

# **“Depressing” is hardly the word**

## **by Henry Mintzberg**

“I hope your visit to the refugee camp is not too depressing.”

This was just an innocent comment in a message that arrived on my final day. Yet that last word leaped off the page, indeed coalesced my thoughts about the entire experience. When I showed it to Abbas, my host, he laughed. “Depressing” is hardly the word.

As the plane headed for Nairobi, I wondered what I was doing in there. Sure I was drawn by the sheer experience of the visit. But why go to a place of such tragedy, so foreign to anything I had ever known? Down below, parched Africa floated by, dried up arteries in the sand waiting for some energy. Like life in the camps, I imagined. Like me in that airplane? On that abysmal screen above, Tom was chasing Jerry yet again, perhaps to keep our minds free for the purchase of the overpriced, “duty-free,” perfume. No shortage of energy for all that.

At the airport, I was met graciously by a Red Cross official. She took me to a proper hotel, which might just as well have been in Napoli. She warned me to be careful about walking beyond its grounds, especially at night. Later we toured the nearby game park, where all the animals duly appeared as our cage rolled by—giraffes, zebras, gazelles, a hippopotamus or two, a lion within leaping distance. Into Africa?

I was to spend two days at the camps, and then had another two free before having to return to France. So the official proposed that I do a real safari, deeper into Africa. Meanwhile, hoping to get a little bit of Africa into me. I asked about the local cuisine for dinner. New to the city, she didn’t know any such restaurant. So we had the buffet at the hotel.

Early the next morning, I was driven to another airport, for small planes, to fly to N'gara, in western Tanzania. Here a different kind of traveler appeared, not your usual tourist or business person—matter-of-fact types, casually dressed. Ten years earlier they were probably doing India. Now they had a job to do.

Five of us boarded a plane that displayed the Red Cross insignia. This reminded me of health care, some kind of infirmary with the smell of medicines. Relief work was just an abstraction to me, something you read about in the newspapers. That was to change soon enough.

I sat sideways—most of the regular seats were piled with boxes—and off we went. I tried to look out the fuzzy plastic window, but could barely make out even Mount Kilimanjaro when Juan, my neighbor, pointed it out. A Mexican with the Red Cross, he was on his way to a conference in N'gara, on “camp management”. (Never an escape from management for this professor of management.) Fortunately the windshield was much clearer, so as we prepared to land I caught sight of a beautiful strip of red earth along a high crest. As we bumped to a stop on it, I could make out several white four-wheel-drive vehicles with about fifteen people milling around, waiting for us or for our seats. That was it for the airport, aside from a few tiny huts.

As I went out the door, that proposed safari went out the window. Why rush away from such a magnificent place? The wide hills, barely forested, were dusted with that wonderful green of the start of the rainy season. All so delightful, and the scene of such incredible butchery. What would I encounter in the camps?

Abbas greeted me warmly. He is a tall, mild-mannered guy, no different here, in his element, than back in class. We had set up an international masters for practicing management and invited to participate what is officially called the international

Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, alongside a number of large companies. They sent Abbas, who turned out to be the only member of the class from Africa, although he was working in the headquarters in Geneva at the time.

Now Abbas was managing the Red Cross “delegation” here in N’gara, just beyond the borders of Burundi and Rwanda, from where the 700,000 refugees had come. They were divided into six camps, two under Red Cross responsibility: Benaco with 175,000 Rwandans and Lukole with 20,000 Burundians.

We drove in one of those Red Cross vehicles—reminders of health care again—to the “compound.” I had never been in a compound before. This one was for the “delegates”, meaning the ex-patriot staff, sent by the Red Cross Federation offices in Geneva. Next door was a much larger compound for members of the Tanzanian Red Cross Society.

I met Felicitas, who ran the hospital, and Hans, in charge of the workshops, both from Germany, Gier, a Norwegian doctor who headed up all of health care, Georges, from Montreal, my home town, who dealt with finance and administration, a Russian named Sasha, who assigned use of the vehicles (a position of great power if you wanted to leave the compound), and Stephen, like Abbas a Kenyan, who had direct responsibility for the Red Cross camp operations.

Abbas grew up in the Red Cross. He belonged to the youth wing, and in his early twenties spent several months with it in western Canada. After working in the Federation headquarters for several years, Abbas had moved his family back to Kenya and promptly came to N’gara, just eleven months earlier.

When Abbas arrived, this delegation, with 38 people, was the Federation’s largest. But as things settled down, responsibility for some of the camps had been handed over

to other NGOs, so that now the delegation was down to 17. The contingent from the Tanzanian Red Cross Society numbered over 500. Some of its senior people were paired up with ex-patriot delegates, as “counterparts,” to develop their managerial skills, as their Society was taking on increasing responsibility for the operations. There was also a paid refugee staff of about 1500, from workers who unloaded the food trucks to “the professor” who came to the compound every day to work on software for health monitoring.

Such a compound is what sociologists call a “total organization”: in this case, the delegates worked here, lived here, ate here, socialized here, and played here. This contributed to the “burn-out” they all talked about, which limited their stays at N’gara to not much more than one year. Of no greater help was the exclusion of spouses, although Hans tried to circumvent this by arriving with his wife. That was indicative of the problems Abbas faced in his total organization.

The delegates had lived in tents until recently, but now the buildings were more permanent, with a pleasant little room for each one, clustered in little rows, like motel rooms. They called one “Beverly Hills,” another “Downtown,” a third “the Bronx,” Each was surrounded by newly planted trees and banana plants. Felicitas was especially proud of the flowers she had grown in Beverly Hill, although she was about to move to the Bronx. Hot showers had just been installed too—considered a real treat. No more having to splash water from a bucket.

One corner of the compound contained the work area, a quadrangle around which all the offices were laid out: signs on the doors announced activities such as Logistics, Telecom, Security, Health, Relief (meaning camp management), and Head of Sub

Delegation (Abbas's office). Beyond this was a clutch of satellite dishes and antennae—links to another world.

In that world, I was doing research by observing managers as they went about their work. Here was a manager, Abbas, and me with little to do beyond trying to figure out what was going on. So the next morning, at 7:15, I reported for research at the Office of the Head of Sub Delegation.

I saw a good deal of training, mentoring, and supervising, as I expected, given the counterpart system and the brief tenure of the delegates. What I did not expect was the degree to which managing took the form of controlling.

Politically and socially this place was in a very dicey state. It could have blown up in an instant, for any number of reasons. Abbas's job was to make sure it didn't. So he monitored every detail as carefully as he could, prepared to leap in for correction. Everything had to remain completely on course.

Course, in essence, was municipal government. With so many people in need of housing, plumbing, food, and health care, the delegates had to establish systems and procedures galore. So what I saw was rather conventional management in a rather unconventional setting—or perhaps I should say, *because* of such an unconventional setting.

I came to N'gara from a world of hot showers, so the real treat for me was getting into the camps. That we did after some early morning meetings at the quadrangle.

What to expect? Teeming masses, squalor, depressing scenes, I suppose. Had I expected that, I would have been disappointed.

Approaching it from a distance, set on a large hillside, Benaco looked vast: 175,000 is a lot of people. The camp was open: the refugees were free to wander out; in fact,

could be seen along all the nearby roads, mostly carrying back firewood on their heads, for cooking. The Tanzanian government had recently announced a four kilometer perimeter for refugee travel, but no-one had yet figured out how to identify it, let alone enforce it.

We arrived where the food arrived, in an area restricted to designated workers. Here the food was eased into the camp in three stages. So was I.

The heavy bags were unloaded from trucks by paid refugee workers, stored in shelters made of plastic sheets, and carried to “chutes”—which were really rectangular surfaces—on which the bags were handed over to refugee “team leaders” once a week. These people carried them through gates in a fence, into the camp. Next thing I knew, I found myself at one of those gates, before throngs of people waiting anxiously for their weekly rations.

Entering that gate offered my first glimpse of what a refugee camp is supposed to be like. And my last. For once I got past the dense crowds, my way opened up by polite people who were looking me over the way I did them, I entered a vast urban area that proved to be rather clean and spacious. (A quick calculation suggested that this camp was less densely populated than Paris. But then again, Paris stacks its people six stories high.)

Off wide roads were rows of small huts, well separated, with cooking areas on one side and latrines on the other. I saw no evident squalor, few flies, and no refuse. I was told that while malaria existed, it was not widespread. (I was taking those awful pills, yet in the compound encountered not a single mosquito. Not so back near Paris a few days later, where my bedroom was inundated with them.) The people of Benaco were going

about their business. Except, of course, the kids, who, like their counterparts everywhere, followed us around as that day's curiosity.

I saw markets in Benaco where various kinds of fruits and vegetables could be bought, some grown on the lands allotted to the refugees, the rest bartered for in nearby Tanzanian villages. There was an area where tailoring took place and a corner where people were converting old tires into shoes. We passed a restaurant too, called "Le Petit Matthieu," operated by an enterprising Rwandan refugee.

All of this had to be quite a contrast with the events of two years earlier, when a quarter of a million people crossed the nearby border in a single day. Abbas believed this to have been the largest such movement of people across a border ever. Yet the German Red Cross had water available for everyone within eighteen hours, and the Federation had a camp up and running within thirty-six.

Not par for the course, perhaps, but for this institution the unusual is usual. When a boat overturned on Lake Victoria a few months earlier, with the loss of a thousand lives, Abbas gathered nine people from here and headed for the site overland, grabbing every stretcher, body bag, and can of disinfectant he could find. They arrived the next day—the first NGO on site—and set up a morgue in the local stadium. Forty thousand people came to look for lost relatives on the first day.

My time in the camps was proving to be all too brief, so I proposed to do more research. The next day I was following Stephen around.

That too started with meetings at the compound. Stephen and his staff discussed speed bumps on the roads, the building of new latrines, some meningitis cases at Benaco, and refugee porters who were found not wearing their Red Cross bibs. Then he met a representative from ECHO--the European Community Humanitarian

Assistance Office. The man from Brussels, who had come to audit the use of its money, asked highly detailed questions, to which Stephen provided equally detailed answers. At one point, Stephen described the food distribution system as 98% effective, meaning that people were receiving almost all the food supplied. No, said his colleague, “I want to know what actually ends up in their stomachs.” He was worried about food being “taxed away” and said: “That, for me is ‘food monitoring’,” he said. It was an impressive performance, especially for anyone who might be worrying about how *those* bureaucrats are spending *our* money.

After the meeting, we headed for Benaco. It was noon, time for lunch. “Le Petit Matthieu” was not where I expected to eat, but the food was fine, although Matthieu had mysteriously disappeared back to Rwanda, leaving behind all sorts of rumors as well as a brother to run the family business.

Then we headed over to the food distribution area, which was quiet after the morning activities, although some of the porters were still hanging around. Stephen chatted with a few of them and then, as we left, announced to me that here were no problems. “I used to work here from eight until six, when there were all kinds of problems. So if anything was wrong, they would be telling me.” In America, they talk of management by “walking about.” Here, one step better, it was management by “being there”!

But walking about too. We headed for Lukole, the small camp. Stephen wanted to check out a problem. The head of the refugee committee had written a complaint to a United Nations official about a particular manager in the camp. “You need to put your ear to the ground Stephen,” Abbas had told him the day before, to “find out more about what the feelings are among the refugees.”



The map labelled Lukole a “settlement area.” As I stood in the center of it, I wondered where it was. A half acre was allotted to each household, so the place felt more rural than urban. It also looked lovely. Having been established longer than Benaco, many of the houses had been converted to mud brick, a perfect match for the terrain.

Stephen was transformed in this place. He became positively gregarious, greeting everyone he saw, with a smile, a laugh, a few words. If Swahili did not work—it’s the language of Kenya and Tanzania, but not of Burundi or Rwanda—or English, then he used his smattering of their own languages. His enthusiasm was contagious, for everyone he met. For me too.

The next afternoon I was to fly back to Nairobi, to catch an overnight plane to Amsterdam. So I had only part of one day left. The workshop on camp management was in full swing in the Tanzanian compound next door, so I suggested to Juan that I could present some of my initial observations. Thus the next morning I found myself before a couple of representatives each from the Red Cross Societies of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea.

I read that line from the message I had just received, to convey how really impressive I found such a potentially “depressing” situation. So called *top* management certainly has a role to play, I suggested, but the real job was being done right here, on the ground.

It was not easy to manage across such a mixture of cultures and organizations. Fifteen different NGOs were working here—although down from a hundred and fifty at the height of the crisis. Add to this the system of counterparts, with its own cross-cultural confusions, and you end up with something like Churchill’s democracy: the

worst possible system except for all the alternatives. What especially struck me was Abbas and Stephen's abilities to bridge: across cultures, across languages, across refugee and Tanzanian needs, and across that delicate line between the International Federation and the National Society. Perhaps the queen bee is a good model for such management, I suggested: she issues no mission statements, nor formulates any strategic plans; she just emits a chemical substance that binds everybody together. It has been called "the spirit of the hive" Abbas and Stephen were the spirit of the Federation's hive.

At the break we were served some wonderful little snacks of meatballs and samosas, which got me thinking about that local cuisine I missed in Nairobi. Not here: Abbas and I were invited to a lunch of wonderful grains and tough meat in the Tanzanian compound.

But not exactly a free lunch: Abbas informed me that he had scheduled my presentation a second time, at the Federation compound, for the delegates. So back we went, where I got a chance to say a personal good-bye and offer some reflections in return for that wonderful hospitality.

I had some spare time after that, so I decided to take a walk. Abbas, always on the job, suggested that I head over to the stores and the shops. There I was greeted warmly by Hans and once again shown everything with great pride.

Hans was certainly in charge of the workshops: he looked like a smaller version of Schwarzenegger. As we completed that tour, with great delight he pointed to a little device in the back of a truck bay. It was the pan of a wheelbarrow that had been set on four wheels, with a little handbrake added on. Had I seen the little kid with the bad legs, Hans asked, the one who hung out at the nearby junction of the road? He had polio as a child and couldn't walk, so his friends carried him there every day. Hans and his staff

made this vehicle so that his friends could push him there instead. The gift was going to be presented that Saturday. Hans, the tough guy, was very excited about this.

It was the perfect closing experience before getting into the car for the ride to the airstrip. The plane arrived, I tried to express to Abbas how deeply I appreciated the visit, and then climbed into my seat—a real one this time—and off we went. The view out the window was no better, but this time I had too much to think about. All that energy and organization, all that generosity and enthusiasm, all set in that place of such calm beauty. And all so fragile.

A sign on each of the gates of the Red Cross compound illustrated a machine gun with a red slash through it. Neutrality is absolutely critical to the functioning of the Red Cross. Its role is to save lives, not to decide whose lives are supposed to be saved. So guns are forbidden on its premises.

It didn't always always work out that way. Some months earlier, a group of drunk refugees invaded the compound in the evening. They held some of the staff, including Stephen, at gunpoint, shot up a few of the doors and locks, and finally left after finding some money in one of the offices. And on my flight back, I read in an east African newspaper about a Swedish field hospital in Zaire, much like the one I had just visited, that had been attacked by rebels. They slaughtered all the patients and some of the staff members.

In Nairobi, I caught my flight to Amsterdam, where I disembarked early in the morning to a modern, efficient airport. Back to the “developed” world, of buy-buy-buy—or as those shopping bags scream out here in bright yellow: “See-Buy-Fly”. Back to the world we know so well, flowing past us like inattentive fish in polluted water. But not me, not on this day at least. Acutely aware of how blatantly sex and image were being used

to peddle expensive junk, it struck me as so much horseshit, so much human energy wasted on nothing, while so much of the world was in flames.

Then I caught sight of a red cross on a sign pointing to a health clinic, and for a moment I choked up. Now the association was reversed. How could I ever look at that symbol again without thinking about the extraordinary dedication of these people.

## **Afterward**

A couple of months later, on a Sunday toward the end of December, I was awakened by a disturbing dream. Abbas was trying to tell me something. He seemed to be saying that his work had been a failure. He began to explain why, but it was as if we had been cut off. All I could recall was a faint comment that he had not really changed the lives of the refugees.

Half in or out of the dream, I wanted to tell Abbas why he was wrong: Think about your success, it is quite remarkable. The Red Cross has ensured the most basic needs of the refugees for these two years.

As soon as I could, I called Abbas at the compound. It only occurred to me later that he was supposed to have left weeks earlier. After a few tries, I reached him on the satellite phone. "I'm a little bit tired", he said at first, only later admitting to being "physically and mentally worn out".

"Everything is up-side down. Benaco emptied out over the last ten days. It has officially been declared closed!" An active city of 175,000 people gone, just like that.

The situation had blown apart a few weeks earlier. Rebels had attacked the camps in Zaire, again, which forced a huge migration back to Rwanda. Watching the international reaction, the Tanzanian government ordered the Rwandan camps shut by December 31 and the people sent home.

Many grabbed what they could and headed out, the other way, deeper into Tanzania, some as far as a hundred kilometers. “I decided to stay here,” Abbas said, to arrange water and health services for those left behind. “I thought this would never happen” said the guy who had seen just about everything that could happen. In the camps themselves, the Tanzanian government allowed only the Red Cross people inside. This was quite a compliment, Abbas reported, but in the ensuing chaos, no gift.

The Tanzanian militia rounded up all the refugees, no matter how far they had gone, and marched them back to the border. In ten days, 400,000 crossed over, at one time forming a line sixty kilometers long. Was there a wheelbarrow in that line?

Abbas had tried to reach me on Friday to tell me of these events, but left no message. “We thought Henry would write quite a long story had he been here!” he said. “It’s unbelievable.” The camp that, weeks earlier, had been “thriving and full of life, now an empty ghost town!” It was to be brought to the ground and kept empty for fear of land mines.

Lukole and the other Burundian settlements remained; indeed 30,000 new Burundian refugees had recently crossed into Tanzania from the south, and a new camp was being set up for them.

“I leave this afternoon”, Abbas said, preparing to take the Red Cross plane to Nairobi. The next day he would be home with his family in Mombasa, just in time for a truly new year.

I hardly needed to tell Abbas about the importance of his work. “Depressing” is hardly the word. But how about “inspiring”?

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