

Hard questions for the future of the humanitarian enterprise

by Antonio Donini

How can we make humanitarianism ‘of the world’ rather than ‘of the North’? Fundamental humanitarian values are shared by all cultures. Not so, however, the baggage, the cultural differences and the power relations that come with the Northern-dominated humanitarian relationship.

The humanitarian enterprise, which spends on average some US\$10bn per year, remains a select club in which the rules are set by a rather peculiar set of players who are generally far removed from the realities of the people they purport to help. While much good is done by the enterprise, its functioning is dictated by the interests of actors who sit in government, international organisations and civil society in the North, including, increasingly, the boardrooms of the private sector and the situation rooms of the military.

Like it or not, humanitarian action is part of global governance, if not of global government. It lives in parallel with, and is sometimes subordinated to, processes of economic governance, political containment strategies and military action that are functional to the interests of the ‘global North’. And this despite the fact that the vast majority of aid workers and many humanitarian agencies are not of the North.

Unlike the UN, where all countries have a vote, there is no such ‘democracy’ in the humanitarian realm. Countries that do not belong to the established donor club have little opportunity to influence the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise and even less to scrutinise the destination of its funds. At the UN, all countries have a stake in peace-building operations and must contribute to them but the purse-strings and the reins of UN humanitarian activities are by and large the sole

purview of the North. The UN has a Peace-Building Commission¹ and a Human Rights Council² but no Humanitarian Council.

To a greater or lesser extent, the public in the North has an opportunity to influence government aid policy through elections, public hearings and the like. But much of the private (and private sector) aid escapes such scrutiny. The workings of militarised ‘relief’ are even more obscure.

Furthermore, the contributions of non-Northern humanitarian players don’t normally make it to the donor hit-parade. Yes, we now recognise India, China and some of the Gulf States as players but the contributions of the informal humanitarian sector – *zakat* and other tithes, remittances from diasporas, the contributions of affected countries and communities – are nowhere recorded. We are even more loath to recognise the life-saving contributions of elected entities such as Hamas or Hezbollah who practice their own varieties of succour to the most vulnerable.

The perils of institutionalisation

Seasoned humanitarian workers may recall with nostalgia those pre-email and pre-satphone halcyon days when important messages from remote field outposts were passed through crackling radios and unreliable telex machines. When neither worked, which was often the case, communication was

dependent on hand-written notes entrusted to a truck driver. For all the advances in technology, the training in management, the 360 degree exercises and the contingency planning workshops, how well has the massive institutionalisation of the past 15 years of conflict and crisis improved the effectiveness of the sector? Are the 250,000 humanitarian aid workers of today doing a better job than those who battled for access and space in Biafra?

Undoubtedly, the unprecedented growth of the enterprise and the development of standards, procedures and techniques have allowed us to respond more promptly and more effectively. The institutions of coordination, good donorship and complementarity of action have served the system well: there is more predictability in emergency response, though problems remain in terms of proportionality and timeliness. But haven’t some of the flexibility and spontaneity that the enterprise was famous for been lost in the process? Has the quality of our mercy improved?

Institutionalisation has resulted in strong pressures on NGOs to act like businesses and like governments. Not surprisingly, senior staff and CEOs increasingly rotate between these different realms. Humanitarian assistance has become less flexible, less able to address the unexpected. There is an intense pressure to programme according to the deliverables defined in grants and in timeframes that are often unrealistic. The short – 6-12 month – duration of grants discourages innovation and risk taking. As organisations have grown and resources mushroomed, controls have become tighter and decision making increasingly

distant from the field. Humanitarian work used to have a connotation of 'voluntariness' – and indeed this remains a key Red Cross principle – but it has now become a career. It is defined by management objectives, standard operating procedures and human resource development tools. Though necessary in any 'business', it has created structures and organisational patterns that tend to stifle innovation and the questioning of the status quo. Indeed, promotion itself means that the most highly experienced, respected, trained (and paid) aid workers are removed from the frontlines and are hunkered down in meeting rooms!

Preparing for the unpredictable

The humanitarian enterprise is still based on Cold War and post-Cold War assumptions of what constitutes a crisis. We are getting better at addressing last year's crises and perhaps today's. But is the enterprise adapted to the challenges that are likely to come our way in the coming decades? There are two areas where we are particularly ill-equipped and where urgent adaptation is required:

- the new asymmetrical wars as in Iraq and Afghanistan (but also now Somalia, Lebanon and perhaps tomorrow Chad or Nigeria or Pakistan) where humanitarians are perceived as taking sides
- the emergence of catastrophic events or unending chronic situations where the system has to deal with compounded threats and vulnerabilities framed, in some cases, by conflict but also by natural hazard events, climate change, technological disasters, environmental displacement, pandemics, etc.

Conflict, in fact, may well be a lesser source of vulnerability than we are accustomed to. In Zimbabwe today, about 3,500 people are dying every week of HIV/AIDS in the midst of a deepening economic, social and political crisis. In many parts of the world threats of old and new varieties tend to combine and compound. Our traditional humanitarian approach is inadequate in such settings.

Trying to predict the crises of tomorrow is not a very useful exercise but investing in preparedness is – making organisations more adaptable to shocks, strengthening partnerships at all levels and thinking outside of our humanitarian box.

While we can certainly applaud the improvements in the functioning of the humanitarian machine, there is no cause for resting on our laurels. Our research findings confirm that the humanitarian enterprise is vulnerable to manipulation by powerful political forces far more than is widely understood. Its practitioners are more extended and overmatched than most of us realise. Failure to address and reverse present trends will result in the demise of an international assistance and protection regime based on time-tested humanitarian principles. If the disconnect between the perceived needs of intended beneficiaries and the assistance and protection actually provided continues to grow, humanitarianism as a compassionate endeavour to bring succour to people in extremis may become increasingly alien and suspect to those it purports to help.

The humanitarian project is in more serious trouble than is widely understood or acknowledged. The current love affair of the international community with humanitarian action is currently based on two notions:

a) that humanitarian action is functional to the security interests of the countries that are its traditional major contributors and therefore shape the humanitarian enterprise and b) that the current political economy of humanitarian action – the humanitarian marketplace – will continue to be dominated by like-minded Northern and Western-driven values, behaviours and management styles. Should either of these assumptions prove to be untrue, either because climate change or other risks force a paradigm shift in the North's security concerns or because the Northern humanitarian monopoly is challenged by other players who do not accept 'our' rules of the game, the current humanitarian enterprise may find itself in dire straits.

Meanwhile, humanitarianism, as traditionally framed and implemented, may well come to occupy a smaller place on the international screen, relegated to crises with low political profile in which the strategic interests of the major powers are not perceived to be at play. The assistance and protection challenges of the Afghanistans, Iraqs and Darfurs will continue to pose major assistance and protection challenges. However, the situation in high-profile conflicts seems likely to be addressed increasingly, if at all, by an array of non-traditional actors, including international military forces, private contractors and non-state actors rather than by 'official' humanitarian agencies.

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

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1. www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding
2. www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil