

Review - Humanitarian Business

Written by Kai Chen

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KAI CHEN, APR 3 2016

Humanitarian Business

By Thomas G. Weiss

Polity Press, 2013

Humanitarian actions are playing an increasingly important role in the world. For example, in 2014, the 31 UN coordinated humanitarian appeals identified 122.7 million people in need, and aimed to assist just 87.5 million of them. An estimated US\$24.5 billion was provided, a rise of 19% from the previous record high of US\$20.5 billion in 2013 (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2015). However, the existing literature pays insufficient attention to the characteristics of contemporary humanitarian action.

Humanitarian Business by Thomas Weiss fills this gap in the literature by exploring some of the most critical characteristics of humanitarian action in ever-changing contexts, as well as exploring its negative consequences. As a well-known scholar on humanitarian action and international organizations, Weiss is the Director Emeritus of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, Presidential Professor of Political Science at the Graduate Center, The City University of New York, and Research Professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

This well-researched book begins by reviewing the dynamics of humanitarian action since the late nineteenth century. The following pages extensively analyze what Weiss considers to be the three main characteristics of humanitarian action: marketization, politicization and militarization. Finally, it stresses the practical solutions to improve humanitarian action in the long run.

According to Weiss, the term “marketization” not only challenges Max Weber’s argument of a state’s legitimate monopoly on violence, but also produces two critical challenges facing the humanitarian communities: “manipulation” and “diversion of aid”. (Weiss, 2013, pp.123). The former refers to the control of resources, and the latter refers to the use of violence. Until now, many belligerent nations still demanded payments from humanitarian workers and agencies in various forms, such as fees for passage, road usage, and work permits.

Marketization is not a short-lived phenomenon. Because the growing funding did not keep up with growing demand, just 62% of requirements were met in 2014, a drop from 65% in 2013, and below the average of 65% over the past decade. It is noteworthy that the private donors (e.g., predominately individuals, corporations, foundations and companies) provided “nearly one-quarter” of all international humanitarian assistance (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2015). Moreover, over the past decade, humanitarian actions have become increasingly concentrated in fewer recipient countries (Weiss, 2013, p.148).

In regards to the politicization of humanitarian actions, Weiss argues that it has been “steeped in politics at all levels” (Weiss, 2013, p.2). For example, the US continued to provide the largest sums (32%) of all international humanitarian assistance from governments in 2014, and more than the total of the next-three-largest government donors combined – UK, Germany, and Sweden (Global Humanitarian Assistance, 2015). This trend would be more prominent if governments had “geopolitical interests to protect and domestic constituencies to satisfy” (Weiss, 2013, p.124). In addition, it does not exclude the possibility that humanitarian action authorized by the UN Security Council

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could be utilized by great powers in pursuit of their own “ideological and self-interested objectives” (Glanville, 2014, p.153). In the foreseeable future, the end result will not only be the further corrosion of humanitarian values, but also the increasing marginalization of the most vulnerable.

In many cases, it is always difficult to distinguish between those who use political motives to pursue humanitarianism and those who pursue it for political interests. In addition, the donors prioritize the “specific projects for a predetermined and often short-periods of time” (Fast, 2014, p.161). In some cases, governments were the direct suppliers of humanitarian aid, while aid agencies played the role of buyers. For instance, governments increasingly drive the decisions surrounding humanitarian action around the world. For example, the largest NGOs always receive the largest share of funding. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an exception, as it holds the position of the custodian of the Geneva Conventions.

In this context, militarization means that the militaries have been one of the key actors in humanitarian action. In conflict-affected areas, private military/security contractors often have an interest in the continuation of the conflict (Weiss, 2013, p.130). Several humanitarian agencies had to hire local military/security contractors when violence targeted humanitarian workers. In the words of Weiss, when violence targets humanitarians, ‘there may be no alternative to military assistance and protection’ (Weiss, 2013, p.82). In other words, only armed forces can protect humanitarian workers and victims. Weiss analyzes the unprecedented case of Margaret Hassan. The then-country director of CARE International was murdered in Iraq, signaling a message of insecurity to all foreigners ‘no matter what their background, dedication, or commitment’ (Weiss, 2013, p.81).

At the very least, the private contractors always have ‘contractual, role-based duties to take on greater costs’ (Pattison, 2014, p.120). They accept any risks. As a result, more and more private military/security contractors have become ubiquitous in offering service of logistics, transportation, and security for many conflict-affected countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, and Somalia. In those places, belligerents often ignore international humanitarian norms and risks are much higher than what they used to be. At the same time, the humanitarian communities have found themselves ‘wading in murky ethical waters’, and scholars seem to be divided on whether the involvement of private military/security contractors occurs at the expense of the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Weiss, 2013, p.123).

There is a lot of skepticism towards private military/security contractors. Many scholars believe that private military/security contractors produce unintended and problematic consequences in the long run. For instance, their involvement might be too costly, and their resources’ cost is ‘subtracted from funds for food and other supplies’ (Weiss, 2013, p.86). But when victims and humanitarian workers are threatened, and the governments have limited resources to rescue them, private military/security contractors should be a possible option (Ibid., p.44). As David Rodin suggests, there are two fundamental constraints for private military/security contractors. First, the contractors should not provide sustained military supports to any belligerents. Second, any contractors must not become ‘participants in a civil war’ (Rodin, 2014, p.250).

As a matter of fact, the involvement of private military/security contractors in humanitarian action challenges ‘the independent and impartial basis of traditional humanitarian assistance’ (Fast, 2014, p.119). In the case of Iraq, many private military/security contractors were accused of ‘rogue behavior’ and even caused significant harm to civilians who were supposedly protected by them (Burns, 2007). In April 2015, Nicholas Slatten, former Black-water security guard, was sentenced to a life in prison for killing 14 Iraqi civilians and wounding 17 others (Greensboro News & Record, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, Weiss highlights the negative consequences produced by these three characteristics of humanitarian actions, particularly the involvement of private military/security contractors. As the author reveals: the involvement of private sector in humanitarian action is inevitable. For instance, the US has deployed more private military/security contractors than foreign soldiers in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The mainstream agencies have been outsourcing security service to private military/security contractors, and the fatalities for military/security contractors in Iraq were ‘higher than for soldiers in 2011’ (Weiss, 2013, p.43).

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Wither humanitarian actions in the foreseeable future? The answer is context-sensitive. In the opinion of Weiss, 'uncertainty is the only certainty' (2013, p.92). It's impossible to obtain reliable statistics on the real costs of delivering goods, let alone making compassion across sectors or agencies. If things remain as they are now, humanitarian action's occasional achievements will be based on the interests and goals of different groups, rather than any coherent structure or organizational chart. As a result, this will lead to a regular business-like performance that will make accountability and transparency a distant goal (Weiss, 2013, pp.111, 166). Therefore, Weiss advances three possible solutions to improve humanitarian action. First, stakeholders should find strategies to 'wreak havoc in order to secure an income', while contributing to humanitarian action. Secondly, stakeholders must curtail the power of belligerents who profit politically or economically from the conflicts. And thirdly, stakeholders should nurture the peace-oriented factors that contribute to humanitarian action (Weiss, 2013, pp.132-133).

In short, Weiss's *Humanitarian Business* employs a skillful analysis throughout, and offers a fresh interpretation of the complex characteristics of contemporary humanitarian action. It richly deserves the praise it has received.

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