



The future of humanitarian action: Reflections on impartiality

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Humanitarianism is in crisis – but what are the current challenges? And in what ways could the humanitarian system change in future? Will western actors gradually lose control, to be replaced by other centres of humanitarian thought and action? And do relief organisations need to find new ways of financing their activities? The author is convinced that only a complete transformation of the system can help to end the suffering of civilians in an increasingly complex, insecure and violent world.

Predictions are always difficult, especially about the future. That's what US baseball player Yogi Berra used to say. Nevertheless, in this essay I will focus on the evolving context in which humanitarian action takes place and the space it occupies between the hard rock of politics and the vagaries of pragmatism. I will spare the reader an analysis of what is wrong inside the humanitarian machine – the nitty-gritty of coordination, the daily slog

through clusters and log-frames and the more or less futile attempts at reform.

I come from Italy, where people are skilled in a very peculiar science called 'dietrologia', or 'behindology'. The topic of this essay, then, is the 'behindology' of humanitarianism. It will attempt to unscramble the functions that humanitarianism performs in twenty-first century international relations, and the codes that underpin it.

'Humanitarianism' has always been an ambiguous concept

The concept of humanitarianism is fraught with ambiguities. It connotes several separate but overlapping realities: an ideology, a movement and a profession. Together, they form a political economy. But humanitarianism is also an establishment, a complex system that operates on power relationships, and an ecosystem, in which different species of

humanitarians compete and co-exist. What unites the various facets of humanitarianism is a broad commitment to alleviating suffering and protecting the lives of civilians caught up in armed conflicts or other disasters. Despite this common goal, however, the ideology, the movement, the profession and the establishment are deeply fractured.

Like other 'isms' – communism and Catholicism come to mind – humanitarianism propounds lofty aims that serve to hide deep contradictions, conflicting alignments and power plays, manipulation and instrumentalisation, personality cults, struggles over resources and market share and, sometimes, shady financial transactions. It includes defenders of the orthodox high church, heretics, fellow travellers, revisionists and extremist fringes. And nowadays there are also for-profit and military wings.

Organised humanitarianism – the international, national and local institutions that provide assistance in times of crisis – commands huge resources: up to US\$27 billion in 2016.¹ The humanitarian system can decide where to use this money or not. Organised humanitarianism also constitutes an important form of governance. Not in the sense that there is a single force or source of power that directs its work. Rather than principles or

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overarching strategies, what keeps the system (somewhat) together is its network power.

This power is concentrated around an oligopoly of a small group of donors, UN agencies and NGOs. These actors set the rules of the humanitarian club. Organised humanitarianism is 'of the west' in the sense that western donors, and the organisations they support, call most of the shots. The west does not own and operate humanitarian governance, it maintains a controlling influence over it – much like it does for global security and economic governance.

Existential malaise permeates the humanitarian system

This de facto control over discourse and action has always been problematic, but now it seems to have hit a stumbling block. An existential malaise is permeating the humanitarian 'system'. Growth and institutionalisation have affected the way it functions. The increase in professionalism and bureaucracy is not new, but the very weight of organisational complexity affects the speed and effectiveness of response.²

Like many systems, organised humanitarianism suffers from the classic transition

of institutions from means to an end to ends in themselves. As humanitarian scholar Hugo Slim acutely notes:

“The Weberian struggle between charisma and bureaucracy is alive and well in humanitarian organisational culture today, and the dominance of bureaucracy is felt by many to have a negative effect on the type, tempo, daring and success of operations.”³



How impartiality suffers in the current system

However, it is the external causes of the malaise that are of most concern. The task of saving and protecting lives, and of doing so impartially and independently, is affected, as perhaps never before since the end of the second world war, by the inability of the so-called international community to address armed conflict in any meaningful way. Where they are not blocked, humanitarian interventions follow the dictates of Realpolitik. If you follow the money, it is easy to see that salve is applied selectively.⁴

Current funding mechanisms do not ensure that humanitarian action is provided in a truly impartial manner, that is, according to need not only within crises but also across crises. Vulnerable and at-risk people in forgotten or ignored crises suffer because of funding gaps triggered by the political preferences of particular international donors (see the articles on forgotten crises from p. 39).

But the challenges to humanitarian principles, and to impartiality in particular, run much deeper and start at the top, as this statement suggests:

“Aleppo is to Syria today what Guernica was to Spain during its civil war, a martyred city and the harbinger of more disasters to come. Equally, the United Nations (UN) risks becoming, in the 21st century, what the League of Nations became in the 20th: irrelevant.”⁵

This is not written by a rabble-rousing NGO activist or rebel academic. It comes from one of the permanent members of

the UN Security Council – the permanent representative of France.

From Afghanistan to Ukraine, from Libya to Yemen, from South Sudan to Syria, the UN Security Council is blocked. And there is no respite in sight for civilians. Many crisis settings are now ‘International Humanitarian Law (IHL)-free war zones’. Indeed, IHL is ignored and humanitarian principles are jettisoned – whether by state, or non-state, armed groups. Slaughter, torture, and ‘surrender or starve’ strategies thrive, despite much hand-wringing.

Those who manage to flee war zones do not fare much better. Well before US President Trump’s election, Europe, the cradle of western enlightenment and humanitarianism, had become a flag-bearer for an untrammelled rollback of rights. Many states parties to the 1951 refugee convention have abandoned their legal responsibilities. Instead, they have invested in deterrence measures to block entry to those seeking refuge from the terror of war zones or tyrannical regimes. The European Union is externalising its borders and pursuing short-sighted and aggressive return policies, undermining the prospects of asylum seekers stuck in Turkey or Libya. It is making aid to the Sahel and Afghanistan conditional on push-backs or migrant suppression. Meanwhile, the global south, including some of its poorest countries, continues to host 84% of the global refugee population.⁶

Multiple perceptions of humanitarianism

Moreover, there isn't just one humanitarianism, there are several. The northern/western humanitarian movement, rooted in various traditions of charity and philanthropy and in the civilising impulses of the Enlightenment, constitutes the dominant, multi-billion dollar, visible face of organised humanitarianism. But there are other traditions as well. Some are ancient and have only recently been noticed by mainstream humanitarians. Others are emerging and their members are increasingly vocal. They are challenging the pillars of certitude of the northern humanitarian canon. For the non-blinkered humanitarian, a wealth of studies are available that document these different traditions, including, for instance, Saudi or Turkish ones.⁷

The point is that humanitarian action and humanitarianism – the practice and

the ideology – look very different depending on where you are. This was brought home to me in a recent discussion with an Indian academic who explained that she was trying to get the Indian government interested in supporting some research work on humanitarian issues. She found it very difficult to meet anyone senior in the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When she finally met a senior official, he told her “we don't even use the term... For us, humanitarianism is colonialism”.


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Decolonising humanitarianism?

This is one of the challenges for the future. It is about the inherent coloniality of a humanitarian discourse intrinsically linked to the western rhetoric of modernity – a rhetoric of compassion and salvation (yesterday) and development and containment (today) – that has spread from the European centre to the farthest borderlands of the periphery. This western ‘epistemic code’ is the software on which organised humanitarianism runs.⁸

The argument goes like this: Humanitarianism is about our relationship with distant others. We don't usually use the term

for social protection issues or disaster response ‘over here’ in ‘our’ countries. We use it for things that happen ‘over there’. Coloniality theory (Mignolo, Escobar, Duffield, among others) has taught us that the emergence of the dominant humanitarian system has much to do with the way in which the west looks at the world and shapes it. Humanitarian discourse and machinery have grown with the expansion of capitalism, the liberal order and the more or less hegemonic power relations that came with it. Humanitarian action is part and parcel of this ‘western code’ of knowledge and power.



Of course, there were other, or different, traditions of protecting and caring for vulnerable people in crisis. But by and large these traditions were replaced by,

or buried under, western humanitarian discourse. That these traditions are now re-emerging is interesting in itself.

Changes in the international system affect the ability to address humanitarian needs

Regardless of whether we think that de-colonising humanitarianism would be a good thing, or that such a thing would be possible, there are changes happening as we speak that will have serious implications for the future of organised humanitarian action. These changes include the crisis of the multilateral system that emerged from the second world war and its ability to address humanitarian need. Organised humanitarian action as we know it is heading for very choppy seas.

I will offer the following thoughts:

- If the west is in retreat and the locus of economic, political, cultural and soft power is leaning eastwards, we can assume that this will have a significant impact on humanitarian discourse and action. Hard and soft power tend to go hand in hand. It is not inconceivable that China, and, later perhaps, India, building on the strength of their economy, will use the range of tools in the humanitarian handbook including their soft power to extend their influence to new areas, as the west has done in the past. What this does for the respect of impartiality and humanitarian principles more generally is another matter. Perhaps 'our' aid was not seen as so impartial

at the receiving end. The cold metal of the water pipe that brings clean water to a village may well be a manifestation of 'our' technical expertise and generosity, but it may be redolent of colonialism and exploitation for 'them'.

- Because the political economy of the dominant humanitarian system is a function of the way in which the 'oligopoly' raises, moves and controls funds, people and other essential resources, it is safe to assume that current and future tectonic shifts will increasingly challenge the current business model of the humanitarian enterprise.
- The present love affair between western donors and aid agencies may not endure. Especially if there were to be a sharp reduction in funding – because of President Trump, Brexit, financial crisis or simply because domestic priorities absorb a greater portion of tax revenue – this could lead to 'market failures' in how the mainly western oligopoly addresses crisis settings. Other players and stakeholders (private, diaspora, non-western, statist, non-principle-based, etc.) might then present increasing challenges to traditional humanitarian principles and

their purported 'universalism'. This will have a direct impact on the technology and coordination structures of the dominant system. An increasing number of new or 'recently noticed' actors are bypassing these structures anyway. Turkey and China, for example, do not engage with UN humanitarian coordination structures. Even many western NGOs find these structures burdensome and tend to work around them whenever they can. And national NGOs have little access to them anyway.

Also, based on the above thoughts, a few hypotheses on where we might be heading:


Multilateralism appears to be in retreat and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The crisis of multilateralism runs deeper than just Trump and Brexit. The three major international gatherings on humanitarian issues in 2015 and 2016 – the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), and the New York Refugee and Migration Summit – produced no tangible results. Worse, they were symptomatic of an international community that has lost its capacity to negotiate on common problems.

In the aftermath of the second world war, international organisations were set up to address collective problems, and they thrived. But this push towards international norm-setting and international cooperation seems to have become a spent force. This will have significant impact on humanitarian action (including on funding

and access). It can create challenges to humanitarian principles and result in even less emphasis on protection. It will also affect the ability of the so-called international community to address factors that drive crises, such as climate change and a faltering international peace and security apparatus. There is a lot of rhetoric around the importance of preventing crises. The current UN Secretary General and others point to the need for coherent or integrated approaches to crises, bringing humanitarian, development and peace/security instruments closer together. But the reality is that the international 'system' – from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, not to mention Syria and Yemen – is in a state close to cardiac arrest.

The void left by the partial retreat of the US into isolationism, combined with the global war on terror, a new coldish war with Russia and a potentially very hot new war in the Middle East, will only deepen the humanitarian malaise and the ability of the system to retain a modicum of impartiality and independence. A multipolar world, or one that relies on 'minilateralism' – ad hoc coalitions of

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the like-minded – may not be very sympathetic to humanitarian values and will pose new challenges to humanitarian actors worldwide. This is particularly the case with western-led humanitarianism, which will increasingly find itself outside of what was its domineering comfort zone to date.

The functions that ‘humanitarian’ action performs in the international sphere will change, perhaps dramatically. Humanitarian action’s multiple functions have included acting as a conveyor belt for western values, lifestyles, and the

promotion of liberal agendas, while making countries safe for capital. If the west is now in retreat, other centres of humanitarian discourse and practice are likely to blossom. If so, this will be a major reversal for humanitarianism as we know it.

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Humanitarian business models and funding might change

If western governments lose (some) control over the system, this could create an expanding role for other forms of global civil society or private action, financing and response that might still be largely based in rich countries, but potentially different in nature. The current business model of the humanitarian enterprise – with the exception of Doctors without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and a few other NGOs and some faith-based organisations which are privately funded – relies heavily on the donor-UN-implementing agency triad. The fact that many international NGOs (INGOs) rely heavily (up to 70% in the case of some large US-based organisations) on government funds provided by the taxpayer creates huge vulnerabilities for such agencies if the political or economic climate or the tax base suffers rapid changes.

An expansion of the MSF model, which is citizen-funded rather than state-funded,

would not necessarily be a bad thing. An INGO that relies almost exclusively on state funds is not really a civil society organisation. It is self-referential and, other than upward accountability on how it uses state funds, it has no ‘members’ that can hold it to account for its policies and actions.

Citizen-funded organisations like MSF are akin to movements where there is room for internal debate and, at least in theory, the constituency can overrule the leaders. Many other humanitarian agencies could be forced to find innovative approaches to raise funds to support their activities, should their state or institutional funds (e.g. EU funds) be curtailed. For example, they could, for better or worse, raise funds from private capital or a ‘Tobin tax’ on airline tickets or capital flows.

An important longer-term threat to the system as it is currently configured is

the fact that, in a global economy, (western) government tax receipts derived to a great extent from the taxation of workers within the domestic economy, may not generate sufficient funds. These will not be enough to cover escalating welfare needs, both domestic (health, welfare and social care) and global, including humanitarian response. Increased robotisation and 'Uberisation' of western economies might lead to massive unemployment levels that could severely cut funds available for overseas assistance. We are already seeing massive shifts of funds from the international to the domestic ledger: From Austria to Turkey, 'humanitarian' Official Development Assistance funds are being used for the care and maintenance of migrants and asylum seekers within domestic borders.⁹ Or perhaps funds might go to climate change mitigation rather than to humanitarian causes.

Finally, (western) humanitarianism may well have reached its historical limits and could now be on the cusp of retreat. The transition from the romantic phase of humanitarianism to the technological, institutional, and governance one, is

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now complete. In other words, the energy that made humanitarianism a means to accomplish valuable ethical ends is waning. The propulsive force of the humanitarian "mobilising myth",¹⁰ which provided meaning and energy to all those involved in the humanitarian endeavour, may sputter. This 'myth' provided a generation of aid workers, individually and collectively, with answers to questions about their place and social functions in the international arena. This is now under question and may be replaced by other mobilising myths (non-western, sovereignty-based, transformational, solidarity-based, or overtly politicised) or simply fade from the global scene – as has been the case for earlier mobilising myths (revolution, decolonisation, modernisation and the like).


Reflection and reform are needed

Caught between the pessimism of reason and the flagging optimism of will, what is the reflective humanitarian to do?

Perhaps the first thing is to stand back from the current crisis, the confusing background noise, the day to day struggle of innocent people caught up in unimaginable violence, and ask: How did we

get here? What are the forces for change and how do we engage with them? Organised humanitarianism is stuck in the eternal present and is poorly equipped to adapt to a more complex, insecure, and threatening world.

A more narrowly focused, back to basics humanitarian enterprise would not



necessarily be a bad thing. It might be narrower in scope, independent, informed solely by the views and needs of the crisis-affected, and focused on saving and protecting lives in the here and now. It would perhaps be the best way of nurturing the values and ethos of an enterprise that may be battered, bruised, and often abused, but is still often the only available safety net for people in extremis.

For now, the political and sociological obstacles to such a shift remain high. It would be necessary to buck the current trend of putting even more things in the humanitarian basket or explicitly incorporating humanitarian action into development or peace and security endeavours, and start protecting this basket from excessive instrumentalisation. The odds are not favourable. For now, the mantra in western capitals and even at the UN is for more integration of humanitarian, human rights, development and peace/security agendas, not less. There is still a long way to go before the lessons of Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen are learned and acted upon. Meanwhile, civilians continue to die and suffer, and the inhumanity of war seems to have no limits.

It is time for organised humanitarianism to acknowledge that it is in crisis, and to come to grips with a possible reform agenda. Ideas for change are already on the table. Many were submitted with the WHS in mind. There was an expectation in the aid community that the summit would provide an opportunity to discuss transformational change. These expectations were sorely dashed; no new political consensus was negotiated. In fact,

the opposite happened. And the change agreed upon – such as the so-called Grand Bargain, a set of technical measures aimed to inject more transparency and accountability in how donor funds are allocated and managed – was already ‘in the air’ and agreed upon before the summit. Even the technical has now become political, with the Grand Bargain implementation moving at the speed of tectonic plates.¹¹

History tells us that transformational change in the international system only happens in the aftermath of a major shock. Will the combination of the crisis of multilateralism, climate change, on-going vicious wars, and massive displacement provide such an impetus? The future is unclear, and many variables are at play. Can the system be patched up and made fit for purpose by injecting more diversity and democracy in the way it is run? Or has the universality train left the station for good? Is the best we can hope for a smaller, more focused western humanitarian system surrounded by an array of different approaches to saving and protecting lives? Perhaps a ‘multiversal’, loosely connected (eco) system?

What is certain is that the current humanitarian system – broke or broken or both – won’t serve us well in the new and violent international and political landscape we face.

Endnotes

- 1 See Global Humanitarian Assistance Report. (2017). Available at: <http://devinit.org/post/global-humanitarian-assistance-2017> [27.02.2018].
- 2 For a critique of the state of the humanitarian enterprise, see Planning From the Future. (2016). Is the Humanitarian System Fit for Purpose? A report produced by Kings College London, HPG/ODI London, and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. Available at: www.planningfromthefuture.org [27.02.2018]. The present author was one of the contributors to the report. Similar conclusions are reached by other reports produced in the run-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. For example, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)/Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) report Time to Let Go: Remaking Humanitarian Action for the Modern Era. Available at: www.odi.org/hpg/remake-aid [27.02.2018].
- 3 Slim, Hugo. (2015). Humanitarian Ethics. A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster. London: Hurst & Co., p. 25.
- 4 Walker, Peter and Pepper, Kevin. (2007). Follow the Money: A Review and Analysis of the State of Humanitarian Funding. Feinstein International Center. Available at: <http://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/follow-the-money> [27.02.2018]. See also the annual Global Humanitarian Assistance reports published by Development Initiatives.
- 5 Delattre, François and Atlani-Duault, Laetitia. (19 November 2016). Is Aleppo the Grave of the United Nations? The Lancet, Vol. 388, No. 10059, p. 2473. Available at: [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)32122-5/fulltext?rss%3Dyes](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(16)32122-5/fulltext?rss%3Dyes) [27.02.2018].
- 6 See www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2016 [27.02.2018].
- 7 See, for example, the series of studies produced by HPG/ODI: www.odi.org/publications/10582-learning-past-shape-future-lessons-history-humanitarian-action-africa [27.02.2018]; www.odi.org/publications/9529-understanding-humanitarian-action-south-asia-responses-famine-and-displacement-nineteenth-and [27.02.2018]; www.odi.org/publications/9019-ancient-origins-modern-actors-defining-arabic-meanings-humanitarianism [27.02.2018]; www.odi.org/publications/8661-responsibility-legitimacy-morality-chinese-humanitarianism-historical-perspective [27.02.2018]; www.odi.org/publications/8787-histories-humanitarian-action-middle-east-and-north-africa [27.02.2018]. The International Committee for the Red Cross has also investigated the compatibility of International Humanitarian Law and Islamic law. The Global Public Policy Institute, amongst others, has conducted studies on Saudi, Turkish and other approaches to humanitarian action.
- 8 For a more detailed discussion of coloniality and humanitarianism, see Donini, Antonio. (2016). Decoding the Software of Humanitarian Action: Universal or Pluriversal? In Volker M. Heins, Kai Koddenbrock, and Christine Unrau (eds.), Humanitarianism and the Challenges of Cooperation. London and New York: Routledge.
- 9 See Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) article. (21 July 2017). Available at: <https://www.irinnews.org/investigations/2017/07/21/aid-credibility-stake-donors-haggle-over-reporting-rules> [27.02.2018].
- 10 On the concept of mobilising myth see: Augelli, Enrico and Murphy, Craig. (1997). Consciousness, Myth and Collective Action: Gramsci, Sorel and the Ethical State. In Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman (eds.), Innovation and Transformation in International Studies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 11 For an analysis of the outcome of the WHS, see Donini, Antonio. (2016). World Humanitarian Summit: A Lost Opportunity? Humanitarian Alternatives, N. 3.