

## Humanitarian challenges

# A matter of principles

The complex and chronic nature of humanitarian crises is forcing humanitarian organizations to adapt their strategies. More than that, they need to ask themselves who they are, what they stand for and who their target groups are.

**H**umanitarian action is facing many challenges. It has come under fire as a result of the changing nature of humanitarian crises, government intervention in humanitarian action and the changing nature of humanitarian organizations. The question is, can humanitarianism stick to its fundamental principles, or does it need new policies and guidelines to deal with what are now perceived to be complex humanitarian emergencies?

It was following the battle of Solferino in 1859 that Henri Dunant, and the International Red Cross Movement he founded, began building what is now known as the traditional approach to humanitarianism. It was based on the following fundamental principles:

- Humanity – alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found
- Neutrality – do not take sides in a conflict
- Impartiality – aid should be based on needs alone, regardless of race, class, gender and sex
- Independence – from benefactors and institutional donors

But several developments since the end of the Cold War have put this traditional approach under pressure. The nature of humanitarian crises has changed. They are more complex, chaotic and chronic, especially in weak states.

### Waning optimism

The optimism that humanitarian organizations felt about the future in the early 1990s soon proved unwarranted. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the superpower stalemate should have resulted in an international peace dividend that would have made it easier to observe classic humanitarian principles. Instead, it heralded protracted

### summary

- Humanitarian organizations were optimistic about the future at the end of the Cold War, which they felt would result in an international peace dividend that would make it easier to observe classic humanitarian principles.
- Instead, the end of the Cold War heralded protracted intra-state conflicts in weakened and failed states, and humanitarianism today is operating in a charged political environment.
- In response to this, humanitarian organizations are making different choices about what they consider their humanitarian character to be, neutral or political, for example.
- But many of these organizations need to clarify their stance on non-humanitarian actors operating in this arena, such as governments and the military.

intra-state conflicts in a growing number of weakened and failed states.

Elites, warlords and rebel factions in these states were rarely interested in maintaining internal order based on international norms. Plundering, asset stripping, rape, ethnic cleansing and murder caused massive human suffering. Along with a growing disrespect for humanitarian workers came attacks against them. Indeed, the very concept of humanitarian space and its principles came under attack.

As a normative concept, this space primarily reflects the physical area in which organizations do their humanitarian work, without any political or military interference. Organizations hope to have unimpeded access to victims in a protected environment, where aid can be delivered in a short time frame.

Increasingly, however, different actors in the once ‘shielded’ humanitarian space pursue their own goals, varying from disbursing and pursuing to stopping and abusing aid. They determine the potential scope and nature of aid to victims in a continuous process of negotiation about policy and practice.

Another development is linked to changes within humanitarian organizations themselves. Many of these

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Increasingly the military provides security during humanitarian operations. Food distribution in Haiti, January 2010.

organizations have adopted a so-called rights-based approach to humanitarianism. This shift from treating victims as recipients to treating them as rights-endowed clients has created fresh problems in terms of the feasibility and effectiveness of aid.

Moreover, this shift has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish humanitarianism from development aid. A growing number of humanitarian organizations find themselves doing development work, whereas more and more development organizations are engaging in humanitarian activities when developmental situations deteriorate.

### Disputed principles

Humanitarian principles have become disputed in complex emergency situations. How neutral can a humanitarian organization remain in the face of gross human rights abuses without running the risk of being accused of aiding and abetting these abuses? Taking sides, on the other hand, entails other risks. The present humanitarian operation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been drawn into such a moral quagmire.

It is also worth asking whether impartiality is still a useful concept in civil wars where neighbours fight each other, thereby blurring the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, and victim and perpetrator. The humanitarian aid operation in the African Great Lakes region after the Rwandan genocide of 1994 provides chilling

examples. Ironically, efforts to assist the refugees in the camps in eastern DRC initially gave the *génocidaires* a safe haven. This prompted the Rwandan military to intervene, which sparked further violence in DRC.

Finally, how independent really are humanitarian organizations if we consider the world's many 'forgotten crises'? The plight of the Acholi in Uganda and the Karen in Myanmar are examples. More generally, what is the impact of the conditions that donor governments impose when funding humanitarian action?

### The shape of humanitarian organizations

The changing nature of crises and the increasing number of non-state actors has created a far larger and more diverse humanitarian space or arena than before the end of the Cold War. As a result, humanitarian organizations need to clarify their various positions in light of the traditional humanitarian principles. There are four basic categories of humanitarian organization.

Dunantist organizations favour traditional humanitarian principles. Driven by considerations of moral duty, they deem humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence to be the backbone of humanitarianism.

Dunantists adhere to a consistent definition of humanitarian principles in order to cope with current conflicts. Two of their hallmarks are neutrality and impartiality to all parties. This means carefully protecting their independence and taking visible distance from



politically motivated actors. Dunantists advocate a strict division between humanitarianism and development.

Wilsonian organizations, by contrast, adjust these principles somewhat. They are often close to the US government, and frequently interpret humanitarianism in line with the broader challenges of peace and justice. As a consequence, their humanitarianism may include rehabilitation, reconstruction and development efforts.

The Wilsonian approach also makes it possible to cooperate with political actors (including the military) from donor countries, and it may tie into a rights-based approach. Sometimes, this means carrying out conflict resolution work or trying to bring perpetrators of violent abuse to justice. In both cases, neutrality can be compromised. Hence, the context determines the principles of operation and the extent to which they can be adapted. A steadily growing number of humanitarian organizations have adopted the Wilsonian approach in the past two decades.

Solidarists take a political stance and reject neutrality and impartiality. Some solidarists believe in universal justice, based on universal human rights, which should be safeguarded by states and the international community. Others attempt to help particular groups, such as their religious brethren, and not others. Think of the Catholic organizations that worked in Biafra, such as Caritas Internationalis, and various small Islamic relief organizations that only cater to the need of their fellow believers.

There are also organizations with a commercial motive. These are often sub-contractors, NGOs fully dependent on government funding and private enterprises such as Hechtel, Haliburton and private military companies providing security in the field. Since they tender for contracts, these sub-contractors are profit-driven and simply execute the

assignment given to them with little regard for humanitarian principles.

### **The politicization of aid**

Governments and their military machines also have added to the growing complexity of what humanitarianism is today. In many crises, the failed state poses a humanitarian problem. But the enhanced role of donor governments poses its own set of challenges.

Coalitions, mostly Western, have responded more frequently with heightened involvement to complex humanitarian crises since the end of the Cold War. This willingness to participate in humanitarian interventions is in part because weak and failed states have a global impact in that they 'produce' refugees, migrants or regional instability. This has created several challenges.

First, donor governments have been very selective in their humanitarian support. The selection of humanitarian emergencies to which governments respond, often steered by domestic considerations, contravenes the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and independence. The same holds true for the complex decision-making processes in the UN Security Council, which is always prone to political bargaining.

Forgotten crises remain forgotten because nobody takes an interest. Widely publicized human suffering, on the other hand, triggers massive response, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. NGOs have the potential to be truly human, universal and independent, but they depend, especially when sub-contracting, largely on government funding. In other words, they have to comply with governmental priorities in order to receive funding.

Second, donor governments have politicized humanitarian aid. Iraq and Afghanistan are cases in point. Political operations in these regions are supported by 'humanitarian' ones in which the aid delivered is actually selective and conditional. Governments use aid to try to win the hearts and minds of people, in the hope they will turn their backs on the forces resisting political intervention, such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The fusion of military goals and humanitarian aid became more prominent after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Western military forces were quick to respond to the new political landscape. Having outgrown their Cold War usefulness, the military tried to redefine their right to exist. They began to engage in so-called 'out-of-area operations' driven by a new interpretation of globally projected humane values and facilitated by the declining importance of state sovereignty.

Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan from 2003 onwards and Iraq are obvious examples. The military task of establishing security in UN peacekeeping operations, for example, has increasingly been integrated with broader tasks. These forces now also dispense humanitarian aid, create conditions favourable to sustainable development, help set up a rule of law, encourage good governance, and try to win local hearts and minds.

So, if civilian and military parties are both trying to alleviate human suffering, do they appreciate each other's

#### **Four types of humanitarian organization**

- Dunantist – named after Henry Dunant, who inspired the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross. These are independent, neutral organizations that attempt to work outside the influence of the state. Médecins Sans Frontières is an example of a Dunantist humanitarian organization.
- Wilsonian – named after President Woodrow Wilson, who sought to integrate US foreign policy interests with NGO activities. Wilsonian organizations differ from Dunantist organizations in that they accept stronger state influence. Examples include the CARE International, the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children US.
- Solidarist – these organizations reject impartiality, and their humanitarian aid programmes follow a clear political point of view. The Norwegian People's Aid organization is an example, just like International Relief and Development.
- Commercial – these organizations are fully dependent on government funding as well as private enterprises such as Haliburton, Hechtel and private military companies. Their profit motive means they have little regard for humanitarian principles.



role or does it irk them to operate in the same humanitarian arena? The answer very much depends on the type of humanitarian principles the humanitarian agencies adhere to.

Dunantists reject civilian-military cooperation because it violates their principles, whereas Wilsonians weigh principle against objective. Some solidarists encourage the role of the military. They see the latter as an efficient and powerful means of directly alleviating the deprivation of rights. The answer also depends on the overall aim that organizations have for their humanitarian action. Short-term, needs-driven alleviation of suffering versus the full restoration of people's rights.

### **Rights-based or needs-driven?**

A rights-based approach to humanitarianism, according to former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, should not simply describe situations in terms of short-term human needs. Rather, it also needs to focus on the international community's obligations to respond to the inalienable rights of individuals, to empower people to demand justice as a right, not as charity, and to provide communities with the moral grounds to claim international assistance when needed.

Humanitarian organizations realize that a rights-based approach will enable them to go beyond the stage of mere palliative care and address the root causes of emergencies for the benefit of a sustainable solution. Yet, this powerful appeal has created conceptual problems for the humanitarian enterprise as well.

Traditional humanitarian organizations focus on delivering aid, without addressing the causes of the emergency and the immediate and longer-term effects of their aid. The principles of neutrality and impartiality meant that humanitarian

organizations did not trouble themselves with the larger context of the human-rights framework. This work was given to sovereign governments, and by extension, intergovernmental organizations. However, both the breakdown of sovereignty (in the case of failed states) and the urge among many humanitarians to integrate their activities in the areas of food, water, shelter and medicine into a broader rights-based approach challenged earlier methods of aid delivery.

The rights-based approach to humanitarianism implies a denial of the difference between people in ordinary situations and those caught up in humanitarian emergencies. In both cases, people are endowed with a full catalogue of inalienable human rights. So people in need should not only be given aid during crises (the basic necessities), but humanitarian efforts should also aim to restore these people's rights. Aid 'objects' thus become aid 'subjects', that is, disaster-struck people have a right to demand aid and the full restoration of their human rights. Passive recipients thus become active claimants. This has two consequences for humanitarian organizations.

First, organizations tend to overreach when they have to combine humanitarian aid with efforts to fully restore human rights in emergency situations. Every intervention a humanitarian organization makes needs to be accompanied by actions that will improve the human rights situation. In other words, food aid is not enough. The aim should also be to restore the right to have food (food security).

Second, humanitarians will invariably be forced to undermine their own principles of neutrality and impartiality since they not only have to address the effects of human rights abuses but also their underlying causes. Neutrality makes it easier to treat victims of conflict in areas where perpetrators are still free to go about their ugly business. However, not



persecuting the perpetrators of human suffering under a rights-based approach is a direct violation of one's obligation to support and defend the unalienable rights of every human being. And addressing human rights violators (most often rebel groups in control of a territory or governments themselves) offends the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Those in control of an area will then in all likelihood simply deny access to humanitarian organizations trying to offer life-saving aid to people in need. This is an unsolvable dilemma. Dunantist organizations tend to be more restrictive under such circumstances, accepting access to areas at the price of being silent about flagrant human rights abuses. Wilsonians or solidarists, on the other hand, are more likely to speak out at the price of not reaching the target groups.

**Relief or reconstruction**

To make matters more complicated, the rights-based approach has blurred the traditional distinction between relief agencies and those active in reconstruction and development.

Humanitarianism and development have for long been considered two different processes. Humanitarianism is traditionally about saving lives in the short run, while development is a longer-term operation that restores or creates people's livelihoods. However, the chronic nature of many current crises in weak or failed states has produced a variety of situations in which the key international agencies are not sure what the exact nature of their role is in such areas.

Nowadays, humanitarian organizations often find themselves stuck in post-conflict situations where violence and abuse continue amidst efforts to redevelop. As a result, the 'ideal' of delivering short-term life-saving aid through quick interventions and then leaving has become impossible. A long-term presence to address immediate needs has thus become intermingled with processes of redeveloping areas into situations of 'normality'.

The humanitarian operations in the African Great Lakes region in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is an example. While attending to the dire human needs due to ongoing violence, humanitarian organizations also became

involved in the redistribution of land, the recreation of livelihoods and efforts to bring the *génocidaires* to justice. Through their long-term presence, they unwittingly contributed to the activities of different rebel groups, which has led to an intensification and spread of armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

On other occasions, for example in Malawi and Tanzania, originally purely humanitarian organizations have turned into long-term development actors, because none of the traditional development organizations has been willing to take over from them. A lack of funds, different priorities, political obstruction and sheer disinterest left the humanitarian organizations with an unpalatable choice. They either leave after an initial phase of aid delivery, knowing that the humanitarian emergency will re-emerge soon, or stay and fulfil their development tasks. Again, pragmatism, depending on the case, has often been the only viable option.

**Mirror, mirror**

There is a prevailing sentiment among the Dunantist, Wilsonian and solidarists organizations that humanitarianism today is operating in an increasingly charged political environment. They are therefore devoting more strategic attention to the fact that humanitarian action both influences this environment and is being influenced by it.

Humanitarian organizations need to be clear in their mandates about what they consider their humanitarian character to be. Many organizations have official policies stating that they fully respect humanitarian principles, and yet it is often unclear how well they succeed in upholding these principles in the field.

Humanitarian organizations also need to clarify their stance on the non-humanitarian actors that also operate in this arena, such as governments and the military. They need to develop policies that state which resources they will accept or reject from donor governments, and which kinds of cooperation with military forces they are willing to accept.

Ideally, humanitarian organizations should also make more of an effort to develop a clear understanding of the goals and strategies of other actors in the humanitarian arena. This would politically inform humanitarian organizations without their having to become politically motivated.

It would not be accurate to say that one type of humanitarian organization has come up with answers to all humanitarian dilemmas. Rather, the Dunantists, Wilsonians and solidarists are increasingly choosing their own paths. This is particularly true for issues such as securing humanitarian space, embracing a rights-based approach and making a clear division between humanitarian and development organizations. It is not clear how these positions will change in the near future, but as long as there are people in need in crisis zones, humanitarian organizations must make clear their different positions on their principles and on other humanitarian organizations and local populations. ■

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