

## **The first mission abroad**

Stéphane Vandam

The first mission abroad often represents a determining experience in the career of humanitarian workers and as such needs to be carefully prepared.

Nowadays, humanitarian aid leaves no more space to amateurism and requires a distinct professional attitude acquired in great part through a good preparation. Beyond technical expertise a full range of aptitudes including cultural sensitivity, knowledge of the political context and of basic humanitarian principles such as neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity are expected from humanitarian relief workers. The adage “do not harm” needs to be well integrated if the first mission is to provide efficient and appropriate relief to local populations victims of disasters.

Humanitarian workers need to be polyvalent in addition to their technical expertise and well equipped with the adequate tools to apprehend complex situations in order to act in a responsible manner particularly as far as security is concerned. Much is about management, planning and good interpersonal relationship.

Training courses on a first mission offer the possibility for newcomers to meet with experienced professionals who will share their experience with the participants. First mission courses help in facilitating the building up of team spirit among the participants, help to clarify the roles of different humanitarian organizations, their mandates, the differences and common features among the UN-organizations, the Red Cross, NGOs, and other organizations from civil society. This also helps in laying down the foundations for successful partnerships during future humanitarian operations.

Funding of humanitarian actions has also evolved in a more coordinated manner and donors increasingly seek to select the competent agencies based on accreditation for further support in the delivery of humanitarian aid. This means for the implementing agencies to have the necessary competence mainly through sufficient human resources, their availability and a confirmed professional competence.

Building competence is a continuous process, this is why it is so crucial for already experienced persons to attend additional training where they will have an opportunity to expand their knowledge while solidifying their field experience in a rational and organized manner. Emphasis is put on the public health approach in delivering humanitarian aid and on epidemiology as the basis for health information, proper assessment of needs, monitoring and evaluation of the impact of health programs as well as in the management and control of communicable diseases.

Programs in the health sector are mainly articulated around the principles of primary health care with emphasis on preventive health care. By deepening their knowledge on important issues such as the provision and management of essential drugs, immunization, mother and child health care, nutrition, water and sanitation, health education, health promotion, logistics, and ethics, humanitarian workers will remain fully operational and updated on the trends in the field of humanitarian aid, including the development of minimum standards in disaster response.