

Survey expert validation – interaction in the humanitarian sector

Dear participant, thank you for your help in validating my research. Before we start, please fill in your name and a small description of how you are involved in the humanitarian sector and/or what your expertise is in this field.

Thank you for participating 

The goal of my research is to identify the interaction between humanitarian organizations and the core mechanisms that shape this behaviour. This study focusses on the influence of these interactions on the sector's dedication of resources to information security. From this study an agent-based model was built to simulate the different interactions between large donors, international NGOs, and local NGOs.

The choice of Modelling and simulation as the research method serves two goals:

- To systematically identify the norms and rules of the humanitarian sector which can form a starting point to improve information security in the sector.
- To identify the missing information and data that is needed to build a model. This will be used for the recommendations on future research on how to gain insight in the humanitarian sector.

Because little amount of literature and data on interaction in the humanitarian sector was found, the model of this study is based on assumptions. Through this survey, I ask you to validate some of the core assumptions based on your own expertise and experience. This validation covers three topics:

- Model assumptions
- Model flow
- The validation of the method

Topic 1: Model assumptions 

The model assumptions that follow, form together the foundation of this study's model. Please answer with "agree" or "disagree" and elaborate on your response.

Assumption 1: When scouting the field for new partnerships with other humanitarian organisations, the Culture of each organisation is highly/very important. An organisation looks for similarity in their potential partner because they deem them to be more trustworthy than others.

agree! in addition to these factors competitiveness and collaboration are considerations too. Funding environment matters in shaping such.

Assumption 2: Humanitarian organisations will not cooperate with organizations or regimes that are deemed illegal or are not supported by their home government..

disagree! maybe not formally, but informally they do, access to certain areas only possible in this way.

Assumption 3: Organisations prefer to re-instate a former partnership with another organisation over new ones. Better image and higher level of transparency of these “new” ones do not influence this preference.

maybe ! the ones that choose over old ones also shaped by funding requirements to show long standing positive relationship between the consortium partners.

Assumption 4: Humanitarian organisations base their priorities on the preferences of their donors. When donors explicitly prefer well-ordered information security in their organisation of choice, humanitarian organisations will spent more of their resources to get this done.

agree! they may resist initially, try to find a way out or around, but eventually funding organizations /donors win

Assumption 5: Humanitarian organizations base their choice of new partnership on the reputation of their potential partners and how transparent they spend their resources.

partially agree! not in all cases. Depends on the organization's own culture and values

Question 1: Are there aspects of the interaction between humanitarian organisation not mentioned in these assumptions that should have been mentioned?

engagement with the non-state actors in situations of internal armed conflict , specifically. Humanitarian organizations vary, some work in conventional setting and others more complex ones, that distinction needs to be captured

Topic 2: Model flow



Modelling and simulation were used to build a model with three types of agents: First, the donors, who choose international organizations to donate resources to. They assess their potential partners based on the previous assumptions. Second, the international NGOs seek partnerships with local NGOs, using the same assumptions to find suitable partners. Last, local NGOs can decide to partner with other local NGOs if needed. Partnerships are costly and the organisation that initiates the partnership is responsible to provide for the needed resources.

Both the international and the local NGOs can spend their resources in four different ways:

- Provision of care
- Organizational costs (salaries etc.)
- Build partnerships and provide partners with resources
- Investment to increase performance of the organizations.

Question 2: is this top-down flow of resource allocation consistent with (the) reality?

partially! sometimes donors do ask for matching funds from other organizations and the local partners

Question 3: is this top-down way of finding and forming partnerships consistent with (the) reality?

not really, it is bits and pieces of everything in varying degrees.

Question 4: Are there mechanisms of establishing partnerships, players, variations of partnerships, or ways of using/spending resources in the humanitarian sector not named in this questionnaire?

Patronage ties , personal connections play a role too

Topic 3: Method validation



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Question 5: What are your thoughts on using modelling and simulation in research?

I think it is good and has a value as it can shed light on the broader context, but limited in grasping how things work in reality, micro level interactions that are often informal, time bound, highly context dependent. Relations are dynamic, they do not work the same way in every situation.

Question 6: Do you have suggestions on alternative research methods that might also be suitable for this study?

Would be great to have an added component of Qualitative research (least apply to a few case studies from different humanitarian scenarios) to find out to what extent this model works and where are the pitfalls.

Final remarks



Thank you for your time and effort. I appreciate your input and have as a final question:

Question 7: Are there any final remarks, tips, or comments that would help me with this research?

Would be great to see you going in to 'field' and undertake some ethnographic research and embed in the various contexts to give more life to the model and to see how you can embrace simplicity and complexity at the same time. Good luck!!!

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Helen Hintjens teach in this broad field

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Tend to agree that communication will be difficult with organisations with a very different interpretation of key terms in practice. On the other hand, not always the case since organisations also look for relationships based on 'complementarity', so sometimes it requires an organisation with capacities that the partner humanitarian organisation lacks, and a complementary (e.g. locally embedded) approach and organisational culture. Trust is more complex than being similar.

Assumption 2: Humanitarian organisations will not cooperate with organizations or regimes that are deemed illegal or are not supported by their home government..

In general yes, though there are exceptions. For instance, some human rights organisations will be assisted and individuals from proscribed organisations may be accepted by e.g. UNHCR as refugees and in danger of persecution. Human rights violations of people in proscribed political parties, NGOs and social movements may make sense at some strategic moments (think of Western support for various Ukrainian political social movements around time of Russian annexation of Crimea).

Assumption 3: Organisations prefer to re-instate a former partnership with another organisation over new ones. Better image and higher level of transparency of these “new” ones do not influence this preference.

Not sure about this. It depends on how the relationship ended. If it ended after a long period of cooperation, and the organisation funding the partnership decides to pull out, it is likely they will want new partners, and will not go back to the e.g. core funding for an organisation they have supported heavily in the past. Exceptions would be if the relationship was viewed as very beneficial for the funding organisation. But in that case, why would they end the relationship and make the organisation a former partner?

Assumption 4: Humanitarian organisations base their priorities on the preferences of their donors. When donors explicitly prefer well-ordered information security in their organisation of choice, humanitarian organisations will spend more of their resources to get this done.

Yes they have to but they usually 'play the game, but bend the rules'. It is more important that they be seen to be playing by the rules than that they actually do so on the ground. On the ground, I believe, there are often deals struck that are not officially reported on. This is for reasons of security, wriggle room, and securing certain local allies who have their price.

Assumption 5: Humanitarian organizations base their choice of new partnership on the reputation of their potential partners and how transparent they spend their resources.

Transparency, or a reputation for transparency, may help, but being a strategic organisation e.g. with the ear of policy makers, and good contacts in high circles (diplomatic, political, humanitarian, UN etc) may be more important than proven transparency. Many highly transparent organisations are not liked much because they consult their members in a complex, democratic process. This means their goals can shift if members participate in decision-making (and not only implementation) and it means that transparency can be viewed as conflicting with efficiency. Reasonable transparency is preferred to full transparency that takes longer. In other words, efficiency concerns may over-ride concerns with full transparency.

Question 1: Are there aspects of the interaction between humanitarian organisation not mentioned in these assumptions that should have been mentioned?

Perhaps the reduction of risk for personnel recruited at the 'centre' i.e. in Switzerland, in Europe, Australia, US, Japan etc. A concern with one's own staff's safety can be reinforced by a culture of suing your employer for inadequate safeguards. This can lead to passing on risks to local NGOs whose staff are paid less yet are asked to risk more, on the (sometimes false) assumption that because they 'know the local environment', they will be less likely to be attacked or harmed. Such assumptions are rarely tested, and may well be invalid.

Topic 2: Model flow



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Question 2: is this top-down flow of resource allocation consistent with (the) reality?

I guess so but not in terms of inputs of labour, only in terms of money and accounting. Real net contributions of labour time are likely to be from the bottom (low incomes, long hours) to the top (high incomes, low hours).

Question 3: is this top-down way of finding and forming partnerships consistent with (the) reality?

More or less, but I think that local partnerships often are formed between NGOs and INGOs without another layer of funding on top of that. In other words, the 'Dutch model', where historically government funding was very significant for Dutch NGOs working as INGOs abroad, is not the case in many other countries. In some countries, the INGOs in the humanitarian sector receive very little government funding. They are sponsored by private sector donations, by members and supporters, and by media fund-raising campaigns for specific humanitarian crises. Catholic organisations are more or less a world unto themselves, and are often very well embedded locally in disaster and conflict areas.

Question 4: Are there mechanisms of establishing partnerships, players, variations of partnerships, or ways of using/spending resources in the humanitarian sector not named in this questionnaire?

Yes religion, ethnicity and political allegiances. These are all based on high levels of trust, whether warranted or not! This is the principal mobilising factor between top-down and bottom-up humanitarian initiatives.

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Question 5: What are your thoughts on using modelling and simulation in research?

I have used on-line role play simulations and I find them extremely thought-provoking and illuminating, so no problem with this method. When it is used to forecast, it seems it works better than more static models. I think as long as it is taken with a pinch of salt (scepticism) then modelling through simulations works well. It can complement log-frames, theory of change approaches to planning and modelling.

Question 6: Do you have suggestions on alternative research methods that might also be suitable for this study?

I guess role play? Or story telling from below to above - e.g. tell one story of what worked well this year, and why. Tell one story of what did not work so well this year, and why. Management at the top, at all levels - local NGOs, INGOs, Governments, multilateral donor organisations, need to hear these stories.

Final remarks

Thank you for your time and effort. I appreciate your input and have as a final question:

Question 7: Are there any final remarks, tips, or comments that would help me with this research?

Perhaps reading published journals of humanitarian workers is a very good way to see what issues come up again and again. There are quite a number of such books already published, including in novel and autobiographical and social science text format. Also Masters and PhD dissertations by international students who have themselves worked in the humanitarian sector, and which discuss their own experiences.

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Andrej Verity

I am a disaster responder and information management officer for UN-OCHA

Thank you for participating 

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Agree (generally). Although people will look to see if an organization generally aligns (e.g. MSF or the Red Cross may hesitate to partner if they see the other org as not being *independant*). I think that more of it comes down to individuals trusting each other in order to get something really started.

Assumption 2: Humanitarian organisations will not cooperate with organizations or regimes that are deemed illegal or are not supported by their home government..

Disagree (generally). Organizations will cooperate with other orgs deemed to be illegal/illegitimate IF the expected result is to alleviate human suffering. Such cooperation will be on a case-by-case basis and will, obviously, create a lot of internal discussion/debate.

Assumption 3: Organisations prefer to re-instate a former partnership with another organisation over new ones. Better image and higher level of transparency of these “new” ones do not influence this preference.

Agree - people and orgs tend to go back to 'what/who they know'. New ones may be seen as a risk of they are not proven already.

Assumption 4: Humanitarian organisations base their priorities on the preferences of their donors. When donors explicitly prefer well-ordered information security in their organisation of choice, humanitarian organisations will spent more of their resources to get this done.

Agree - IF the donor demand it as part of the funding, then organizations will give information security more attention. If it is not demanded (and does not have to be reported on), I suspect that many orgs will try to maximize the amount of money spent directly on the affected population.

Assumption 5: Humanitarian organizations base their choice of new partnership on the reputation of their potential partners and how transparent they spend their resources.

Agree - yes, in general. But, that obviously depends on the org making the decision. If they are not transparent themselves, then they may not expect so much transparency from another org.....

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Difference in relationship between two orgs is different than relationship between two people (in those respective orgs). That bi-lateral relationship can have a major impact in org collaboration (especially in disaster times)

Topic 2: Model flow



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Question 2: is this top-down flow of resource allocation consistent with (the) reality?

Disagree - there is a lot of funding that goes directly to local NGOs, local organizations / faith-based groups, and even individuals.

Agree - generally in terms of how partnerships are setup from the view of the international organizations / NGOs.

Question 3: is this top-down way of finding and forming partnerships consistent with (the) reality?

Agree - generally in terms of how partnerships are setup from the view of the international organizations / NGOs.

Question 4: Are there mechanisms of establishing partnerships, players, variations of partnerships, or ways of using/spending resources in the humanitarian sector not named in this questionnaire?

Not that I can think of immediately. Key with (especially new) partnerships is that it can come down to the individuals responsible for the partnership and how they relate to each other.

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Question 5: What are your thoughts on using modelling and simulation in research?

Positive: a great way to both test a concept as well as better understand any realities that were not considered. Simulation is a great way to gain exposure without (potentially) interfering in an actual disaster.

Question 6: Do you have suggestions on alternative research methods that might also be suitable for this study?

None that I can think of off-hand

Final remarks



Thank you for your time and effort. I appreciate your input and have as a final question:

Question 7: Are there any final remarks, tips, or comments that would help me with this research?

- none -

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Nontas Papadimitriou. I've been working for MSF for 10,5 years 7 of them in the field in Africa, S.Asia & Pacific. I started in the function of Logistics and last field assignment was participating in country management tema & emergency interventions.

Thank you for participating 

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The assumption is true. Nevertheless there are 2 issues with the statement: (1) Culture of the potential partner organization is not a criterion by itself but rather a bias that exists when an NGO approaches others for partnership. Culture is difficult to define in any case especially in international NGOs/actors. (2) It's not about trustworthiness but rather ability to communicate. If the initiating actor sees the partner as someone that can take their place (more or less equal) then it's about getting the feeling that the partner will continue the initiating actor's legacy. If it's about delegating (UN agency partnerships) the partner plays mostly the role of the obedient subordinate to the big aristocrat/feudal. Thus subconsciously the culture of the partner comes to fit the bias of the initiator.

Assumption 2: Humanitarian organisations will not cooperate with organizations or regimes that are deemed illegal or are not supported by their home government..

I'm sorry but this is funny. And a very naively cute assumption. :-)

Who holds the golden truth of who's illegal? (looks to me that there is a westerner bias here) Cooperating with organizations or regimes that are deemed illegal or are not supported by their home government is what HumOrgs do most of the times. ICRC and MSF that I can speak for sure are willing to cooperate (define cooperate) with any "illegal" actor that you can think of if it allows them to hold to their principles and accept their mandates. The ones that are not willing to cooperate (and in some cases; not even as a blanket rule) will do that either because they are dictated by their donors or because they are too small to manage the complexities of such cooperation.

Assumption 3: Organisations prefer to re-instate a former partnership with another organisation over new ones. Better image and higher level of transparency of these “new” ones do not influence this preference.

True. If the cooperation has been positive.

Assumption 4: Humanitarian organisations base their priorities on the preferences of their donors. When donors explicitly prefer well-ordered information security in their organisation of choice, humanitarian organisations will spent more of their resources to get this done.

Largely the assumption is true. Keep in mind that there are HumOrgs that don't depend so much on donors (MSF, ICRC) and set the priorities based on needs that they themselves see on the ground.

Assumption 5: Humanitarian organizations base their choice of new partnership on the reputation of their potential partners and how transparent they spend their recourses.

True, but not only. Capacity, acceptance by host communities, ability to monitor being some of the rest

Question 1: Are there aspects of the interaction between humanitarian organisation not mentioned in these assumptions that should have been mentioned?

Going back to the culture, and taking a bit bigger, most of the HumOrgs are western/rich world based. On the other hand most of the partners are local actors in developing countries; that means that there is always the remnants of the "colonial relationship". Meaning that there is always a power imbalance that goes beyond the financial aspect. That affects and mostly deteriorates relationships when issues arise and the big HumOrg perceives the partner as sneaky/unprofessional indigenous and the other side as arrogant don't-know-what-you're-talking-about white collars. (mostly the last one is more true).

Topic 2: Model flow



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Yes

Question 3: is this top-down way of finding and forming partnerships consistent with (the) reality?

No. At the highest level it's mostly who is willing to fulfil the (political) agenda of the donor. Sometimes this can be transparent (e.g. investing in local economies of countries from where economical migrants are coming to EU) or not at all (e.g. investing in actors that their way of work eventually will block the beneficiaries to chose better life, christian organizations that teach people that suffering & obedience will lead them to heaven)

Question 4: Are there mechanisms of establishing partnerships, players, variations of partnerships, or ways of using/spending resources in the humanitarian sector not named in this questionnaire?

No, it's quite simple. Maybe to be aware that this is downward looking approach and seems it doesn't involve the reporting back and the long term relationship. If that's by choice then OK.

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Question 5: What are your thoughts on using modelling and simulation in research?

It's great! It has only value when it's being enriched by more case studies and experiences. People might see it suspiciously and the way to counter this is to demonstrate that simulation can fit largely (say 80%) a real life scenario that the audience has experienced.

Question 6: Do you have suggestions on alternative research methods that might also be suitable for this study?

I think it should be combined with field research at the bottom level. Like I mentioned above it seems that you're carrying a western/UN bias.

Final remarks

Thank you for your time and effort. I appreciate your input and have as a final question:

Question 7: Are there any final remarks, tips, or comments that would help me with this research?

I can only give you some practical examples to keep always in mind the different cultures that reflect on how local NGOs act; in most developing countries the individualism that has been developed in the west allows us to clearly define to whom resources belong to. While in the rest of the world, especially the bottom of the pyramid, these lines are not clear; a rich person has the cultural & moral obligation to care for the rest. This reflects to how some local NGOs act when they receive funds; they don't 100% comply to the mandate of the partnership because they receive communal pressure. E.g. You have a local NGO that receives funds to provide care to refugees from Sudan in Chad; is it logical that the donor should expect the NGO not to pour some funds in the local market? especially when the financial situation of the two groups is not that different? This can take the form of hiring staff more than needed, pushing beneficiaries to contribute to the local economy etc etc. One would argue if that's unethical or "illegal".

The other example that you might need to take into consideration has to do with timelines and expectations; Westerners & donors require results fast (so they can go to galas and present their impact) while local communities have a different pace. Let's not mention the obsession with working 14hrs in the west that becomes an expectation for the rest of world.

Western vs african style of democracy. Western = majority vote; African = we sit down and discuss until everyone agrees and we have 100% vote.

This affects the speed of decisions at local communities and the compliance to donor requirements. Having 100% vote equals more compromising on conflicting interests = less adherence to expectations. The result is that donors put very high level requirements and expect results without dictating the way.

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Samer Abdelnour. I am an Assistant Professor at the Rotterdam School of Management. Part of my work uses organization theory to explore how international (humanitarian) organizations conceptualize, plan and launch interventions. I also do conceptual work on actors, agency and institutions (in the tradition of taken-for-granted norms, rules, values). I would be happy to speak more on this if you would find it useful: abdelnour@rsm.nl

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Agree. There is a lot of literature on this topic (not humanitarian organizations per se) in the international business literature, with a focus on culture, cultural distance, and mode of entry (or internationalization). I do think you may need to unpack 'trustworthy' a bit more. In my own work, I found organizations partner with others for the purpose of being able to access beneficiaries and convince donors they have the ability to successfully undertake an intervention. Thus, this is more about access to resources (beneficiaries being one resource the NGO business model is predicated on, funding another). I wrote about this in Abdelnour & Branzei (2010) in an article about the construction of subsistence marketplaces in Darfur, and in a teaching case called 'competing for development'.

Assumption 2: Humanitarian organisations will not cooperate with organizations or regimes that are deemed illegal or are not supported by their home government..

Disagree. They cooperate, but in different ways. It is common for humanitarian organization to work with governments (regimes is a loaded term) that are illegitimate within the world society/order or involved in significant human rights abuses. Sudan, Israel and Syria are case examples. All are involved in massive atrocities yet the international order, as well as different governments (the US for example) treat them very differently. Western humanitarian organizations operate in all these countries and are forced to content with these governments. North Korea however, is for the most part isolated. Humanitarian organizations also work with rebel/opposition/armed groups (look at Operational Lifeline Sudan) and even groups that are framed as humanitarian but are reportedly fronts for terrorist activities (White Helmets in Syria).

Assumption 3: Organisations prefer to re-instate a former partnership with another organisation over new ones. Better image and higher level of transparency of these “new” ones do not influence this preference.

Intuitively I would agree. Organization theories (such as transaction cost economics) would also support this, as the costs of forming new partnerships (contracts) is high. However, I think you have two assumptions here. One is about reinstating former partnerships. Another is about transparency and reputation having little impact. Please return to my comments about Assumption 1. I think it is more about accessing resources. Remember, and this is also something to think about. Humanitarian organizations do 'act' in a way, however, they are populated by people who have relationships across organizations, and are also embedded in international and national networks, many of which serve to coordinate humanitarian activities. Thus, these relationships, individual, organizational and industry level, serve to shape the nature of the partnerships NGOs engage with.

Assumption 4: Humanitarian organisations base their priorities on the preferences of their donors. When donors explicitly prefer well-ordered information security in their organisation of choice, humanitarian organisations will spent more of their resources to get this done.

Agree, especially when funds are tied to priorities. Donor priorities are also not homogeneous, this is something to keep in mind.

Assumption 5: Humanitarian organizations base their choice of new partnership on the reputation of their potential partners and how transparent they spend their recourses.

Agree partially. Reputation is important, but in so far as it supports access to resources (again, see response to question 1). Reputation is also deemed important in terms of ethics, credibility, potential for successful dissemination of resources, community relationships, etc.

Question 1: Are there aspects of the interaction between humanitarian organisation not mentioned in these assumptions that should have been mentioned?

If anything, I would have mentioned these in the above responses.

Topic 2: Model flow



Modelling and simulation were used to build a model with three types of agents: First, the donors, who choose international organizations to donate resources to. They assess their potential partners based on the previous assumptions. Second, the international NGOs seek partnerships with local NGOs, using the same assumptions to find suitable partners. Last, local NGOs can decide to partner with other local NGOs if needed. Partnerships are costly and the organisation that initiates the partnership is responsible to provide for the needed resources.

Both the international and the local NGOs can spent their resources in four different ways:

- Provision of care
- Organizational costs (salaries etc.)
- Build partnerships and provide partners with resources
- Investment to increase performance of the organizations.

Question 2: is this top-down flow of resource allocation consistent with (the) reality?

Generally speaking, yes. This is how the aid industry has evolved into over the past few decades. Though there are contingencies that shift priorities, and perhaps create others (such as safety of staff, etc.). But in generally, where this is a crisis, funds are made available and organizations follow.

Question 3: is this top-down way of finding and forming partnerships consistent with (the) reality?

I am not convinced. In my work/travels I have found organizations having the same partnerships in multiple settings. They become institutionalized, and coordinated also, at multiple, including global/industry levels.

Question 4: Are there mechanisms of establishing partnerships, players, variations of partnerships, or ways of using/spending resources in the humanitarian sector not named in this questionnaire?

During humanitarian responses, some agencies, especially the larger ones and UN agencies, also 'split the pie' so to speak, taking over specific camps or sectors and control intervention resources and partnerships within that space. A form of gate-keeping.

Topic 3: Method validation

Modelling and simulation are used in this study to systematically gain insight on the humanitarian sector and locating possibly missing data and information. A downside of this technique is that the constructed model becomes very abstract and might miss a connection with reality.

Question 5: What are your thoughts on using modelling and simulation in research?

Simulations, in my mind, help us model complex behavior where there is little data, or help us project in the future. I do think there is ample empirical evidence on humanitarian organizations partnering, and the choices they make. That said, I am not an expert on simulations, and so would leave this for you.

Question 6: Do you have suggestions on alternative research methods that might also be suitable for this study?

The case study method may allow you to look at a partnership or series of partnerships, and cross-level interactions. Interviews would also be a potential avenue (analyzed for themes, a grounded theory approach, or with the case study method), a survey is also possible though it takes a lot of work, and is perhaps not advisable for a MSc thesis. That said, I think one needs to think a bit about the intention of the research design. Simulations are really highly deductive, depending on the assumptions. An inductive design (as with much qualitative work), can allow one to start with some assumptions, then challenge/shape them as the analysis unfolds.

Final remarks

Thank you for your time and effort. I appreciate your input and have as a final question:

Question 7: Are there any final remarks, tips, or comments that would help me with this research?

You are taking on a fascinating topic, but also a very broad one. My concern is that you are maybe trying to do too much, in the sense of developing/testing a grand theory of how humanitarian organizations organize/partner. There is some good literature on partnerships you will want to look at. Look up the work of Dr. Salla Laasonen, she has two review pieces on partnerships, one a critical review that may be of use for your. In the humanitarian space, Dr. Thea Hilhorst may (or may not) have some relevant work. Barbara Harrol Bond (who sadly just passed) did some seminal work on this topic.

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