Humanitarian action: a victim of its own success?

Antonio Donini

What we have today is an imperfect international welfare system that provides some assistance and some protection to individuals and communities affected by crisis and conflict. What then lies ahead?

Never have so many people and so much money been devoted to the provision of life-saving assistance and protection of vulnerable survivors of conflict and disaster. One estimate puts the number of humanitarian aid workers at 250,000. As for the financial resources devoted to humanitarian action, 'official' funds have hovered just above US$15 billion annually for the last three years. This is only the exposed part of the humanitarian iceberg as the contributions of host governments, affected communities and diasporas, and remittances, tithes and other religious contributions are not counted in the official donor statistics. And it is unclear whether it is the official or the 'grey' humanitarian largesse that contributes more to the well-being of those affected by crisis and armed conflict.

More efficient but less principled?

Growth has brought institutionalisation and a mixed blessing of better technique and lesser mystique. Much effort has gone into improving the technical proficiency of the aid system through standards, coordination mechanisms, sectoral approaches, standing agreements, clusters and the like. These changes – in principle – make humanitarian action more predictable and efficient but the humanitarian impulse and the ethos of voluntariness have fallen prey to results management approaches, short-term budgetary concerns, and career paths. Humanitarianism used to be a powerful discourse – a means to an end. Now, like other 'isms', it risks becoming an end in itself.

Moreover, the humanitarian enterprise remains inescapably Northern and Western both in reality and representation. Through the network power it wields – everything from communication technology, eligibility requirements for employment or training, security procedures, coordination mechanisms and policy development hubs – by design or by default the Northern humanitarian establishment sets the rules: "You" can join "us" but only on "our" terms. Studies have shown that core humanitarian values resonate across all cultures.[1] Universality is not at issue but the baggage that outsiders bring with them is.

From Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, we see a worrying disconnect between the functioning of a humanitarian establishment intent on reproducing and expanding itself and the daily reality of the undignified conditions and patterns of harm faced by those it purports to help. Much lip service is paid to the perceptions of, and accountability to, the millions living *in extremis*. But at the same time the system of large agencies and donors that sets the stage of the humanitarian theatre remains stubbornly self-referential. Structures, practices and reward systems tend to value growth, if not turf, over principle and effectiveness.

Principles are far too often sacrificed on the altar of organisational expediency. Moreover, the clash between the pragmatism of realpolitik and the ethical values at the heart of the humanitarian message remains unresolved. Experience from recent crises tells us that the growth

and institutionalisation of the humanitarian enterprise have not immunised it against instrumentalisation. Humanitarian efforts continue to be routinely hijacked by political and security agendas at odds with core humanitarian values. If anything, the size of the enterprise makes the stakes and the opportunity for manipulation greater than in times past. The notion that size matters – national organisations consolidating into mega international constellations – has echoes of contemporary financial systems and banks that are 'too big to fail'.

The picture that emerges is a troubling and sobering one. Instrumentalisation is not a new phenomenon; the temptation to use humanitarian action for objectives that are all but humanitarian is well known to aid workers around the world. From Solferino to Syria, the intrusion of partisan politics, power and economics into the humanitarian endeavour has taken many forms, ranging from the relatively benign diversion of assistance by belligerents as a pre-condition for access to people in need, to the wholesale incorporation of humanitarian action into military or political adventures.

Agencies are sometimes successful in countering blatant manipulation but the risk of being co-opted, stage-managed or steam-rollered is always there. This challenge is likely to be a persistent feature of crises and disasters in the foreseeable future. With the increasing centrality of the humanitarian enterprise to agendas designed to influence 'the world order', the risk has increased; instrumentalisation has tended to become systemic. These pathologies are more visible in high-profile crises such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka or Somalia, where the international community took sides with one set of belligerents, but in one way or another they permeate contemporary humanitarian action.

Reading the tea leaves

The current international humanitarian welfare system does not reach everywhere, and not everyone with life-threatening need has ready access to it; there is no proportionality in addressing suffering. But despite its many warts and biases, it saves countless lives and one should be wary of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

In fact the baby is quite healthy. The humanitarian enterprise is getting better at addressing need – at least the assistance side of need. Protection (see below) is a different matter. Nevertheless the bathwater is quite dirty. Humanitarian action sometimes soaks in the evil that surrounds it; wittingly or unwittingly, it performs functions that are linked to agendas ranging from the promotion of liberal peace to the advancement of partisan objectives, including a worrying tendency to term wars as 'humanitarian'. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish the baby from the bathwater as when human rights, advocacy, development or entrepreneurial agendas get mixed up with the relatively straightforward objective of saving lives.

Then there is the vapour that is coming out of the bath. Over the past two decades, exaggerated claims have been made about the power of humanitarianism, whether its purported ability to address the root causes of crises or its capacity to exist in splendid isolation from Western power and class relations. The hot air is clearing and we see that (Northern/Western) humanitarianism's capacity to act as a mobilising myth has reached its structural limits. In particular, it is far from clear that the current love affair between Western donors and 'their' humanitarian enterprise will continue far into the 21st century.

The challenge then is to determine what happens if, as is likely, the plug is pulled on the current dispensation of the humanitarian enterprise. Powerful cross-currents are emerging from 'the Rest', not just the West, that will shape the way in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met, or not. Here are three:

Perhaps the most important challenge to humanitarianism as we know it is the emergence of sovereignty and nationalism-based discourses, especially in middle-income countries. Sri Lanka and Darfur have shown, brutally, that the manipulation of humanitarian action is no longer the preserve of powerful Western states. On the more positive side, we can expect many new players in the humanitarian arena; the BRICS, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico and Turkey are refining their humanitarian tools. When China decides to enter the humanitarian fray, taking a leaf out of the West's approach to promoting soft power, the global humanitarian enterprise will look a lot different from how it does today.

Rather than worry about protecting turf, the leaders of the current humanitarian establishment should welcome the emergence of new actors and engage with them. They can no longer set the rules and control the membership of the humanitarian club. This opening-up is of course fraught with uncertainty. What will happen to our beloved principles? How do we ensure respect for international humanitarian law, and in particular for protection, when more robust states will accept our assistance but only on their own terms?

Secondly, the challenges to the current protection regime, such as it is, are likely to be many. Putting aside concerns about R2P (Responsibility to Protect) and other political or military-driven agendas, it is time to acknowledge that the relief system continues to look at the need for protection – from harmful or abusive behaviour and policies – as an afterthought, rather than as an integral part of humanitarian action. The limited commitment and competence of humanitarians to address threats that marginalise or undermine the safety and dignity of crisis-affected groups in recent crises – Sri Lanka in particular comes to mind – sets unhelpful precedents that will complicate a broadening of the humanitarian enterprise. Again, we will have to put our own house in order before giving lessons to others.

Finally, we have to get real about displacement. Climate change, massive urbanisation, technological disasters and systemic crises ranging from pandemics to economic melt-downs are likely to be the drivers of the humanitarian crises of the future and of the attendant large-scale population movements. The current categories of refugees, IDPs and economic migrants no longer fit the reality of what is happening on the ground, and the policies of international organisations are woefully inadequate. Just to give one example, the promotion of refugee return to Afghanistan and the policies adopted by the UN and the broader relief system, donors and neighbouring countries are totally disconnected from the reality of the demographics and migratory movements in the region. Encouraging or, worse, forcing refugees to return is a 'dog biting its own tail' approach. Innovative thinking, based on global agreements on how to address population movements that put individuals or communities at risk, is required here.

Back to basics?

Over the past decade and a half, the humanitarian agenda has expanded to encompass activities such as human rights, peace-building, post-conflict recovery and development. Some would say that it has drifted away from its traditional moorings. An evolution toward a more modest humanitarianism, limited in scope, objectives and actors, would not be an entirely negative development. It would reflect a realisation that the current global trends and forces that generate crisis and vulnerability can be neither redirected nor significantly contained by humanitarian action itself. This does not mean that humanitarians – as citizens – are uncommitted to a more compassionate, just and secure world but rather a recognition that their first obligation as humanitarians is to be effective in saving and protecting lives that are in imminent danger.

Humanitarian action is about injecting a measure of humanity into situations that should not exist. Buffeted by strong crosswinds, the flickering light of humanitarianism continues to shine. It lights a narrow path strewn with obstacles and compromises. Working wherever the needs are most urgent and looking for opportunities to push back partisan agendas continue to be fundamentally necessary and worthwhile activities despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges briefly discussed above. Instrumentalisation may well be embedded in the DNA of humanitarian action but so is the impulse to give effect to the humanitarian imperative. Humanitarianism remains fundamentally necessary and ethically worthwhile. The arrow of history does not travel in a straight line. Learning from the past is the best way to ensure that its arc tends toward more dignity and justice for the millions whose protection and survival are at risk.

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1. See for example the Feinstein International Center's series of studies on perceptions (fic. tufts.edu); similar work done by CDA's Listening Project, ICRC and MSF

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