Conceptual background on trust

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this backgrounder is to provide a common vocabulary and shared framing on the concept of trust for participants in the Trust Commission of the 33rd International Conference.

It is not designed to impose a 'correct' interpretation or definition of trust. However, it is based on a thorough review of literature on trust commissioned by the ICRC and conducted by Scott Edwards from the Institute for Conflict, Cooperation, and Security at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom.

The concept of trust – including its practical relevance for humanitarian action – is shaped by diverse sociocultural factors and contextual interpretations beyond Western thought and practice. In this regard, a limitation of this particular review is that the literature underpinning it is mostly Western in origin. The hope, nonetheless, is that it will serve as a useful framework with which to engage in the Spotlight sessions.

What is trust?

One oft-cited definition of trust is:

> *'a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another.'*

Common elements to this and other definitions of trust in the literature are:

- Risk – without potential harm, vulnerability, or objective uncertainty about the future, then trust would not be required.
- Positive expectation – trust is grounded in the expectation that another actor will act in a predictably positive way. This positive expectation subjectively reduces the expectation of risk and makes one more willing to take a 'leap of faith'. Trust is built through an iterative process of observation and verification of another actor's behaviour.
- Interdependence – the interests of the trustor cannot be achieved without dependence on the trustee. As such, the target of trust is an 'other,' whether people, organisations or systems.

Trust is not the same as 'reliance' (e.g. relying on another party to fulfil a contract). Unlike the latter concept, trust has an additional moral dimension; breaching someone's trust leads to feelings of *betrayal*, as opposed to only disappointment and/or anger.

Trust is also not the same as 'trustworthiness', although one's subjective perception of risk (the first element of trust) can be reduced by one's perception of the trustworthiness of another person/organisation/system. Trustworthiness, in turn, might be analysed according to three factors:

- Ability
- Integrity
- Benevolence.

Alternatively, one oft-cited way of analysing how trustworthy others perceive us to be is by using the 'trust equation':[1]

$$\text{Trustworthiness} = \frac{(\ \text{Credibility}\ +\ \text{Reliability}\ +\ \text{Intimacy}\ )}{\text{Self-orientation}}$$

In this equation:

- <u>Credibility</u> refers to the words we speak. Is what we say credible? Are we a credible source?
- <u>Reliability</u> refers to the actions we do. Do we 'say what we do and do what we say'?
- <u>Intimacy</u> refers to the safety or security that others feel when entrusting us with sometimes-sensitive information. Can we keep the information confidential?
- <u>Self-orientation</u> refers to our focus. Are we focused primarily on ourselves, or on the other person? Whose interests come first?

Whose trust do we need? And who needs our trust?
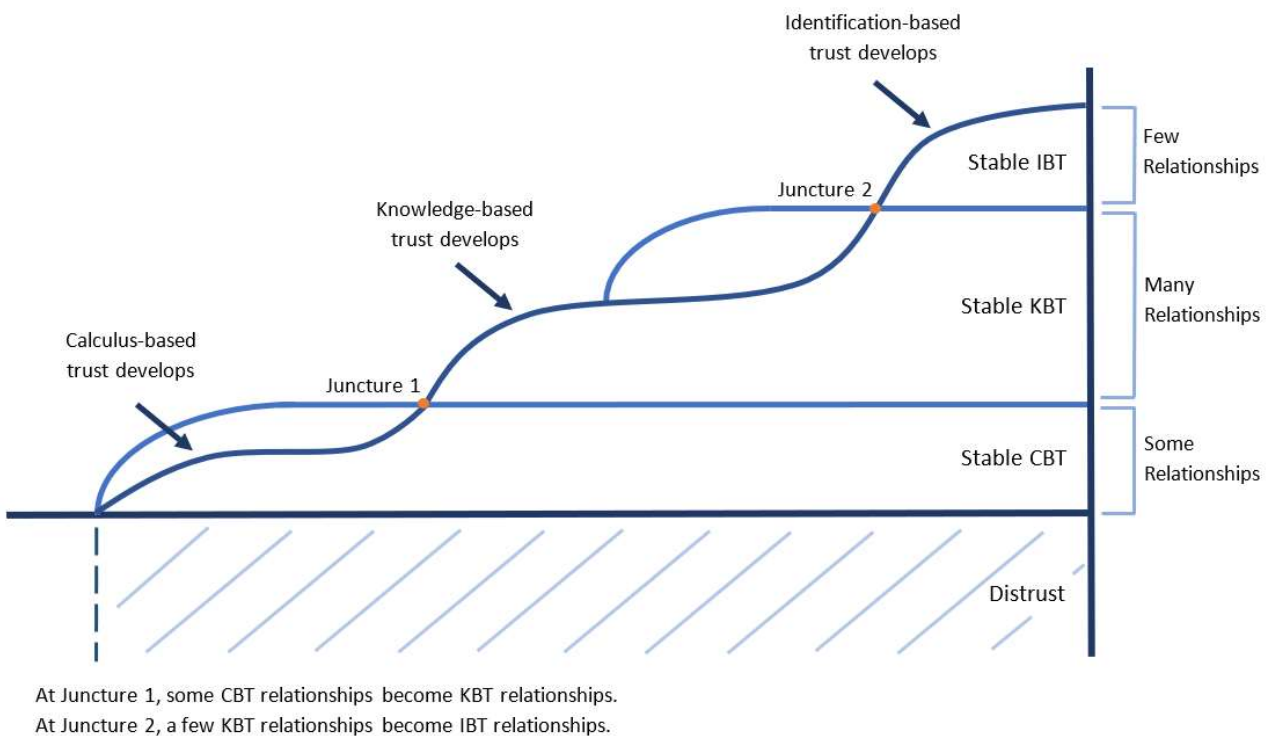

How does one build and maintain trust?

The literature on trust suggests that the early stages of building trust are often fragile. Nevertheless, there is potential to deepen trust into more resilient forms. Signaling ability and integrity, demonstrating benevolence, and establishing an emotional connection all contribute to generating trust. A commonly referred to model, illustrated in the graph below[2], posits that trusting relationships in a professional context develop in three phases: calculus-based trust, knowledge-based trust, and identification-based trust.

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[1] David Maister, *The Trusted Advisor* (2001).

[2] Adapted from two sources: R. J. Lewicki and B. B. Bunker, *Trust in Relationships: A Model of Trust Development and Decline* (1995) and Dietz, G. (2011) 'Going back to the source: Why do people trust each other?' *Journal of Trust Research*, 1(2): 215-222.

1. <u>Calculus-based trust (CBT)</u>: akin to rational choice theory, calculus-based trust centres on a calculation that involves observing other actors and making predictions about the likely risks and benefits attached to their future behaviour.
2. <u>Knowledge-based trust (KBT)</u>: is still grounded in rationalist thought, but centres more on exchange/interaction, in particular, knowledge of other actors' intentions and behaviour gained through past experience and communications with them.
3. <u>Identification-based trust (IBT)</u>: equates, in effect, to complete trust i.e., when the parties effectively understand, agree with, and endorse each other's wants.

At Juncture 1, some CBT relationships become KBT relationships.
At Juncture 2, a few KBT relationships become IBT relationships.

Trust as a governance system for the Movement: Reflections on accountability, compliance, and transparency

The exact role of accountability, compliance, and transparency in building and maintaining trust is contested in the literature. While it may seem that these can strengthen trust, some argue that greater accountability, compliance, and transparency does not necessarily translate into greater trust – if everything is known (i.e. transparent) or regulated (i.e. compliance), then trust is not required. Here, **a more nuanced consideration of the forms that compliance or accountability take vis-à-vis trust is imperative**.

To actively strengthen trust, the literature suggests that compliance and accountability requirements should ideally be voluntary and organisation-led, rather than externally imposed, and should not compromise the Fundamental Principles. Given the inherently risky environments in which the Movement works, this means – among other things – engaging donors, communities, and other stakeholders in practical conversations about **sharing the risks** associated with neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian action in order to reach people in need.