afghanistan, agencies have been able to work over decades of wars and conflicts, by keeping a certain attitude: "cooperative but no allegiance". The post 2001 situation resulted in many agencies having to choose to keep a certain distance or to enter into the "state building policy" of both the Afghan Government and the Donors. Some NGOs were very reluctant, on the basis of the uncertainty of the future: who will finally win the war? Certain agencies decided to leave, other chose to stay, and to subscribe to the "support the State" agenda. Who will prove to be right is the question of the day.

### **Different mandates, different strategies**

Agencies have different visions, different mandates given by their specific membership. It is highly dangerous when an agency chooses to promote itself as "the benchmark". The way an aid agency appraises a situation and defines its "exist strategy" is of course highly dependent on its sphere of activity. A medical NGO will not have the same reading of a situation as a food security/agriculture organisation. Agencies with multiple mandates (emergency and development) are likely to develop a more complex strategy than those with a more focused approach. At the end of the day, what is critical for the sector is the capacity of aid agencies to accept principled biodiversity and creative differences.

### **From a clear "exit strategy" to "mission creep"**

It is often easier to engage than to disengage. Institutional survival is often a key criterion for NGOs, in a world of increased competition for funding and projects. Emergency relief programmes are sometimes seen as opportunities to engage durably in new contexts, and a chance to explore and access new resources. "Institutions grow or die". This bureaucratic saying is often a driving force to stay. Mission creep then enters the scene.

However, sometimes, agencies stay because they simply do not know or see how to disengage. Years ago, Groupe URD promoted an innovative process of the 'on duty development specialist', who is on standby to join the first team sent for exploratory mission. Their responsibility would be to assist in the design of exist strategies while the main emergency programmes are being prepared. Very few agencies have taken up this suggestion. In our many evaluations from Asia to Latin America through Africa, we have frequently observed programmes that continue to be implemented for long time with no "way out".

### **Critical communication strategy to support exist strategies**

What remains crucial is the explanation given for any decision (to stay as well as to leave). Unfortunately, departures are too often discrete and with very little advance notice: maybe one farewell party for the expats. In many cases, it is just announced a few days before departure, the national staff and national institutions are rarely involved in the decision and the design of the strategy for the "day after". This process which is sometimes perceived as cowardly contributes to the discrediting of the aid system.