

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of 'In the Eyes of Others: How People in Crises Perceive Humanitarian Aid' Caroline Abu-Sada (ed.) and 'Dilemmas, Challenges, and Ethics of Humanitarian Action: Reflections on Médecins Sans Frontières' Perception Project' Caroline Abu-Sada (ed.)

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Book details

Abu-Sada C (ed.)

In the Eyes of Others: How People in Crises Perceive Humanitarian Aid
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform; 2012

ISBN: 978-1475211832

Abu-Sada C (ed.)

Dilemmas, Challenges, and Ethics of Humanitarian Action: Reflections on Médecins Sans Frontières' Perception Project

Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press; 2012

ISBN: 978-0773540866

Keywords: Perception, Humanitarian principles, Humanitarian space, Access

Painting pickups pink and the perception of humanitarian aid

Painting pickups pink has become an operational imperative for certain humanitarian agencies working in conflict and other unstable contexts.

Drawing on the experience of Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Ituri Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, *In The Eyes of Others* opens with a decision made by the organisation in 2005 to repaint its all-terrain vehicles a bright shade of pink. This decision was driven by far more than the desire for a change of aesthetic and is illustrative of a number of emerging challenges that threaten the humanitarian space within which humanitarian agencies

are able to safely operate; as MSF continued to implement its medical programmes in Ituri Province, the United Nations peacekeeping force active in the region launched military operations with the aim of disarming local militia. The peacekeepers operated in white jeeps that were difficult to distinguish from MSF's own vehicles. Fearing that combatants could mistake MSF staff and patients for armed UN soldiers, the organisation implemented measures that it hoped would set MSF apart from other agencies and organisations working in the region.

Leaving the pink pickups as a precedential programmatic decision against which to contextualise the discussion that follows, the authors proceed to describe MSF's Perception Project, a four-year study implemented between 2007 and 2010. Almost 7000 stakeholders including crisis-affected people, community leaders, politicians, military personnel, MSF employees, and

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others in nine countries were asked how they perceived MSF's activities and underlying principles and humanitarian action more generally.

Several important findings emerged during the course of the study that have significant operational implications for MSF and other humanitarian organisations: MSF's 'no guns' logo was seen as a threat in some contexts, while other interviewees interpreted that you could not enter MSF premises unarmed; in Iraqi Kurdistan, some interviewees confused the MSF acronym with MNF-I (Multi-National Force Iraq), the military coalition active in-country; in Cameroon, some interviewees felt that humanitarian aid was a 'Western product' with a racial component: a commitment that 'whites' have towards 'blacks'. The humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence were subject to a variety of different interpretations; in particular, interviewees and discussants in multiple contexts offered divergent interpretations of neutrality, based on challenges associated with the practical application of this principle.

The central premise behind the study of perception is that the subscription to a particular vision, or to one or more of the humanitarian principles, does not guarantee automatic translation into multi-stakeholder understanding and acceptance of an organisation's presence and programmes. Both *In The Eyes of Others* and the collection of essays that follow in *Dilemmas, Challenges, and Ethics of Humanitarian Action* acknowledge that perception is transitional, and therefore highly time and context dependent. Issues as diverse as local human resource policies to the presence of the military, with its own security and stabilisation strategies, are explored and considered to have a significant impact on the ability of organisations to safely and effectively implement their programmes.

Both texts make a valuable contribution to a growing body of literature that seeks to do away with the misguided belief that crisis-affected populations are 'passive recipients' of aid, reaffirming contributor Bruno Jochum's assertion that respect cannot simply be 'gained from a display of the power that resources provide, nor from the repetition of principles as slogans.' With attention paid to the perspectives of crisis-affected people, humanitarian organisations can again hope to reassert a fundamental characteristic of their work: 'the attention to others'.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

Received: 21 August 2015 Accepted: 6 January 2016

Published online: 01 March 2016

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