Sustainable Substitutes? The Effects of Humanitarian Crisis on Third Sector Organizations Filling the Place of a Non-Responsive Government

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Recently, Third Sector organizations in different parts of the world have been called upon to take a major role in the response to humanitarian crises stemming from natural disaster or man-made calamities. In situations and places as disparate as Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua and the Second Lebanon War in Israel, this was the result of the dismantling effect that neo-liberal policies, privatization and welfare state retrenchment had on public social service provision systems (Katz et al 2007; Rocha and Christoplos 2001). And indeed, Third Sector organizations have become the main actors in addressing human needs in humanitarian crises, from Kobe to New Orleans, disasters caused by a natural disasters, industrial accidents or acts of war. Disaster response entails dramatically larger scale of needs, working under conditions of extreme uncertainty, and often having crews exposed to distressing events and traumatized populations. Yet very little is known about the long term effects that participation in aid efforts during humanitarian crises has on Third Sector organizations. A few studies of Third Sector organizations in New York following the attacks on the World Trade Center found that the crisis had negative long term ramifications on the sustainability of organizations directly involved in aid efforts (E.g. Seley, Wolpert and Motta-Moss 2002). Such adverse impact, especially in light of government failures and reluctance to respond, could mean that future disaster response and the sustainability of the system of nonprofit social services in general would both be jeopardized. To mitigate such a grim scenario, we need to learn more on the negative as well as on the positive effects that involvement in aid and relief in humanitarian crises has on Third Sector organizations.

This study investigates the effects of humanitarian crisis on Third Sector organizations through an analysis of Israeli organizations that responded to the humanitarian crisis in Israel's north in the summer of 2006, brought about by the Second Lebanon War. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with senior staff of third sector organizations in selected fields of activity that were engaged in aiding the people in the North. Thirty respondents were interviewed during the month-long war, and follow-up interviews were conducted with them one year after the war. This sample is supplemented by a set of interviews with additional organizations, conducted one year after the war. In all, the sample includes nearly 60 local and national organizations. The interviews focused on 3 questions: (1) the response of the organizations during the war and how did those differ from regular times, (2) the organizations’ assessment of their functioning and that of other players, and (3) their views on the roles of the third sector and the public sector during a time of emergency. Findings reveal various aspects which organizations had difficulty with, such as handling the long-term effects of traumatic events and the emotional cost of their work on employees and volunteers. On the other hand, most organizations report that the massive increase in their operations
during the crisis hadn't caused them any substantial financial instability. These and other findings from the analysis can be very useful in developing capacity building programs for Third Sector organizations in preparation for future disasters, and are relevant for practitioners and policy makers in all regions of the developed and the developing world.

References: