

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation

Research Report Summary

STAYING AFLOAT WHILE ROCKING THE BOAT: TRANSFORMING POWER DYNAMICS IN A REFUGEE CAMP

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"Humanitarian action does not take place in a political vacuum; it is often instrumentalised and politicised. Nevertheless, the core humanitarian principles themselves – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – create tensions and contradictions that independent Higher Education institutions need to study, with a view to a strengthening of quality and accountability in humanitarian action."

Barbara Moser-Mercer, Director, InZone, University of Geneva

Key findings

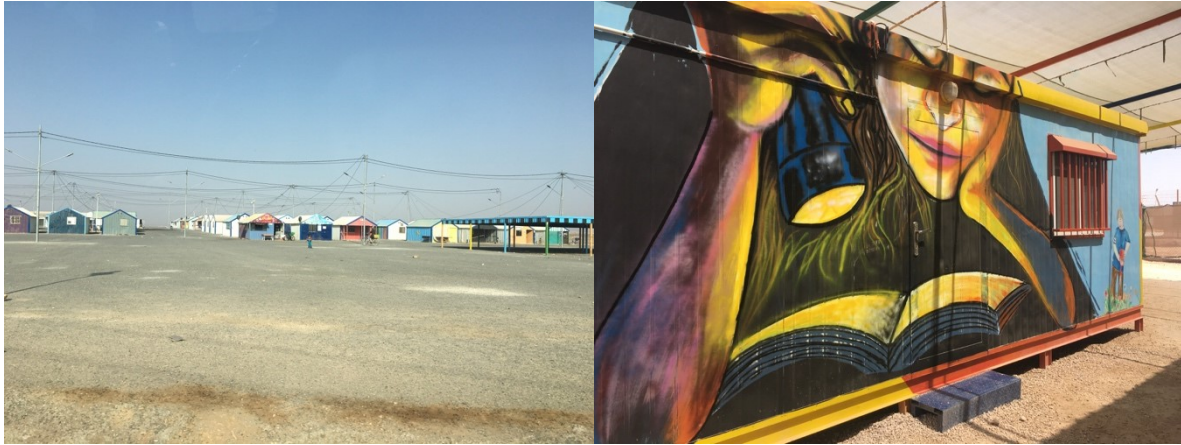
Making change in an established system like humanitarian aid is not easy, especially for a small newcomer organisation. Prior research has described how 'tempered radicals' make incremental change *within* organisations by rocking the boat 'without falling out' (Meyerson, 2008: 8). This case study describes an example of tempered radicalism *across* organisations. Tempered radicals in this partnership take advantage of different forms of power—authority, backing, and knowledge—harnessing them to create pockets of opportunity to do things differently. They also transform power, leveraging one form to reinforce another.

Background

InZone is an academic centre of the University of Geneva. It designs higher education spaces in refugee camps with high quality 'connected learning' models adapted to emergency contexts. InZone seeks to allow refugees more agency within camps by enabling refugee management of their learning centres. This is unusual, as other services in camps are typically managed by humanitarian aid workers.

This study tracked InZone's efforts to implement a refugee-managed learning program with Syrian refugees in Azraq camp in Jordan. In practice, this transition proved difficult, because policies in the camp did not enable refugee-led management, and camp administrators were hesitant or unwilling to challenge the status quo to support InZone's goal.

The researcher was in contact with InZone after a prior professional partnership, enabling access to virtual documents, on-site observation and in-depth interviews with stakeholders.



Azraq refugee camp and a cabin in the community centre where InZone hosts its program. Images courtesy of Chelsea Waite.

Emerging themes

While tempered radicals seek to change power structures and norms, they do not completely lack power themselves. 'Power' is conventionally thought of as control over resources and rules, but this study looks at how power can itself be treated as a resource, to be harnessed strategically, in efforts to make change from within a system.

Harnessing power

InZone staff harnessed various forms of power — academic and legal authority, grassroots support, and experiential knowledge — to influence or bypass camp administrators who were apathetic or resistant to refugee management of its Higher Education Space in Azraq. For example, InZone used academic and legal authority to overcome resistance to their use of WhatsApp groups to contact refugee learners without camp administrators as moderators. When humanitarian partners raised concerns about this, InZone staff framed the issue as an academic one, citing human rights and academic freedom. They called the WhatsApp chats 'purely pedagogical groups'. By framing the issue this way, they obtained permission to continue communicating directly with refugees.

In another example, InZone learned on a visit to the camp that some of the computers in the Learning Center were gathering dust, and humanitarian partners had not taken action to protect the machines. Rather than continue to advocate to camp administrators for a solution, InZone harnessed its support from the community of refugee learners to sew hand-made covers for the computers. InZone's director commented: "you get things done this way".

InZone also harnessed their knowledge to gain access to other camps. Their humanitarian field experience—what one study informant called "baptism by fire"—and their knowledge of academic research practice were both valuable. InZone's staff recounted that establishing their field and academic experience with humanitarian authorities in another refugee camp helped them gain permission to expand their operations. InZone's director said, "We had to be better than our partners," and this was possible only through relentlessly building both first-hand and theoretical knowledge about the humanitarian sector and higher education in emergencies.

Transforming power

In other instances, InZone staff transformed the power they had access to. That is, staff would use one form of power to build up, reinforce, or attract another form. For example, they consciously built up backing from within their parent institution – the University of Geneva – in order to increase their academic authority in the refugee camp. During the period of the study, InZone's director was working to ensure that the university recognised InZone as core to its mission. This cemented its identity as part of a higher education institution, rather than simply a small humanitarian organisation. As a result, InZone could assert authority to challenge its humanitarian partners on issues of higher education. This was especially valuable when they needed to insist upon measures that were integral to high standards of academic practice. A smaller educational NGO would have had comparatively less power to negotiate with camp administrators on issues of higher education.

InZone staff understood how the effectiveness of different forms of power would differ depending on the values of their audiences, recognising the situated nature of power as a resource. They also saw how the authority deriving from their "outsider" status as a university could be used in humanitarian contexts to create opportunities for InZone to act differently from typical humanitarian actors, while also remaining fully accountable to the principles of humanitarian action.

Implications and future research

This study connects tempered radicalism with research on cross-sector partnerships. In a world where cross-sector partnerships are key for social transformation (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2015), conceiving of power as a dynamic resource can be helpful to tempered radicals seeking to create change from within. This case has shown how small organisational actors can consciously and strategically harness the power of their 'outsider' status to pursue a change agenda in a cross-sector partnership.

Future research might ask:

- How do tempered radicals become aware of the forms of power they can harness and transform?
- How do tempered radicals harness and transform power in different contexts: within single organisations, at different levels of management?

Key references

Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C. and Stone, M. M. (2015) 'Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed and Challenging', *Public Administration Review*, 75(5), pp. 647–663.

Meyerson, D. E. (2008) *Rocking the Boat: How Tempered Radicals Effect Change Without Making Trouble*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

About the project

This research is based on the analysis of qualitative interviews and participant observations conducted between September 2017 and May 2018. It was carried out with the support of The Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation, and with the support and permission of InZone-University of Geneva.

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