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‘Every Person Counts’
The Problem of Scale in Everyday Humanitarianism

Abstract: As multiple forms of ‘vernacular humanitarianism’ are emerging, ordinary citizens, active locally or internationally, play an increasing part. Their interventions face the challenge of scale, and scale-ability of their activities. What can be their role if they only engage with small groups of people? How do they attribute meaning to these interventions, given that the scope of the problem is always larger than what they can hope to achieve? Drawing on research with privately funded humanitarian initiatives in Cambodia, the article argues that in order to accommodate the partialness of their endeavours, they deploy a particular scale, namely that ‘every person counts’. The practices carried out under this logic contain singular acts of care, and lives being transformed. Other scales are being brought into play, such as an individual ‘paying it forward’ by supporting others and thus effecting change in wider society.

Keywords: Cambodia, development, humanitarianism, scale

Humanitarian endeavours are sometimes described as a ‘drop in the ocean’ of need. At first sight, the problem of ‘scale’ might refer to the constant challenge to provide more, or enough support to those requiring it. Focusing on the case of everyday humanitarians in Cambodia, their response to this situation consists of making and deploying their own scales, such as that of the single individual. Adopting a scalar approach to humanitarianism more generally avoids dismissing such efforts as negligible, but makes visible the manifold humanitarian practices that exist on the margins of the formal, institutionalised sector. In turn, their practices of scale-making demonstrate that their scales are not distinct or oppositional, but interlinked: making ‘every person count’ also points to those receiving support extending charity to others, into the future, or effecting change in wider society, thus unsettling entrenched notions of what ‘small-scale’ humanitarianism means.

The term ‘everyday humanitarianism’ is used here to describe practices by individuals and small groups to directly support others, within and across regional and national boundaries. While these might be considered forms of charity, or indeed development initiatives, invoking the term ‘humanitarianism’ highlights the fact that ordinary people, rather than professional aid workers, provide assistance and thus alternatives to established, formal institutions of aid (Bornstein 2015; Fechter and Schwittay 2020). This chimes with recent work on forms of humanitarianism described as ‘vernacular’ (Brković 2020) or ‘amateur’ (Schnable 2021). Describing these as ‘humanitarian’ rather than ‘development’ practices, even though they are not emergency interven-
tions, captures their often ad hoc nature. It also reflects that the people involved do not usually consider themselves part of the formal development sector, but prefer to describe themselves as being on the margins, or separate from it. The term ‘humanitarian’ reflects this informality, even though in practice this involves aid projects such as Cambodians setting up after-school educational centres for young people; citizens from neighbouring countries organising food banks and soup kitchens in provincial towns; or nationals from the Global North, often in collaboration with Cambodians, offering support for those with disabilities or in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, offering training and improvement of livelihoods.

In principle, these initiatives are not different from other forms of charity. Their ways of operating set them apart from the formal aid sector, such as being nimble and often more attuned to local conditions, simply because they are not underpinned by large institutional infrastructures. What they offer and whom they support, such as youth development or skills training, does not as such deviate from established INGOs or NGOs. While their impact has not been researched systematically, these forms have nevertheless been criticised as ‘contraband humanitarianism’ (Berman 2017: 77) or lacking legitimacy (Kinsbergen 2019). Allison Schnable (2021) suggests that they may be self-serving, insofar as if amateur humanitarians genuinely wanted to change matters – for example, improving the lives of African farmers – they would do better to vote wisely in elections, rather than expending their energy in these circumscribed forms of assistance.

This challenge – how to change the world with limited means – is precisely what attention to practices of scale-making renders visible and tries to address. Understanding quotidian forms of support for others through the prism of scale-making elucidates a quandary that is not unique to everyday humanitarianism, but that it illustrates in a pronounced fashion. Pertaining to social change more generally, the question is how attending to all of humanity – a mainstay of humanitarianism – squares with the knowledge that inevitably one’s efforts are limited and partial. What is at stake in the question of scale-making is both practical and theoretical: where to place one’s efforts and how to imagine one’s own limited agency in the context of much broader aims and challenges? This paper argues that attention to scale-making processes illustrates some of these answers through ethnographic description of everyday humanitarian practices.

Everyday humanitarianism entails ordinary people supporting others in need, and as such could be seen as always falling short of its aims, namely to alleviate human suffering wherever it is found. If not fundamentally futile, this may at best constitute an inefficient way of looking after others. It entails choices about who to extend support to, and in what form. When confronted with widespread poverty in Cambodia, which remains a ‘least developed country’ (UNCTAD 2018), where to start? And how to continue supporting a few people, given that there are so many others who would benefit from it, too?

The problem of not being able to rescue everyone is not unique to everyday or ‘amateur’ forms, but concerns all humanitarian intervention, no matter how comprehensive (Ticktin 2015, 2019). My argument here engages with scale-making in everyday humanitarianism. Comparable mechanisms are at work and sustain large,
institutionalised forms, too. One might note that the temporal scales of more established humanitarianisms fit their universal ambitions: the Millennium Development Goals are one case, or the campaign in the year 2005 to ‘Make Poverty History’. They express collective or institutional ambitions, while they often subsequently fail to achieve these in their entirety, too. While everyday humanitarians and those working for large organisations both make scales, the kinds which they deploy may differ. Work in the formal aid sector typically rests on particular temporal and spatial frameworks that define their scope for action, such as the scale of the ‘project’ and its associated timeframe (see also Watanabe 2015). It is not unusual, however, for employees at large agencies to be active as everyday humanitarians at the same time (Fechter 2017), so that people, in their different capacities, may be operating on different scales simultaneously. While formal aid staff may struggle with the challenges of the large scale (Fechter 2016), the everyday practitioners avoid this by choosing to focus on the scale of one.

Everyday humanitarian practices are confronted with this in a pronounced fashion rendering them a particularly appropriate case for exploring this tension. A key challenge for all forms of humanitarianism is that not all of humanity can be ‘saved’: whether large institutions or small groups of individuals, their interventions are necessarily limited in scope. They have to decide whom to support. No matter how they are being selected, the challenge of the partialness of humanitarianism remains. This paper explores one response to this situation: the making of scale, which appears poignantly in everyday humanitarianism. In order to understand how those involved in everyday humanitarianism respond to this situation, I adopt the premise articulated by E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert that scales are made, not given, and that ‘scale is process before it is product’. Like their collection, this paper explores ‘how, why, and to what ends people and institutions scale their worlds’ (2016a: 8–9; for anthropological approaches to scale, see also Strathern 1995; Tsing 2012; Wastell 2001). The framework of ‘making scale’, paying attention to what scales are made, how this happens and what use these scales are put to is particularly productive to explain a key operating mode of everyday humanitarianism. A key mode of saving a single life, or the tenet that ‘every person counts’. This is particularly appropriate as studying scale means ‘to examine how the ideals of social life stand in tension with notions of what is practically achievable’ (2016: 10). This captures the archetypical tension characteristic of humanitarianism, that is, the tension between certain ‘ideals of social life’ – such as the wish to save everyone – and the practicality of what one person, or a small group of individuals can achieve. How people respond in this situation is by understanding their response (also) as a form of making scales.

One outcome of this scale-making is value statements: the scales that are being made – for example, that ‘every person counts’, or that the single life is worth saving – are used to justify, valorise and frame ensuing interventions. Using these scales is a way for everyday humanitarians to guide and make sense of their actions. As Carr and Lempert explain, scales are useful because ‘they help people orient their actions, organize their experience, and make determinations about who and what is valuable’ (2016a: 9). I aim to document what kind of scales are being made, and how they matter for practices of everyday humanitarianism; what use they are being put to; and what follows
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from their deployment. For, as Carr and Lempert remind us, ‘scales are ways of seeing and standing in the world, and as such, they are also instruments for political, ritual, professional, and everyday action’ (2016a: 10).

Drawing on this framework to understand beliefs and practices of everyday humanitarianism means to consider, in the first instance, what kinds of scales are being made. Here, this takes the form of the individual life and efforts to support it have value in and of themselves. In the first instance, I consider examples of the semiotic labour – that is, linguistic practices framing one’s actions – that are involved in making such scales. The tenet that ‘every person counts’ links to a range of scale-making practices. The first is understanding this as single acts of care and second, considering the person as a site for change.

Before discussing this in more detail, one might confront the charge that this tenet was born of pragmatism. If everyday humanitarians by definition operate with limited means, would they not opt for making a scale that befits these means, and which, moreover, might make them feel better about their efforts? While this may hold in some cases, I was told in no uncertain terms by several of my interlocutors that such practice could not be reduced to mere necessity. Rather, they impressed on me their conviction that this was ‘the only way to work’, which I return to below. Further, understanding the focus on the single person as a pragmatic or self-serving attitude does not diminish the insights on humanitarian action that the making of this scale offers more broadly.

This particular scale may come in different guises. Liisa Malkki, in her work on volunteers for the Finnish Red Cross, refers to such framework as the ‘logic of the one’ (2015: 14). This means imagining ‘one singular child, one singular benefactor’ of their supportive efforts, creating a feeling of responsibility (2015: 14). While I would consider this undoubtedly as an instance of such making of scale, Malkki does not explicitly use it for such purpose in her discussion. A related case of scale-making in charity is provided in China Scherz’s work with Franciscan nuns in Uganda. In a charity home, they are providing for abandoned children, often in a manner that external funding bodies consider unaccountable and unsustainable. Squarely refuting such criticisms, it becomes clear that for the Sisters, the scales employed by ‘professional’ charitable bodies lack relevance. Instead, they are crucially living and working within a set of scales that take into account the effects of divine power. As Scherz explains, ‘they believe that only God can complete and perfect their imperfect works, which are always broken, always partial, as they believe themselves to be’ (2013: 632; see also Gell 1992; on the use of temporal scales in development, Watanabe 2015). Scherz notes that while operating within such framework poses constant challenges, it is the only way for the nuns to accommodate the partialness of their endeavours. Following from this, I turn to a different form of scale-making, which also offers a way of dealing with the inevitable shortcomings of any form of humanitarianism, and the labour required to enable it.

The environments where the ethnographic material I present here originates are the capital city, Phnom Penh, as well as smaller, provincial towns in Cambodia. Having received substantial amounts of overseas aid since the end of the civil war in the late 1990s, as well as a steadily increasing stream of tourists, both institutionalised forms of development and everyday humanitarianisms have been flourishing here. Based on a series of fieldwork visits between 2014 and 2019, in the context of a project dedicated
to ‘alternative actors in development’, I spent time with a range of foreign and Cambodian everyday humanitarians at their homes and projects, and with the people they were supporting. The long-term, if intermittent, nature of the research made possible repeat visits and conversations, alongside being able to follow the trajectories of projects and the fortunes of individuals over time.

It matters that the practices of everyday humanitarianism that are discussed here are not necessarily traceable to uniquely Cambodian or ‘vernacular’ forms of charitable interventions. Instead, supporters include Cambodians and foreigners, often working together on projects. They come from other Asian countries, such as Singapore, as well as Australia, North America and Europe. Their humanitarian practices often emerge as a result of very partial understandings and knowledges of the other, and do not neatly fall into categories of either ‘local’ or ‘global’, but often emerge in interaction – or contestation – of these.

Making Scales

The process of scale-making is performed through different forms of labour, including but not limited to the ‘semiotic labour’ foregrounded by Carr and Lempert (2016b). Scales are also made through decisions, actions and non-verbal practices, as illustrated in the ethnographic material below. As Carr and Lempert emphasise, the making of scales is the result of continuous efforts. Given their importance for guiding action, ‘the scales that social actors rely upon to organize, interpret, orient, and act in their worlds are not given but made – and rather laboriously so’ (Carr and Lempert 2016a: 3). The recognition that people undertake efforts to structure their world, linguistically and otherwise, is not necessarily new. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, for example, highlighted some of the ‘metaphors we live by’. These are linguistic forms that structure people’s realities and actions, which they traced through their production and efficacy (1980 [2003]). While approaches to scale-making have remained perhaps more marginal in anthropology than in other disciplines, they can be an ‘especially powerful ethnographic strategy’ (Carr and Lempert 2016a: 8; see also Brković 2016; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Humanitarian practices, both informal and formal, lend themselves to an examination of the mechanics of scale-making, not least because their aspiration to attend, in principle, to the whole of humanity is by definition vast.

A key trope, and indeed a scale animating everyday humanitarianism, is the value of the single person. It appears in many linguistic expressions, including the slogan ‘every person counts’, to which I return below. It is rendered poignantly in the parable of the ‘Star Fish Thrower’. This story can be traced to the American anthropologist Loren Eiseley – though it was most probably not invented by him – and was published in his collection, The unexpected universe (1969). A version of the parable, titled ‘The Starfish Story’ and adapted to a Southeast Asian context, renders it as a dialogue between a Buddhist monk and his disciple:

A Buddhist monk was on the beach with his apprentice the day after a fierce storm. Thousands of starfish had been washed up and stranded on the shore. Stooping down, the monk carefully lifted a single creature and returned it to the sea. His young appren-
tice wondered aloud why his master bothered to do this when it made little difference to
the mass of helpless creatures. As they walked along, the monk picked up another single
starfish and replied, “It makes a difference to just this one”.1

This story was frequently invoked across a range of initiatives and small projects I
encountered. It was presented as a motto on their social media sites, in promotional
leaflets and displayed as a visual starfish icon. It also heralded the work of one particular
NGO, the Indochina Starfish Foundation. On their website, they describe themselves
as an NGO ‘that believes every child has the right to education, healthcare and play’,
embodied by their motto emblazoned on their welcome page, ‘Making a difference,
one child at a time’. The Starfish Foundation links to this very story on their website,
explaining that the philosophy of ‘The Starfish Project’ derived its name from the para-
ble. In another setting, the slogan ‘Every Person Counts’ was emblazoned on the walls
of a café run by a small NGO in a Cambodian provincial town. The slogan featured on
its website, its promotional leaflets and the T-shirts on sale. It summed up the focus
of the NGO, which was working with and for people with disabilities – those who, in
the absence of support by the state, and living in poor families, are among the most
disadvantaged. Its urgency stemmed from the fact that in a developing country people
with disabilities are the most likely to be left behind. Such emphatic commitment to
the value of the individual is not unique to projects dedicated to those living with a
disability. Rather, I argue that the value of the individual, or the belief that ‘every per-
son counts’, fundamentally motivates and shapes forms of everyday humanitarianism.

The scale that is being made through such semiotic labour is the ‘value of the one’. Nothing perhaps embodies the spirit of grassroots aid as much as the insistence that
every person counts. This scale of ‘the one’ has, of course, prefigured manifold in
human history. One of its earlier incarnations may be the tenet that ‘anyone who saves a
life, is as if he saved an entire world’ (Talmud, Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). Understood as a
metonym, saving one symbolically saves everyone. In the history and analysis of (West-
ern) humanitarianism and its agencies, this appears in many forms, such as the ‘logic of
the one’ (Malkki 2015: 14). While particularly resonant of everyday humanitarianism,
it is not unique to this context. It is also a central tenet for some large organisations,
notably medical NGOs such as Médécins Sans Frontières (MSF). They uphold the value
of the individual life even in medical emergencies affecting hundreds or thousands. As
Peter Redfield observes, ‘MSF humanitarianism operates under the clinical logic of
“one patient at a time”, seeking to treat “the patient before us” . . . Like a good shepherd,
it seeks to secure each and every member of its conceptual flock’ (2013: 156). This belief
insists that every person is valuable, and every single life is worth supporting or saving,
independent of concerns about efficiency or scope. Each person’s life, in this logic, is
an incontrovertible, unassailable good. Following Carr and Lempert, we can see how
‘people use language to scale the world around them’ (2016:6).

Mechanisms of scale-making include, but are not limited to, semiotic labour. Directing one’s humanitarian efforts at one person or a small group of people is not
in itself about scale. In the following, I document how the labour of scale-making can
consist of identifying sites of intervention; of consciously limiting one’s scope, and
identifying frames for action and measures of value that guide and give meaning to
one’s efforts. This doesn’t imply that the resulting scales are fixed. As I discuss below,
they are also imagined as extending out across society, or indeed towards the future. Its consequences are an ordering of the world; a justification for a particular form of action; and even producing a response to an impasse, raised at the beginning, of where to site one’s intervention when facing vast challenges. The insistence that ‘every person counts’ exemplifies one, semiotic mechanism of making scales. Other practices of scale-making in everyday humanitarianism consist of singular acts of care, catalysing change in one person and, finally, supporting individuals not just as being valuable in itself, but as the way to bring about change in wider society.

**Acts of Care**

Such singular acts of care and relief have been described, for example, by Elisa Sandri (2018: 74). In the context of the informal refugee camp in Calais, labelled ‘the Jungle’, the task of a tea kitchen volunteer consisted of preparing hot drinks in muddy and cramped conditions, and handing out cups of tea and biscuits to people who had fled, offering a gesture of humanity, in a moment of recognition and care. In addition to support through campaigning, offering a conversation or a smile are not considered vain gestures, but practices of care that are meaningful in their own right, independent of the broader context.

One such everyday humanitarian engaged in acts of care was Mabel, originally from Malaysia, who ran a volunteer-supported soup kitchen in a residential area of Siem Reap. The kitchen normally reached a considerable number of people: during the week in the school term, they provided lunch to twenty or more school children in the area, who would not have had a hot meal otherwise. At the weekend, with the help of a substantial team of volunteers, they prepared around six hundred meal packages, including rice and a vegetable curry, to disadvantaged families living on the outskirts of town. Nevertheless, Mabel was very clear that with her whole soup kitchen operation, ‘I’m not saving anyone’. More specifically, she meant that even though the food packages the families were receiving on a Saturday were ‘possibly the most nutritious meal they’ll have all week’, the project would not substantially improve their livelihoods, or save any of them from destitution. Beyond its nutritional importance, she saw the value of the food packages as an act of care.

As the name of her project, ‘Reach Out’, indicated, the ambition was to reach rather than transform, or even save, a life. Mabel recalled the case of Sopheap, a woman in her thirties, who was living by herself near Mabel’s home. Sopheap liked to attend the soup kitchen and sit down there to have a meal in the company of Mabel’s team and the neighbourhood kids. This was not, Mabel assured, because she was not able to feed herself, but rather because ‘she wants to be taken care of’. Her husband having left her some time ago, Sopheap was renting a single room in a house nearby, and was earning some money from selling self-made handicrafts. While some of her basic needs were met, Mabel’s kitchen provided a place of sociability, mingling with a steady stream of foreign volunteers, and company.

Such single acts of care were also performed at one of the stops on the food distribution round that Mabel and her team undertook on a Saturday. The stop was at a low-level concrete bungalow, set in a compound, the building in a state of half-completion,
and possibly abandoned by a previous resident. Around the courtyard were a number of rooms, with open doors and empty window frames, each inhabited by one, and sometimes two people. Inside were gathered their sparse belongings, a sleeping mat, a small gas-fired cooker and a shelf with cooking utensils. As the team approached and were handing out food, Mabel chatted with Srey, one of two sisters who were living here, catching up on the week, enquiring about people's health, whether one of the older residents had been able to get up and walk around at all. Most of the dozen or so people living here had no immediate family to look after them; some had mental health issues, were living with a disability or were managing the effects of old age without immediate help. None of them were able to support themselves by earning a living, though some were more mobile and supported others in the courtyard. The concrete bungalow and its surroundings recalled what João Biehl (2003) has described as ‘zones of social abandonment’. And yet, despite the evident absence of care from family or the state, the people here were not entirely abandoned. Apart from some company and support they received from other residents, Mabel and her team were welcome here. A sign, perhaps, that they were not forgotten, that someone cared enough to visit regularly and bring food with them. Even though most of this may have been palliative, and Mabel’s intervention would not substantially improve their lives, they were acts of care, validating the scale of the single person.

Similar practices were evident in Carol’s project. A US-American citizen, now in her seventies, Carol had turned to Buddhism several years ago, and had set up a hospice supporting Cambodians suffering from HIV/AIDS. The main purpose of the project was to provide practical and spiritual support to those in their last stages of life, dispensing medicine and providing palliative care. As Carol described it, ‘we are holding their hands and doing [Buddhist] chanting with them’. Carol’s project, ‘House for Hope’, was relatively unusual insofar as their interventions, while focused on the single person, were not oriented towards a future. This characteristic set it apart from many other initiatives discussed here. Many of the practices documented in the Cambodian context are aimed at improving the circumstances of young people – activities fundamentally geared towards generating better life chances for them. As becomes visible with those initiatives, the tenet that ‘every person counts’ can extend beyond singular acts of care, aiming to bring about change in the life of an individual. This step-change also matters in relation to fundamental inequalities between recipient and giver that can characterise such ‘acts of care’, and humanitarian support more broadly. While neediness undoubtedly exists among the helpers as well as the recipients (Malkki 2015), acts of everyday humanitarianism are not marked by these inequalities in a straightforward way. This is not least because frequently those having received aid in the past become ‘givers’ in due course themselves, as is evident in the following examples.

**Turned-Around Lives**

Initiatives revolving around the person as a site of change abound among everyday humanitarian projects. A mechanism of making scales here extends beyond single acts of care, and extends it into the future. In its simplest version, an outside intervention turns around the life of a person. Harun, for example, was a Malaysian national, run-
ning an IT business, who was living in Cambodia with his wife Nim, who had grown up in a village. As he remarked drily in conversation, ‘my wife was rescued by Don Bosco’. He explained an NGO that offered young Cambodians training in catering and hospitality carried out an enrolment drive in her village, offering her the opportunity to move to the provincial town. Nim had gone on to work in the tourism industry, being employed by one of the major hotels, and thus leaving behind what might have been a life of subsistence farming. Having met and married Harun, she had an income and their three children were attending a good school in town. In Nim’s case, this life change consisted of accessing training, being able to support herself and marrying a middle-class foreigner. In other cases, such changes can manifest as gaining dignity, status or social visibility as a person.

Rob, for example, passionate about people living with disabilities, told me what had happened that week with a young woman, Sokanthy. She was living with a disability, the result of an injury caused by a landmine, and was now a wheelchair user. People had brought Sokanthy to his attention. For him, this was an example of the belief that ‘every person counts’ or to focus on ‘the One’. Through his connections and brokerage, he was able to find a collapsible wheelchair offered by a US-American, Mike, a wheelchair user himself. Being expensive and difficult to find in Cambodia, a collapsible wheelchair can make a big difference to people’s mobility and possible livelihoods. A story of this donation, with a picture of Sokanthy and Mike in their wheelchairs, was subsequently featured in the English-language newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post. Rob thought that this wheelchair made a difference for how Sokanthy thought about herself, beyond the mobility she had gained:

with disability . . . so first there is this landmine victim, Sokanthy, she lives in this haze, I’m poor, there is nothing I can do about it. That’s bullshit. It’s about helping her build self-esteem, that she does matter in the world. The choice to do that newspaper story was hers – she said, ‘I’m ready, let’s go’. The piece was in the Phnom Penh Post, with a picture of her. When I had this BBQ at my house, I showed it to her, and a lightbulb went off in her head, you could see it. ‘I’m ready. I matter in the world.’ She was like, ‘I’ve been recognised as a human being’.

‘Every person counts’ can thus also mean initiating change in a single person – not necessarily in the form of a changed livelihood, though this might follow. In the first instance, it may be about gaining dignity and self-respect, and that being of value in itself. As Rob explained, in the mid-term, ‘her idea is to live independently. She’s smart, but she has been stuffed inside her head for so long . . . they’ve had such a limited experience.’

Other such stories also made it clear that for those supporting them, it was not the numbers but the fact that they may have changed the course of one life that counted. Marco, for example, was a German engineer whose wife worked for a large NGO. He told me about their experiences, both at his wife’s difficult work in capacity-building and their efforts at home to support the staff they employed. For a sense of reward, he explained to me, ‘you only really need one thing to work out. Like, we saved two souls’. As Marco and Ella told me their own ‘Starfish story’, they reasoned that ‘even if nothing comes of Ella’s work with the aid agency [training carpenters], because progress is just too slow or entirely absent, we will have saved two souls’. He was talking about Sam, who worked for them as a night guard for their rented house. Marco and Ella
paid for him to attend English classes, which he did with such success that he became an assistant at the English school and now had a permanent job. While still working part-time for them, he also got married and started a family. In addition, Ella explained that ‘our cook who was working for us, we paid her English lesson, and something with cookery, and now she is teaching in a cookery school’. Like others, they rejected scales built on quantity; the scale that guided their actions was measured by the particular people in front of them. This can also have opposite effects; as Catherine Trundle (2012) shows, the resulting closeness between supporter and aid recipient can also cause discomfort, and lead to the former extracting themselves from the situation.

A particularly poignant form of effecting change in people is among those who may have faced bleak prospects otherwise. Barbara, for example, a trained social worker originally from the UK and in her sixties, used to work in the prison probation service in the UK before she moved to Cambodia. She recounted a story of such a life ‘turned around’ for a person with whom she was involved in the UK. I had asked her about her motivation for her job at the time when she was in the probation sector. She explained that she had a strong impulse that carried her through: ‘Michael Howard, he was home secretary at the time, he said that there was an “individual pathology”, like people were just individually evil, and I was like, hang on, there are massive social issues’. As an example she recalled a woman

who I am now great friends with. She runs a very successful business in the UK and donates to charity, she’s thoughtful and engaged . . . she was my client when she was on probation. She was hell in a handcart then . . . but look at her now!

Such stories of turned-around lives were also prominent in the discussions I had with Olivia and Jim, a semi-retired couple from Singapore in their sixties. Though not a social worker, in her voluntary work Olivia had been involved with young Singaporeans who had come out of prison and were placed in a rehabilitation programme. As she described their relationship, ‘we don’t have children, but in the end, we’ve got a lot of children’, with a laugh: ‘They give you a lot of joy’. She showed me some images on her phone of a group of three smiling young men from Singapore: ‘I have seen so many stories, inspiring stories. These three were all criminal, they were gangsters. One has gone to train with Jamie Oliver, he’s better than me now, he has his own chain of restaurants’. She also explained that they sometimes came over to Cambodia to help in her work with the poor communities and small business project – an example of ‘paying it forward’. A scale oriented towards the future, this was crafted through the actions of the former beneficiaries themselves.

‘Paying It Forward’

It is clear that, for these supporters, an act of care had value in itself and the change effect ed in a person’s life course is all they were looking to achieve. Nevertheless, in the stories told by Barbara, Olivia and Joseph, a perceptible sense of satisfaction was noticeable that not only had the lives of their protégés changed but that the latter, in turn, now reached out to support others, making a scale to extend beyond the individ-
ual. Barbara, for example, casually mentioned that the reformed character who became her friend now ‘donates to charity’, having been in dire straits earlier in her life. Olivia’s pleasure also derives from seeing the Singaporean young men not just achieving professionally, such as opening their own businesses, but especially when they come to Cambodia to join in with her work, having benefited from such projects themselves. These are instances of what Rob describes as ‘paying it forward’. This refers to the practices of paying forward, or in turn supporting others after or while one has been on the receiving end of such support.

Rob, for example, talked about Chantrea, his now colleague in his small fair trade project. A Cambodian women with a disability in her thirties, Chantrea had grown up in a small place in the provinces. Disadvantaged and excluded from education, she came to the attention of Rob’s project by chance, while spending a few days with her aunt in town. She moved into the project’s premises on a semi-permanent basis and had become essential to Rob’s project. First she picked up sewing skills and dressmaking, then managed other staff, learning English and selling her own and others’ designs in the small fair trade artisan shop that she was centrally involved with. As Rob put it, ‘it’s all about quality and dignity. Look at her now, how she has grown. How she is managing everything. She’s inspirational’. What touched him most, though, is a story he kept coming back to:

what really got me, after we had put a lot of [resources] her way, she went back to the village where her mum still lives, and where she was bullied when she was little, and neglected. And you know what she did? She went to the place with the next-poorest family living in it, and said, how can I help you? She was helping them build a new house. She was paying it forward straightaway.

A similar discussion occurred on a different occasion when we met in a small, Cambodian-owned restaurant, whose owners Rob had been friends with for a long time. A young girl, Channy, a member of the owners’ extended family, came to our table and as we chatted Rob asked her what she would like to be when grown up. Without hesitation, she replied she wanted to be a doctor. That’s a lot of work, I commented, perhaps adding an unnecessarily cautious note. She can do it, Rob assured her and us, and explained after she had disappeared inside the restaurant:

I’ve invested in the relationship. When I first met them [the family] they were huddled in this hut, she was washing dishes for the family. They had no toilet and no running water. So I paid for them to have a toilet and water . . . and then money to get an education. I kept asking questions, what do you want to do? What can you do to make it happen? We set up an educational trust fund for her, so she can later take care of the family. She says she’s tired of people dying because they are hungry. That’s when I get paid . . . it’s a pay forward. It’s about the girl going forward. She’s got an intuitive set of values – it’s about caring for others. It took two years for her to believe in this. We’ve got 500$ in her trust fund. So my interventions have ceased here.

What impressed Rob was not just her ambition for herself, but for others, and to see the educational support as something that she would pay forward into the future, again referencing a temporal scale. Such imagined futures and pay-forwards do not,
of course, always materialise. When I talked to Rob on a later occasion, no further mention was made of Channy, and when I asked about her and her family, all that transpired was that she had not been able to begin her studies yet.

As Carr and Lempert remind us, ‘to study scale, then, is to examine how the ideals of social life stand in tension with notions of what is practically achievable’ (2016a: 10). A pertinent question is why people make particular scales, raised at the beginning of this paper. In the case of everyday humanitarianism, one ostensible rationale for why people make a particular scale such as the single life, or ‘the One’, is that by virtue of their size and informal approach, their financial and other resources are limited in comparison to larger, formal organisations. This determines the time they have available, the number of friends or volunteers they have at their disposal or their capacity to fundraise. As discussed, a critical observer might argue that it is hardly surprising that everyday humanitarian initiatives make and act according to scales that foreground the ‘single person’. This may be modesty by design since, as some occasionally said by way of explanation, ‘this is all we can do’. I mentioned this as a possible reason for focusing on ‘the One’ in a conversation I had with Rob. As indicated above, when I suggested that a focus on individuals was born of necessity, he vehemently disagreed: ‘Why do we work with individuals? Not out of necessity, no. Because there is no other way. This is the way.’ Reducing the tenet that ‘every person counts’ to a pragmatist rationale was anathema to him, as it was to others. He fiercely rejected the implicit suggestion that operating at this scale was because of a lack of means to do anything else. Rather, Rob insisted regarding work with people with disabilities that ‘there is nothing efficient about it. You have to work with the person: everyone is different. This is the only way to do it’.

Similarly, Marco, a long-time Australian resident in Cambodia, disavowed the suggestion that staying small was due to limited (financial and administrative) capacity. Instead, he insisted, ‘I don’t sit in a temple of administration. The longer I do this, the more I realise that the best way to do this is one individual at a time . . . that’s the best way to work.’ ‘Work’ is here understood as bringing about wider change. As Marco went on to explain his sports community project, ‘I work with 36 women at the moment, and no more. Once they are integrated, then we can take on more. We go to their houses, see their living circumstances and then nurture them. They train [volleyball] at the weekend. They don’t even know what is going on. They support and network each other’. He gave the following story as an example:

I’ve got this project manager in Battambang, she gets 200$ a month. She uses that money to buy a sewing machine, and then she gets contract work – and she brings in the athletes to do work for her. So she creates a business for themselves. It’s about restoring hope in individuals. What they do with that is up to them. It’s about sports steering them towards employment and a better lifestyle. Sports as a weapon of social change. We’ve got a 90 percent success rate. People who have successfully rebuilt their lives. For example, clothes . . . the new people from Kampong Speu come along, all scruffy. Sochan says to them, ‘we’re dressing well here’, and she gets them to dress well. Sochan shows them how it’s done, and they do it for themselves.

The case described by Marco, and the others discussed above, also allows for the belief that ‘every person counts’ – whether as an act of care, or to effect change in that par-
ticular person’s life. Beyond this, the objective of ‘growing the person’ is also an instrument for change in wider society, following Rob’s and Marco’s belief that ‘there is no other way. This is the way’. The scale of ‘the One’ thus refers to a range of practices of how and why the individual is considered a meaningful object for intervention. In addition to the ‘Starfish stories’ of individual redemption, there is a shift in the making of scale: towards the future, as one person is ‘paying it forward’, and in terms of scope, as this one person, such as Sochan, is ‘pulling others along with her’. Such shift in the making and use of scale underscores how people skilfully operate with several scales as required, extending one into the other, according to their shifting and expanding objectives and activities.

Conclusion

The problem animating this paper is the inevitable partialness intrinsic to humanitarianism, namely that ‘you can’t save everyone’. Heeding Carr and Lempert’s (2016) proposition to pay attention to which scales are made, and how, implies examining why they were being made, and with what consequences. In the case of everyday humanitarianism, one tentative answer is that making a scale such as focus on the individual, or that ‘every person counts’, allows practitioners to deal with the challenge of the limits of everyday humanitarianism. Considering the semiotics of scale-making, and the practices associated with it, it turns out that the apparently simple scale of ‘every person counts’ is associated with a range of practices, and different ways of meaning-making. In the first instance, the semiotics of the single starfish being rescued suggested that the meaning of everyday humanitarian acts is found in saving a single soul. This may not consist of a rescue, but in a singular act of care, such as being given a weekly portion of curry and rice. The scale of the Starfish parable also allows for acts of ‘saving’ and redemption, such as the life chances of a person being turned around. If one was looking for a way to conceptually accommodate one’s practical limits as an everyday humanitarian, then intervening under the auspices of a ‘starfish’ paradigm would provide this option.

In a twist of sliding scales, however, it turns out that practices carried out under the mantra of ‘every person counts’ can be read not only as giving meaning to a single act but also orienting action beyond the individual. This was expressed in semiotics such as ‘paying it forward’. This manifested when a change of an individual’s life course became part of a process as the person, newly enabled, enacted charity of their own, thus effecting life changes in others. Carr and Lempert warn that ‘tropes like scalar “leaps” or “jumps,” or the often-used idea of scaling “up” or “down” do not mean any one thing across cases and should not be treated as stable analytic terms’ (2016a: 7). Taking this into account, what is taking place is a scalar ‘slide’, rather than a jump or leap. Further, the firm focus on the present associated with the mantra of ‘every person counts’ is infused with orientation towards the future: ‘paying it forward’, looking after those who are less fortunate than oneself.

More accurately than jumping or leaping, which suggest scales as distinct from each other, everyday humanitarians constantly operate with one, two or several scales
at the same time, nimbly interlinking them. One such manifestation consists of shifting from ‘every person counts’ to individuals as agents of change. Everyday humanitarians creatively extend and fuse temporal and numerical scales. One example is furnishing the numerical scale of ‘every single person counts’ with a temporal horizon, that is, individuals becoming change-makers and ‘paying it forward’. Another way consists of envisaging greater numbers than ‘the one’, through ‘taking others with them’ and augmenting numbers. They are thus producing a more comprehensive answer to the problem of the limited scope and partialness of their endeavours. In addition to contributing to our understanding of scale-making, this approach renders a better understanding of humanitarianisms. Specifically, it unsettles notions of humanitarian practices as being either ‘small’ or ‘large scale’, ‘local’ in contradistinction to ‘international’ and ‘global’. Instead, a scalar approach allows us to see how humanitarians themselves conceive of their activities, where such binaries are replaced by a jumble of interrelating humanitarian practices, and pre-defined sets of scales are replaced by a set of self-made, interlinking ones to guide their actions.

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Note


References


"Chaque personne compte" : le problème d’échelle dans l’humanitarisme de tous les jours


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