Is Humanitarian Aid Politicized?

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Is humanitarian aid politicized? Humanitarian aid *is* a political act. Conversely, most of humanitarian agents repeatedly announce themselves as apolitical. Nevertheless, international humanitarian policies struggle to reflect good governance practices. The inconvenient truth is that we live in a world of chaos: the number of people affected by humanitarian crises has almost doubled over the past decade according to recent reports from UN OCHA. Beyond the 60 million refugees and internal displaced persons (IDPs) of internal armed conflicts, the UN has recently declared that the world faces the largest humanitarian crisis since the end of the second world war, with more than 20 million people in four countries facing starvation and famine in: Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Nigeria. Adding to the complexity of humanitarian crises in the "modern" era other global issues such as climate change; population growth; volatile financial and commodities markets; disease epidemics including Ebola and HIV; water scarcity; sectarianism and the mushrooming of armed groups and extremists contribute to the enormity of this problem. Consequently, not only is the humanitarian aid industry in crisis, but humanity itself. There is no simple cure. The current interventions require the need to be selective and this has created a moral dilemma of deciding not only when to intervene, but also who should receive the aid. Humanitarian agencies work under time, operational and financial constraints which create a domino effect. Humanitarian aid reform has never been so urgent and imperative.

Backwards and Forwards to Neo-realism: Clausewitz in Reverse

From a theoretical lens, humanitarian assistance is grounded by the principles of a quadruple equation: humanity+impartiality+neutrality+independence. In actual practice, humanitarian aid is political. From the traditional Realist school which regards international relations as a zero-sum-game, by intervening, the donor State maximizes or guarantees its power. Moreover, to be effective in the pursuit of national interests, individual nations need to align with other States in order to reach a level of cooperation. As a result, it is expected that the interveners would increase the relative power through an apparent permanent presence. If so, donors or organizations may become part of the problem as humanitarian aid creates a parallel market and helps to undermine governmental capacity instead of fostering cooperation and the pooling of resources. Under the realist perspective, states are required to intervene in a humanitarian crisis only when is a threat to their own interests and security and if their expected benefits exceed their expected costs. It is important to consider that it might be cheaper to intervene comparing to the political cost of indifference. Under this belief, there is no room for humanitarian intervention *per-se*: without the consent of the needed country, the exercise of public authority within a foreign jurisdiction is a façade for expansionist policies aimed to increase the relative power of the intervener. An example of this is the United States.

The US was not interested in the political chaos of Haiti when they carried out their intervention. Rather the United States was forced to approve the MINUSTAH peacekeeping mission which would later also deal with the consequences of the earthquake as well as cholera epidemic. The intervention in a country that is not a global security threat and has no exploitable natural resources was carried out to avoid a massive refugee exodus to American soil. Similarly, Europe is not concerned with the Mediterranean Sea becoming a large cemetery of drowed human beings taking their last breath of hope to escape from death from Syria and Northern Africa. Domestic order, national security, identity as well as an influx of foreign workers into the job market take precedence in the political agenda. Countries such as Brazil, Japan and Germany are highly participative on peacekeeping missions and humanitarian assistance as they perceive as a foreign policy tool to become one of the permanent members of a reformed UN Security Council.

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Clausewitz states that war is a continuation of politics by others means. If that is true, humanitarian intervention is a continuum of domestic politics. Moreover, a donor country, international organization or NGO projects a public image which they strive to uphold. The international law currently emphasizes that civilian populations should be protected from state violence in order to prevent the ignominy of a "second Rwanda". The legitimacy and the credibility of a sovereign state as well as the UN Security Council hinges on its ability to act as a guarantor of civilian protection. In the case of the UN, this legitimacy and credibility is essential to the survival of the organization. It is a bargaining tool to appear to be doing something in order to maintain a status quo and the international (in) security (in) balance. Humanitarian aid is about geopolitics, balance of power and a mêlée between imperialism and humanity that resembles to a tower of Babel due to conflicting ideas within the international system.

The Apathy of the Agents in the Field: A Moral Responsibility to Protect and while Protecting

Far from the politics of the headquarters out of which the various aid agencies operate, the majority of the work done by humanitarian agents is carried out in the field. On the ground of conflict and disaster zones, humanitarianism might be closer to what it should really be: humanity as charity and solidarity. The unresolved dilemma of humanitarian intervention opposes the state versus the individual. In the field, an as a direct inversion of the Realist rationale, the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) requires that the individual takes precedence over the protection of state sovereignty. The need to protect human rights is regarded as imperative. The main argument for this is based on the fact that not-intervention for the protection of human beings is morally repugnant, as the case of Syria which has given rise to the greatest flow of refugees since the Second World War.

More than the R2P, there is also the responsibility while protecting (RwP). Good intentions are not enough to avoid doing bad by doing good. The classic examples of UN peacekeepers perpetrating sexual abuses and other misconducts in Bosnia, Congo and recently in the Central African Republic and Mali shed light upon how the responsibility is not just to protect those in need, but also to do no harm while intervening. This ideal has created the necessity to rethink the concept of the humanitarian intervention on the parameters of *jus ad bellum, jus in bello* and *jus post bellum.*

By instinct as well as by the principle of impartiality, assistance is often delivered to an individual in need; not a gender, a race, an ethnicity, an ideology or a faith. Humanitarian agents are either experts on how to deliver aid, or volunteers inspired by good intentions to do-something-somehow, or both. The vast majority is not only unaware, uninterested or apathetic to the political or partisan imbroglio that created the problem at the first place- as the Sudanese government in Darfur- they may also be unaware of precisely why the aid is not effective.

Paradoxically, politics is most evident as being at the centre of humanitarian conflicts as well because politics creates a micro-dynamic of cooperation and competition. In conflict zones, to deliver aid requires negotiation with rebels for a humanitarian corridor. In some controlled area, humanitarian assistance is only possible through the help from insurgents when the Government is the one perpetrating abuses against its own people. Beyond the breaching of the principle of impartiality over the R2P no matter what, this creates not only room for moral dilemmas that encompass corruption and deviation of aid to fuel the black market, but also undermines the Government and the fragile State institutions' capacity when they exist.

Beyond utopia, from a constructivist and cosmopolitan perspective, politics is the result of social action that has been constructed. Therefore, rules and norms governing behavior can be re-constructed towards a "one world society" plagued by common problems such as climate change, rise of terrorism or economic inflation and unemployment. Also it is impossible to calculate the risk that humanitarian agents take to their own lives and families who are left behind for the benefit of unknown human beings who have been caught up in the disaster. Above and beyond apathy and apolitical interest, the main value remains the one of "do no harm".

Humanitarian Policies: The Urge for Reform and Good Governance Effectiveness

There is no such thing as a free lunch. From emergency to development, humanitarian action requires continuity. The multi-billion-dollar international humanitarian industry is under pressure to reform the way aid is delivered as supply

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does not match the high demand. The unprecedented amount of concomitant disasters and emergencies has exposed serious fragilities of the current international humanitarian aid system: financing is insufficient and unsustainable and coordination policies result in more bureaucracy instead of adequately matching the available resources to the most in need and in a timely manner. There is no magical solution. In humanitarian responses the main challenges are to react to time, continuity, costs, selectiveness, and accountability. Two dilemmas are at the peak of the iceberg.

First, there is a hidden struggle related to the principle of independence. Funding is necessary. Even though most humanitarian institutions receive a significant amount of money from States, they do not necessarily result in governmental control of policy as they are autonomous bodies. However, either coming from Governments or private donors, international organizations and (I) NGOs faces the dilemma of tackling emergencies crises and sustain aid projects while maintain independency from its founders interests.

Second, who should be saved: friends or enemies? Operationally, it is impossible to be everywhere and protect everyone in need. As selectiveness is inevitable, a moral dilemma is unmistakable. How to determine the neediest victims of crises? In the politics of protection and the limitations of humanitarian relief in the new and old wars, hard choices must be made when saving lives. The arrangements of selectivity are not only empirically puzzling, but they also imply conflicting theoretical expectations with regard to the international response to humanitarian crises and the extent of the so-called "selectivity gap." With the increasing significance of human rights norms in the international agenda, would lead to an increase in humanitarian activity as well as a high degree of consistency in addressing those crises. Importantly, the principles of consistency and coherence are not only critical for a legitimate political order but also for compliance to rules, as coherence is considered a key factor in explaining why rules compel. Contrariwise, selectiveness results in double standards preventing the international system from evolving into a normative order. Any humanitarian policy will mirror or impact a new political dynamic.

There is no such thing as "true independence". Humanitarian policies urge for reform for more effective good governance. Paradoxically, it makes humanity and humanitarianism even more crucial. The solution is not more money or more coordination, but perhaps, prevention.

Conclusion

As for the principle of fairness, distinction must be made. Humanitarian aid *is* a political act well explored by a realist Clausewitz in reverse epitome. Contrariwise, most of humanitarian agents are apolitical or apathetic to political questions of why and wherefore. The idealist perspectives of constructivism and cosmopolitanism highlight the necessity to implement the principle of R2P as well as the RwP. Yet, beyond politics and policies, international humanitarian aid struggles to reflect the principles and practices underpinning good governance. The inconvenient truth is that the "modern era" mirrors a world in chaos. Therefore, humanity itself as well as humanitarianism are both in a state of crisis. Additionally, and paradoxically, the significant fieldwork made by humanitarian agents has never been so in-demand. Facing a set of dilemmas as moral selectiveness, financial sustainability, independence and operational, humanitarian assistance urges reform to make humanitarian intervention more efficient and effective. There is no simple solution for such a global problem with significant complexity. But certainly, the call for humanitarian intervention in order to protect and uphold human rights has never been so loud. After all, humanity really matters.

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