Agility, quality and accountability: responding to complex, protracted crises

To mark Groupe URD’s 25th anniversary, we would like to invite you to the Autumn School on Humanitarian Aid, which this year will explore a topic that is at the heart of many current debates and is related to operational difficulties experienced in the field: the agility, quality and accountability of aid in complex, uncertain, volatile and protracted crises.

The eleventh Autumn School will be held on 2-4 October 2018 at Groupe URD’s headquarters in Plaisians (Drôme Provençale, in the South of France).

Grey Rhinos and Black Swans: dealing with uncertainty and turbulence

The literature on risks includes a range of coloured animals to describe certain concepts. Two emblematic figures exist with regard to the issue of agility (what to do in relation to known risks and in relation to uncertainty): the grey rhino and the black swan.

The grey rhino is more or less certain to charge if you annoy it. The existence of black swans, on the other hand, comes as a surprise: everyone thinks that swans are always white. The parable of the grey rhino is used to describe events that are highly probable, while that of the black swan is used to describe events that are so rare that they are believed to be impossible.

Faced with the predictable dangers and the constant uncertainties of crisis contexts, it is a constant challenge to ensure that aid meets needs, that it remains relevant and that it causes as few negative effects as possible. This central aspect of the quality of aid and the accountability of actors towards beneficiaries and donors involves various levels: understanding the situation and how it might evolve; deciding to act or to allocate funds in the face of uncertainty and risk; the possibility of making mistakes and “no regrets” approaches; adapting administrative and financial procedures to accompany change; and, the need to build trust between the different stakeholders of the response to a complex, multi-form and changing crisis.

Today, these issues concern humanitarian and development actors, as well as donors who collaborate more and more in protracted crisis contexts on multi-year programmes aimed at reconstruction and/or resilience building. Thus, agility – or adaptive management – needs to be developed due to long-term crises and the combination of humanitarian and development practices in fragile contexts.
Agility, flexibility, adaptability

Agility, however, brings new challenges to operators and donors: this involves reducing the time between gathering information, making decisions and putting these into action. In order to do this, it is necessary to be capable of anticipating potential changes and preparing for them, and also using new technology so that decisions are made based on data from the field and accepting courageous decisions made in the face of uncertainty. Forty years ago, Robert Chambers introduced the principle of “optimal ignorance”, that is to say, what needs to be known in order to make a decision. What is the situation today with regard to the need for an evidence base, “infoxication” (intoxication due to excess information) and the many sources that are available on social networks? How can projects be made more flexible to cope with the frequent changes in contexts via new financial and reporting procedures?

A topic that Groupe URD has been working on for twenty years

At the end of the 90s, following Hurricane Mitch in Central America, we began carrying out Iterative Evaluations with Mini-Seminars which we then developed and implemented in several contexts, with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of evaluations and helping to improve practices in real time. We also set up observatories in Afghanistan, Chad and Haiti in order to bring learning closer to actors in the field. Today, in 2018, we have launched two projects aimed at increasing agility: one as part of the Resilac project in the Lake Chad region, and the other in support of the Key programme in Mali, combining IEMS, multi-scenario planning, operational research, etc.

Flexibility: a discreet revolution

Never in the history of humanitarian action have budgets been so high, contexts so volatile and funding and accountability procedures so cumbersome and complicated. The large number of different document formats, the cumbersome processes required to modify contracts, and the duplication of audit and evaluation procedures all limit the adaptability of operations. There is nevertheless some hope that it is possible to make progress and manage both what is known and what is uncertain: crisis modifiers, the development of “fast tracks” and the increased presence of certain donors in the field to help promote change. In any case, we no longer have any choice: technological changes and the development of social networks have exposed our errors, our lack of decision-making and the blatant inability of our system to be “agile”.

In order to discuss the challenges of being agile in complex and protracted crises, and explore possible ways forward, the 11th Autumn School will bring together a number of academics, operators and donors who are interested in these issues.

Faced with grey rhinos and black swans, will we be able to adopt the strategies, tools, methods and forms of dialogue between actors that are needed? This will be a major challenge!!!