

# TRANSCRIPT

## EPISODE 5: *The Ethics of Closing Humanitarian Projects*

**Hosted by:** Rebecca Richards

**Guest:** Dr. Matthew Hunt

*Transcripts may have been edited for clarity.*

**Rebecca:** Hello and welcome to Just Emergencies. I'm Rebecca Richards and for this episode, I sat down with Matthew Hunt to talk about the ethics of closing humanitarian projects.

Matthew is an Associate Professor and the Director of Research in the School of Physical and Occupational Therapy at McGill University and he's also a researcher at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Rehabilitation and an affiliate member of the McGill Biomedical Ethics Unit.

And just before we get into our conversation with Matthew, I wanted to let you know that we won't be posing a new episode in January, but we'll be back to our regular posting schedule come February.

*[Intro Music]*

This is "Just Emergencies", the podcast where we show that global health emergencies are anything but just. In each episode we explore an issue, question, or event that makes us think about global health emergencies, humanitarian crises, and how to best respond to them. Without further ado, let's get into the episode!

**Rebecca:** *Hi Matthew, thank you so much for sitting down and taking time to talk with me about the ethics of humanitarian project closure.*

**Dr. Hunt:** It's my pleasure. Thank you for the invitation.

**Rebecca:** *So I guess first things first. How did you become interested in this topic?*

**Dr. Hunt:** Well, it's been over a decade that I've been conducting research around ethical questions related to humanitarian health responses. I've been focussing on the organisation of humanitarian action to respond to situations of disaster, war or epidemic, usually by international humanitarian organisations and examining the ethical dimensions of this domain of practice.

Sometimes these are more clinical ethical questions - issues related to the dilemmas of competency, for example. So a health professional who's been trained for a certain scope of practice is now in a circumstance where, because the lack of other professionals and the inability to refer to others, they're asking questions such as whether it is appropriate or ethical to be practice near the edges/the boundaries of their clinical scope of practice? That would be a very near-term question.

We've also looked at aspects related to the ethics of resource allocation in humanitarian settings, for example. In this context [we've] conducted many interviews with humanitarian workers - close to 200 interviews with different individuals, differently situated within the sphere of humanitarian action.

In that work, there was a set of questions that we hadn't examined. They came up in various contexts. Sometimes in interviews and in other conversation, people identified a broader issue that was ethically vexing, that they struggled with, that they had questions about. This idea of: how do you close a humanitarian project? What happens at the end? What are your responsibilities towards communities with whom you've been working? What would an ethical project closure look like? It's really those sorts of stories, those sorts of experiences, related to us in the context of this research, that brought us onto this research question.

So now I'm conducting this research project with colleagues that's really asking the question: What does an ethical project closure look like? What would be some of the dimensions there? But also, what is ethically at stake in the context of humanitarian project closure?

**Rebecca:** *Right. And when you talk about the closure of humanitarian projects, what are you talking about there? What's involved in that process?*

**Dr. Hunt:** I think it's important to make that distinction. Obviously there are all sorts of project closures because there are all sorts of humanitarian projects. It's going to look very different. I mentioned the issues around disaster, war and epidemics. Obviously closing a project in the context of a long-term armed conflict is going to be very different than after a sudden onset disaster or the outbreak of an epidemic.

But broadly what we hear about are modes of project closure. Sometimes we have - or particularly in the past. Maybe people are more careful of this because there's more attention to it - an abrupt project closure. So a cut-and-run approach: wrap things up and leave. This was done maybe more in the past. Jennifer Rubenstein has referred to this as "pulling the

rug out" from underneath a community with whom the project has been developed and with whom the project has been implemented.

On the other hand, what we hear - and what we emphasise more - are:

- Phasing-down a project: so gradually decreasing a project in scope.
- Phasing-over a project: so handing it over, maybe gradually, to some entity - ideally the Ministry of Health in a health related project. But maybe partner organisations, local non-governmental organisations, other agencies that can take over some of these services. One of the concerns is: what is the legacy of the project? What are the implications in terms of the wellbeing of the community, in terms of continued access to quality services?

So we see these various modes.

And the other thing to say is that under the umbrella of closure, is also the transition from a humanitarian relief approach to an international development approach. The reality is that those boundaries are more porous than we sometimes describe. We describe them as a sharp division between the two. I think it's quite clear that that is not the case, that there is much more interaction between relief and development. But it's part of this idea of closure - that you might be wrapping up the acute relief aspect, moving towards reconstruction and towards development. So those transitions come under that umbrella.

**Rebecca:** *So you mentioned before that there's been a shift away from this cut-and-run or 'pulling out the rug' approach to a hand-over or phase-*

*out approach. Can you give some circumstances of the cut-and-run approach, why that happened and under what circumstances and why it has shifted over into this phase-over and hand-over approach?*

**Dr. Hunt:** I think what you're seeing is an evolution within the humanitarian field - a greater appreciation or attention to the longer-term consequences of how relief is provided and maybe towards increased professionalisation within the humanitarian sector as well.

There might still be instances in which there will still be this abrupt closure. And like I said, there are different contexts as well. There might be certain types of projects where the idea of a closure that's more abrupt and where there's less follow-up afterwards or less attention to what comes afterwards, might be less problematic. I'll give you the example of a vaccination campaign: once the vaccination process is complete, it's easier to imagine that it's going to be more cleanly divided in terms of what happens afterwards.

Then there are other instances where you might have to think a great deal about continuity. If there is the likelihood of a recurrent drought or disaster, for example, in some settings might lead you to pay close attention to what's going to happen afterwards. Or even this question that I alluded to before of 'what's going to be left behind'? Imagine you have a primary care program where you've been providing health services that have been fairly extensive. The worry is that if the humanitarian relief project closes, what's going to be left behind in terms of health services for the community? We might be thinking very much about what's going to be available, is there going to be access to quality services, and who will provide them? So there's a shift of attention. Partly it's about the temporal horizon of concern: the acute phase of the

disaster or humanitarian response and then looking at what comes afterwards.

**Rebecca:** *You mentioned what is left behind after projects leave. Is that one of the ethical tensions that you're talking when you're talking about the ethics of closing humanitarian projects? What are the things that people are talking about when they're talking about the ethics of closing humanitarian projects?*

**Dr. Hunt:** I think maybe it's worth saying at the outset that there are many instances where projects are closed and it proceeds in a relatively smooth fashion. Just to acknowledge the fact that there are project closures that unfold in a way that aren't contentious and just don't pose these ethical challenges.

But there are many others where people have described closing projects as the most challenging aspect of humanitarian action. Partly it points to some of the central ethical tensions you asked about. I would say that one of them is about adjusting our ethical gaze. The concern for the community with whom we've been working and then concern for other communities who may not be receiving assistance. So to make that a little bit more tangible, at one level you might be thinking as a humanitarian practitioner who's working with a community. It might feel very uncomfortable to be closing up a project where you know there continues to be precarity, people are in a precarious situation, that there's uncertainty about access to services if you're working in the health domain. What's going to happen after the project closes? Is there going to be access? Will people still be able to have obstetrical care? Or nutritional needs addressed? Or primary care delivered or surgical capacity? So that might be a concern at one level.

Then at this broader level, maybe if you're thinking as a policy maker, you might be asking this question: if we look across communities or across countries, are there other communities who have greater needs or are in more precarious situations than the community with whom we've been working? From a humanitarian principle of impartiality, focussing on needs and directing our actions and priorities based on needs, should we not be shifting over to be helping that community instead? We might worry about what we owe to the communities with whom we've already been working. But you might ask the question of 'what do we owe to communities who are not receiving assistance?' And they might be close by, they might be in another country, or on another continent. So there is this wider point of view of humanitarian action, maybe taken by these international organisations.

There are other questions that get asked. There's questions about what harms might be result from different modes of closing projects. That might be very clear when we talk about the abrupt project closure where we haven't planned for, or paid attention to, some of these issues. People describe harms of various types. You can imagine that in a project the fact that the humanitarian project is there is a huge boost on the local economy. People describe that because the humanitarian organisation is there, there's produce in the market place and in the community it creates jobs, for example. So people might be concerned about *those* losses when the project closes. There might be harms, too, on an economic level. Changing, for example, people's access to accommodation or changing the issues of the rental of properties. That's been described in different contexts. So we might have these economic concerns. Obviously there's the more direct services that might be removed. The people who are working for the humanitarian organisation might be worried about various types of harms. There might be issues around security. The biggest issues from a security point of view are

often at the beginning or end of a humanitarian project. That's where the risks of insecurity are at their greatest.

So you can start to see that there are these various aspects or concerns related to harms and trying to minimise those harms. Ensuring that we're upholding principles of impartiality and yet acknowledging that there might be special duties, concerns of solidarity for example. That we owe certain responsibilities to people with whom we're already working.

Then there's this concern for the legacy of the project. What's going to be there after the project finishes? And to what extent do we have a responsibility for that? Also recognising the limits of humanitarian action. Rubenstein would say that humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are always second-best actors. They're not the Ministry of Health and they should not be replacing the Ministry of Health. And yet in these very difficult circumstances of a humanitarian crisis, maybe they have some of these roles, with the goal of handing over - this ideal mode of humanitarian closure - to organisations, entities and governments that are in place and have legitimacy and credibility to be able to provide these services and activities going forward.

**Rebecca:** *How can the handover be made smoothly? What are the sort of things to look out for there or the processes that can be taken to hand over from an NGO to a government or a ministry of health?*

**Dr. Hunt:** I don't think there are any easy answers to this question. There are obviously some operational dimensions to that. Maybe I could focus on the ethical aspects of it.

One of the things is in the work we're doing now - I mentioned that we're starting a project on this. We've been interviewing expatriate and



national humanitarian workers in this first phase of the project. We're trying to understand some of their experiences and perceptions about the ethics of closing projects. Through that work we're starting to articulate some things about the process of closing. The emphasis on handovers is one piece of a process. We could distinguish the ethics of why a project is closed, the ethics of how a decision is made to close a project - so maybe that should be the first one. How we make the decision, why the decision is made, and then how the decision is implemented. So we've decided to close a project - how do we move to a handover type scenario?

Obviously one of the things is clear planning from the outset. People have described that the start of planning for project closure should begin in the design phase before the project has been implemented or *as* the project's being implemented. This sort of careful planning - emphasis on relationships and building relationships with these sorts of organisations. What role have they had in the design and implementation of the project? We would emphasise concerns such as transparency. Transparency both of the reason why the project is being closed but also what are the steps and the timeline of project closure? That's going to be important for handover. Issues of inclusivity and participation in the process of project closure; not just something that is being unilaterally decided. To the extent it's possible, that there's involvement. That really pushes us towards thinking about both partnering with these local entities even within the project itself. And then maybe also attention to concerns of capacity building: are there ways of capacity building? Are there ways that within the project itself we are creating the groundwork, doing the groundwork, that makes it more feasible for the handover to occur? We are concerned from an ethical perspective about some of these procedural dimensions: issues of transparency, inclusivity, participation, partnership. These would be ethical goals - ideals that we'd be aiming

towards and seeking to achieve all within the context of recognition that these are situations of crisis.

As the acuity of the crisis diminishes over the life-cycle of the project and we're moving towards closure - presumably we're moving towards a diminished crises situation where we can anticipate closing the projects, then we should be ramping up some of these other considerations: capacity building and partnership for example.

**Rebecca:** *You mentioned that how we're going to be close projects should be kept in mind as we're designing projects. I would imagine that some humanitarian projects might be need to be put in place very, very quickly because of unexpected circumstances. Under that type of time-pressure, are there guidelines that can help with designing projects in a way that already has closure in mind? Because I would imagine that in an emergency situation, you just want to get this project up and running as quickly as possible and maybe deal with the closure when we get to that point, when we have a bit calm return to the situation.*

**Dr. Hunt:** That certainly is the reality that there are a variety of circumstances where humanitarian projects are implemented quickly. There's this sense of temporal urgency associated with particularly a sudden onset event or an exacerbation of conflict, for example, the outbreak of an epidemic that might be a catalyst or trigger for a humanitarian response. So it might make these things more difficult. But there are lots of things we can say about that.

One is that humanitarian organisations have responded to other crises before. There's an opportunity to learn from previous experience and apply it in this new situation, to plan it in advance. You mentioned guidelines and protocols - are they in place? That is so within

organisations and across organisations there have been efforts to try and articulate some of these considerations. What has worked elsewhere? Obviously, there's a need to tailor that and contextualise it. I think what's really challenging in those circumstances are the relational dimensions of what I described. How does participation and partnership work in this situation of urgency? There's a pushback against a tendency to think "well, it's too urgent, we should just leave closure for later". It's been a consistent response from the people we've been speaking with that it's been insufficient and that there are more opportunities for engagement than at first blush we might think. We could think about these things.

The other thing to say is that there are many of these crises that we could point to in past years where not only are these organisations rushing in after an acute crisis event, but often the organisations were already there in place. Maybe they were providing development type responses and then they shift gears to providing a crisis response. They might have relationships that work there in the past. So especially for the larger organisations, it might not be a case of starting things all of the sudden. There might be different ways of working and they might partner with local organisations. Imagine the Red Cross Movement with national Red Crescent societies - it's not something external to the country. It's working within local institutions. There might be things like that in other circumstances where organisations have been there.

So we can learn from past experiences that have been from elsewhere, there might already be groundwork in terms of relationships and connections and even projects, and then it seems to be the case that there's more possibility to develop these relationships towards effective handover than we might originally think.

**Rebecca:** *Just before we go, you've mentioned Jennifer Rubenstein and her work a couple of times, is there anyone else that people who are interested in learning more about this might start reading? Where could they start looking? What resources can they access?*

**Dr. Hunt:** Some of the things that I've found very interesting are:

Lisa Fuller's written about justified commitments. She's looked at the types of responsibilities that humanitarian organisations have when they're making decisions of where to begin projects. She's also described some of the obligations that humanitarian organisations have for communities with who they've been working, if they're going to close a project. So it's an articulation of a special obligation based around this idea that humanitarian projects have both instrumental and intrinsic value. The degree to which they engender things like hope or trust - which we can problematise which is pointing to the nature with which there are these relational dimensions. This question of solidarity that might exist. I found that helpful.

Not directly related to humanitarian project closure, but an idea more related to the ethics of research and ancillary care benefits, but I think has application here is the idea of moral entanglement that Henry Richardson has developed in these other contexts. So he thinks about sorts of responsibilities - so Rubenstein might point us to some of the responsibilities that flow from the somewhat governmental aspect of humanitarian action. Fuller might point to these obligations that might exist because of the intrinsic and not just the instrumental value. And then Richardson talks about moral entanglement that is an image or concept that might capture some of these things. He would articulate that the responsibilities are higher the more comprehensive the project has been, the longer it has been in duration and then thirdly the degree

of reliance the communities has on the project. There's more moral entanglement: longer, more comprehensive and more reliance and therefore the obligations and responsibilities to address some of the concerns increase.

Maybe I'll say one last thing about how we respond to this. One thing that we've been doing in our project has been to think about some ethical capacities that humanitarian organisations can nurture and develop. This might seem a bit more difficult to pin down than the idea of articulating principles of impartiality, or minimising harms, or sustainability, or more procedural ethics - transparency and otherwise -, but ethical capacities. What would that look like? What would virtuous project closure look like? So that's what we've been trying to think about. And we're talking about three capacities.

The first is the notion of foresight: anticipating what might be the consequences. So this is about planning but it's actively, deliberate anticipation. Maybe forecasting possible scenarios, anticipating potential harms and trying to adjust planning to address these. The notion of foresight actually has a long history in humanitarian action, which I've learnt about recently. Back in 1875, Gustav Moynier talked about *prévoyance* as one of the key approaches of the Red Cross Movement when it was articulating values for the Red Cross Movement. So that's the first one: how do we develop this foresight in the light of or in the context of project closure?

The second is the idea of attentiveness: the ethical capacity or drawing attention to the nature of relationships. Attentiveness to the different types of perspectives and points of view. In this context you can imagine thinking carefully about what does project closure mean for the staff that you've hired locally or for the local communities. How are people seeing

this situation? What is at stake from the perspectives of various individuals? And being attentive to this social fabric of action in this particular circumstance - to paraphrase Springer.

Thirdly is the idea of responsiveness, which is this need to be able to adapt plans in light of the situation: to take this more generalised institutionalised knowledge that we have about project closure and then think about how does it apply here? How do we respond and later our plans in light of circumstances, particular contexts, particular communities, the relationships that are being developed and are evolving over the course of the project?

This is an important line of thinking. Lisa Eckenweiler has been really helpful in sparking some of these reflections. How do we develop foresight? How do we develop attentiveness towards relationships? Responsiveness towards shifting circumstances - adaptability? These might help us as the humanitarian community and humanitarian organisations are trying to think carefully through and navigate the ethical terrain of project closure.

**Rebecca:** *Fantastic. Thank you so much for this fascinating look into what's at stake when we're talking about closing humanitarian projects. So thank you!*

*[Outro music]*

That's it for today – we hope you enjoyed the today's episode. Episode transcripts are available below the episode description. We also have shownotes on our website, where we not only list all the references mentioned in this episodes, but also give you some further resources if you're interested in learning more about today's topic.

If you have any questions, comments, or ideas for topics *you'd* like to hear about in future episodes, please email us at [ghe@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ghe@ed.ac.uk). We're also on twitter as @GanguliMitra and @reb\_richards.

Be sure to check out and explore our website "Justice in Global Health Emergencies and Humanitarian Crises" for more great content, just go to <https://www.ghe.law.ed.ac.uk/>.

Thanks for listening and see you again on the first Monday of the month for the next episode.

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