Graduation advice for aspiring humanitarians

Graduates hoping to embark on an international humanitarian career should not do it to 'save the world'.

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Understanding local culture is important when working in international humanitarianism [EPA]

It's that time of year in the Northern Hemisphere when university students are donning caps and gowns to participate in graduation exercises. For those new graduates pursuing careers in international humanitarianism (be it diplomacy, development, relief or human rights work), many are wondering what to do next in order to build a career? Herewith a bit of advice for the aspiring humanitarian - and it's not what you'd expect.

Many people go into humanitarian or development work to "save the world". While working to make the world a better place is a noble goal, it often sets up a problematic dichotomy between those doing the helping and those being assisted. This approach also obfuscates the links between wealth generation in some parts of the world and deprivation in others. It's insulting to be classified as an object of charity. Worse yet, the charity model may disempower local people by convincing them that they are somehow inferior.

Rather than charity, the need is for allies and collaborators in a common fight against injustice. Become a humanitarian or development practitioner because you find the work interesting. If a development worker came to live in my community, I would much rather they be there because they find my culture interesting, they're willing to join me in exposing injustice, or they enjoy the challenge of working on a local development question.

**Develop deep regional knowledge**

The prevailing wisdom in the development assistance arena today is that you need **strong technical skills** to be successful. While expertise in public health, agriculture or natural resource management is definitely helpful, don't forget about the importance of deep regional knowledge. This means learning local languages, spending extended periods of time in an area, and studying regional history, culture, geography and politics.

A good example of the need for such insights is the northern Nigeria crisis involving Boko Haram and the kidnappings of more than 300 school girls. International terrorism experts and human rights advocates tend to see this situation in
black and white terms. In their eyes, Boko Haram is the clear villain and the Nigerian government is the likely actor for positive change and resolution.

In contrast, long-time Nigeria scholar Michael Watts points out that it is far more complicated given the history of politics in the area. There are, for example, connections between Boko Haram and the government. Politicians had made promises to Boko Haram which they then broke, producing tensions. This is not a defence of Boko Haram, but a nuance that is largely missing from the international campaign to #bringbackourgirls.

While we tend to celebrate the globe-trotting development or humanitarian professional who moves effortlessly from one context to the next, these individuals often lack the deep knowledge of regional history and politics needed to develop lasting solutions and interventions.

The temptation with any career is to move up the ladder as quickly as possible. Within development and humanitarian work, this often means moving from field-based positions to those in the office or in increasingly large cities far from the actual work. This problem, identified long ago by participatory development scholar Robert Chambers, often leads to detached and out of touch managers and leaders.

Rather than seeing a field posting in a small, rural community as a time of waiting, it ought to be embraced and extended as much as possible. It is this grassroots experience that will prove to be a valuable sounding board later in one’s career. Whether or not you admire US President Barack Obama, his time as a community organiser gave him insights which served him well later in his career.

Beware of hubris

While young graduates are right to be proud of their university degrees, and they have now joined an elite club (only 6.7 percent of the global population has a university degree), they must never forget that their ability to obtain a degree had as much or more to do with luck than hard work and intelligence. Sure, they worked hard and did well in school. And yes, the fact that many of their classmates flunked out along the way suggests that making it to graduation was never a given. But, let’s face it, all university graduates won the lottery by being born into a context that allowed them to get a university degree.

University graduates must further recognise the limits of their knowledge. What they possess is book or formal knowledge of certain phenomenon. Nearly all vexing development or humanitarian questions are not easily solved by formal knowledge alone. These problems also demand the insights and experiential knowledge of local people. While the global community has long privileged formal technical knowledge over local or experiential understandings, aspiring development professionals must actively resist this tendency.

The rural agricultural development scene which I study is often riddled with field staff who think they know better because they have a university degree. Everyone would be better off if they recognised the valuable insights that local farmers have to offer. For example, small farmers in southern Mali have traditionally used their local understanding of ecology to sustainably produce food in the face of highly variable rainfall, limited soil fertility and pest problems.

The world needs good international citizens who are willing and able to manage its global development and humanitarian institutions. While these individuals must be competent in their particular fields, their temperament, perspective and regional knowledge are often just as important. As newly minted college graduates contemplate how to develop careers in international humanitarianism, I urge you to ignore most of the conventional career advice for these fields. Do it because you enjoy it, develop deep knowledge of certain places, linger at the grassroots and be humble about the limits of your knowledge.

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