

A Clouded Perspective: What is the Field of Humanitarianism? **by Iain Levine¹**

The ghastly killing of Sergio de Mello and his colleagues in Baghdad in August last year, sent shock waves through the humanitarian world. The brutality of the killings; the deliberate targeting of a long time humanitarian; the frustration of operating in the awful mess that was and is Iraq all boiled over into some agonized reflections amongst humanitarians at all levels in the system – UN, NGOs and others.

Since then, many meetings and conferences have been held. Many believe that the future of multi-lateral humanitarian action is under threat as never before with potentially awful consequences for those who most depend on its implementation. The very nature and essence of humanitarianism has been questioned. Some of those in the business with longer memories have noted ruefully that “things were better when nobody took us seriously.” And while nobody takes this plea entirely seriously, there is, occasionally, a real nostalgia for those days when humanitarian workers were on the margins and left to their own devices much more.

I’ve spent almost 20 years in and around the humanitarian world since I first went to Sudan in January 1985 with Save the Children UK. In those heady, far-off days before TV, the Internet, cell phone or reality TV, NGOs were known as the Volags or voluntary agencies, humanitarian assistance was about the provision of food, shelter, health care and water; politics was a dirty word for a relief worker; human rights were taboo, and the term “integrated missions,” if ever used, was how we described Apollo flights to the moon.

This paper seeks to provide some background reflection and a starting point for our discussion on October 12th on “What is the ‘field’ of humanitarianism?” It has no pretensions to be a comprehensive analysis or to provide any real answers to what are clearly very complex and sensitive issues, but I hope that it flags the principal issues of debate

Before reflecting on the field and, by implication, the future of humanitarian action, we need to touch on some of the key changes in the humanitarian field over the last 20 years or so. Much, though not all, has been change for the good. A few highlights:

Professionalism:

Humanitarian workers operate in a much more difficult and complex environment now than in years gone by and are more sophisticated and professional. Training has improved. The understanding of laws and principles that underpin humanitarian action, though still patchy, has developed. The profession has its think tanks such as the Overseas Development Institute’s (ODI) Humanitarian Practice Network and the Humanitarianism and War Project and analysts such as Hugo Slim, Larry Minear, Fiona

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Terry and Joanna MacRae, amongst many others, who have helped foster a more reflective, self-critical and analytical profession. The Sphere standards, an NGO initiative to set minimum standards of practice in key technical areas of work, though incomplete, have contributed a lot to the development of basic professionalism and technical competence. People in Aid has improved the thinking on managing personnel.

Creating an architecture:

The architecture of the international humanitarian system is much changed and significantly strengthened by General Assembly resolution 46/182 which established a variety of co-ordination mechanisms and processes including the Office of the Emergency Relief Co-ordinator; the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (the IASC) which brings together UN agencies, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement, and the Consolidated Appeal Process. These are not just bureaucratic mechanisms, though like all mechanisms they are only as good as those who manage them and thus do descend sometimes to the level of unimaginative bureaucracies. They have provided frameworks and fora for important policy development, about which more later, and operational co-ordination. Humanitarian responses have become more predictable as a result.

Humanitarian action and human security:

The development of the “human security agenda,” a view of peace and security that encompasses civilian protection, special concern for women and children, protection of international humanitarian law, child soldiers, landmines, and impunity. The International Criminal Court has led to efforts to humanize the peace and security agenda of the UN system. This human security agenda has both led to and been enriched by several important Security Council resolutions on the protection of civilians, women, peace and security and children and armed conflict.

In other words, the human security agenda has tried to put the protection of civilians and their rights at the centre of the management of crises of peace and security.

Though this approach to the management of peace and security has promised far more than it has delivered – the Security Council has applied human security principles inconsistently and selectively into country specific action – it has created an important framework for dialogue. Indeed, as the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, has stated on several occasions there has never been such a gap between the existence of international standards and their implementation.

As a result of these developments, lobbying of Security Council diplomats and other political actors by humanitarian agencies has become common. And if one can make one prediction for the future with reasonable certainty, it is that humanitarian agencies will increasingly concentrate resources and expertise on humanitarian advocacy with political actors.

The scope of humanitarian action:

As the concept of the complex emergency has developed and expanded, humanitarian action, which used to cover a narrow set of life-saving activities, has broadened

considerably. In addition to the classic tasks (food, health, care, water and sanitation, shelter), mainstream humanitarian action now covers education, family reunification of separated children and psycho-social support to the traumatized. More controversially, it covers an acknowledgement that the protection of civilians in conflict is an integral part of humanitarian action even though, as Francis Deng amongst many others has pointed out, there is no clear operational definition of protection and no agreement on the core competencies required to promote it most effectively.

Beyond this, the human security agenda has sought to use humanitarianism as “an organizing principle for international relations” in the words of Joanne Macrae of the ODI. This has involved humanitarian actors engaging in democratization initiatives, conflict prevention, human rights advocacy, capacity building, post-conflict resolution and other related activities.

Herein lies the crux of the debate over the future of humanitarian action and what it should be. The absolutely crucial question for the humanitarian community is: can one humanize the political agenda without politicizing the humanitarian agenda?

Challenges and opportunities going forward:

Important as these developments are, all is not well in the humanitarian enterprise. Indeed, the ugly, post 9/11 world has brought a whole new set of challenges and dilemmas for humanitarians. Many of these will be dealt with in future seminars of the series. In this paper, I want to focus on the more political challenges that lie at the heart of the reflections on the future of the field of humanitarian action.

Politicization of humanitarian assistance:

Humanitarianism is being manipulated and instrumentalised in many different ways by many different actors. Much of this is taking place in the context of the post 9/11 war on terrorism, particularly in the context of Afghanistan and Iraq which have changed the landscape of the humanitarian enterprise and which threaten it as never before.

It merits reinforcing that terrorism is totally antithetical to the values that underpin humanitarian action. Yet, the tendency of many of those leading the counter-terrorism efforts to ignore human rights and to manipulate humanitarian action in fighting terrorism is not only disturbing in its own right; it is dangerously counter-productive. The smoldering resentment that it breeds risks generating terrorist recruits, puts off potential anti-terrorism allies, and weakens efforts to curb terrorist atrocities. Such actions also undermine the effectiveness of humanitarian action and threaten the safety and security of humanitarian workers.

All the issues raised below in this paper threaten to undermine the fundamental principles of neutrality and impartiality. There are those who argue that neutrality and impartiality are passive attitudes – a relic of an older and simpler time. Others regard them as incompatible with the growing advocacy role that many NGOs play today. To be neutral

and impartial is not to be passive or indifferent in the face of suffering. It is not to be silent. On the contrary, it is to respond without discrimination to assist and protect. Neutrality and impartiality continue to be vital and essential values ensuring universal application of humanitarian standards. Humanitarian action cannot and must not be an extension of a political or military struggle, however well intentioned. We must ensure that we retain the right and the ability to reach all those in need regardless of race, religion, or political affiliation. This is essential both to serve those who have a right to be accessed and for the protection of humanitarian actors.

In the immediate aftermath of de Mello's death, many of us responded by seeing the problems of providing humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and Iraq as the future of humanitarian action. This was understandable but way too simplistic. The neglected crisis of Africa – Liberia, DRC, Somalia, Angola – and other peripheral parts of the political world, provide as great a challenge, if not greater, to humanitarians.

Co-option into a political agenda:

The future of multilateral, neutral and impartial humanitarian action is under serious threat. In Afghanistan, the sight of soldiers, often disguised in civilian clothing as humanitarian workers yet carrying weapons, was deeply troubling. Reports of US military providing medicines, blankets and other supplies to villagers with promises of more support if information is provided about “terrorists” or the Taliban makes the jobs of “real” humanitarians particularly difficult. It also undermines their safety and security.

The comments of senior Administration officials such as Colin Powell and Andrew Natsios, head of USAID, about the role that humanitarian aid plays in supporting “nation-building” in Iraq and Afghanistan has placed particular pressure on US NGOs.

In Iraq, the challenges have been even greater. The US and UK governments have sought to portray the war in Iraq as a humanitarian intervention, though this argument has been widely disabused, including by Ken Roth in his essay “War in Iraq: Not a Humanitarian Intervention” published in Human Rights Watch World report 2004. It is not at all clear how any humanitarian agency can, with integrity, find an operating space in the context of an occupation so widely regarded as illegitimate.

In case I am accused of taking a classic NGO anti-military line, let me make it clear that the military can play an important role in humanitarian crises. Parties to conflict and peacekeepers can and must ensure free, safe and unimpeded access for humanitarian actors to those in need. Through their respect for humanitarian law and human rights they can ensure the well being of civilians. Warring parties must respect the neutrality of relief organizations and their personnel and permit humanitarian agencies to operate independently from any military or political authority. There may be occasions where they can help by repairing roads and bridges and the means of communication. They can help to clear landmines. Any involvement of the military in the delivery of humanitarian aid, however, must be very controlled by civilian agencies and only as a measure of last resort.

Integrated missions: paying the price for humanizing politics?

In line with the human security agenda and the Brahimi report on the future of peacekeeping operations, UN peacekeeping and peace building operations are increasingly constructing themselves as integrated missions – attempting to promote a coherent UN approach to the problems of countries such as Afghanistan, Liberia, and DRC bringing together diplomatic, political, developmental, humanitarian and human rights elements within the mission.

The logic of this approach is self-evident. For years, the lack of coherence of UN and international approaches has been criticized. This approach, consistent with the SG's reform efforts of 1997, seeks to harmonize the different elements of the UN system. But the disadvantages of this approach are equally clear. Can a humanitarian operation whose framework is defined by the Security Council maintain its neutrality and impartiality? How does UNICEF organize the vaccination of children in rebel-controlled areas, when armed peacekeepers are threatening to disarm, by force, if necessary, those very rebels? How can one insist upon accountability for egregious violations of international humanitarian law when others are seeking to promote reconciliation in the name of peace and stability?

If humanitarian actors were equal partners with their colleagues from other parts of the Secretariat, integrated missions could offer an opportunity to put human security at the centre of UN action. Given that the humanitarian and human rights components of integrated missions are the lowest in the pecking order of the UN system, however, the reality is that their imperatives are subsumed to what are regarded as the broader and more important imperatives of achieving peace, stability and economic development.

Neglected and marginalized emergencies: paying the price for being outside the political spectrum?

There is no such thing as a “forgotten” humanitarian crisis. If that were the case, it would almost be forgivable. In fact, these crises are neglected, marginalized, ignored, cast aside, shut out by indifference.

We are all too familiar with the chronic under funding of so many humanitarian crises. Global humanitarian needs are vast and the response of donors is grossly disproportionate. To the 1999 UN appeal for Kosovo and FRY, donors gave \$207 per head, to Sierra Leone \$16 per head and to DRC \$8 per head. In 2000, Southeastern Europe received \$185 per person while Sudan, Angola, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Tanzania received between \$20 and \$36 per head.

As ODI points out in its recent analysis of the changing role of official donors, there has been increased earmarking of contributions and concentrations of resources on high profile emergencies as humanitarian issues have become more explicitly linked to efforts in international peace and security.

The consequences of such unfairness are all too predictable: growing resentment, deepening inequalities, worsening indicators for mortality, morbidity and malnutrition. And then there are the less-recognized problems. Sexual abuse and exploitation, of refugees and internally displaced in West Africa and now more recently in Nepal seems linked to chronic, marginalized and under funded crises.

The neglect of such humanitarian crises because they have no strategic value is an egregious violation of the fundamental humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality – non-discrimination and the rights to health, education, clean water and an adequate standard of living. As Oxfam points out in a recent paper, “An End to Forgotten Emergencies?” “while conflict and calamity persist, all human beings are entitled to assistance and protection to ensure that their lives are protected and that they continue to enjoy dignity even in the midst of despair.”

Humanitarian actors need to be more effective and coherent in arguing that the international response to humanitarian crises be determined by need, and have a commitment to international humanitarian law and principles and not strategic interest, or media coverage. They particularly need to improve their capacity to assess and evaluate the impacts of under funding using the standards of the SPHERE charter as a benchmark.

Humanitarianism as figleaf:

Those of us who have followed or worked on the crisis of Darfur have been struck forcefully by the comparisons with the Rwanda genocide 10 years ago when the governments which failed utterly to protect civilians were often those which most loudly trumpeted their humanitarian efforts in eastern Congo where hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees, many of them genocidaires, had fled. Darfur has been defined as a humanitarian catastrophe or even the greatest humanitarian catastrophe in the world by the UN for almost a year. And the understanding that this crisis was a consequence of massive violations of human rights was known from the start. Yet, it was not until Kofi Annan’s address to the Commission on Human Rights on April 7, 2004 commemorating the 10th anniversary of the Rwanda genocide and explicitly referring to Darfur and the need for greater international engagement that any real political momentum began to develop.

In my own meetings with Security Council diplomats in April and May, the mantra was “it’s not on the agenda” due to concerns about undermining the Naivasha peace talks to resolve the long-running north-south conflict. The Security Council did not hold serious discussions on Darfur until July 7, 2004 after visits to the region by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary-General Kofi Annan created an unstoppable public and political pressure.

Hugo Slim, in his forthcoming “Dithering in Darfur” makes the important point that when political negotiations have broken down, discussions on humanitarian issues have helped to keep the political actors talking together and produced concrete progress that could save people’s lives. But this analysis cannot escape the fact that, at least in the

early months of the response, lobbying for humanitarian access and the provision of humanitarian assistance was the dominant response of most international actors. Though the need for aid is clear – the mortality rates revealed by WHO’s research demonstrate astounding levels of suffering – the lack of political pressure to address the causes of the humanitarian crisis has been indicative of appalling abrogation of responsibility by Council members. The humanitarian crisis will only be resolved with disarmament of the janjaweed, an arms embargo against the Sudanese Government, an International Commission of Inquiry and accountability for the perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

The inadequate international response to Darfur is troubling but not the whole story. The responses to Liberia and Ituri in DRC last year were, as Tom Weiss and colleagues say in a recent paper, “The Responsibility to Protect: Is Anyone Interested in Humanitarian Intervention?” signs that major powers would respond to a humanitarian emergency even after September 11th.

Growing insecurity: new constructions of enmity?

It has been pointed out that the Bush and Al-Qaeda doctrines mirror one another in that you are either for or against us. That leaves little space for humanitarian actors who espouse neutrality and refuse to take sides or to use humanitarian action to advance a political or ideological agenda. This is particularly the case when the humanitarian enterprise is overwhelmingly western and northern and, by implication, deriving from Judaeo-Christian ideology.

These challenges are particularly intense in the Islamic world and particularly where militant Islam is powerful. While it has long been noted that deliberate attacks on humanitarian workers is a worldwide phenomenon, attacks on and killings of aid workers in Afghanistan and Iraq are seen as somehow more troubling.

Were the killings of UNHCR and MSF staff in Afghanistan consequences of the staff being seen as extensions of a US-dominated anti-Taliban political strategy? Is it possible for the UN and international organizations to separate themselves from the agenda of the US-led Coalition? Or, as some suggest, are humanitarians under attack, not because of the perceived westernness of their ideologies, but simply because its practitioners are overwhelmingly white and western, and thus, in the context of Afghanistan and Iraq perceived to be allied with US agendas. And if that is the case, why have international aid workers not been targeted by extreme Islamic elements in the Palestinian occupied Territories and the Gaza Strip?

Jonathan Benthall in a paper titled “Humanitarianism and Islam after 11 September” asks whether “humanitarianism rests on an absolute set of principles, developed in the West but universally applicable, or whether there are various distinct humanitarian traditions?” He doesn’t really answer the question. Neither have I. Nor has the international humanitarian community, other than to acknowledge the need for more national staff and staff from the developing world to make the profession more culturally and ethnically

diverse. Humanitarianism is a value-driven enterprise which must seek to be universal and not just a proponent of globalizing western values. If ever there was a topic that required the attention of scholars, this is it.

Redefining humanitarianism: going forward into the past?

Those who argue for a reductionist approach – returning humanitarian action to its roots in the delivery of life-saving services and the easing of suffering– see this reductionism as being essential to preserve the future of humanitarian action. David Rieff in his book, *A Bed for the Night*, is perhaps the most visible such critic. Others, myself included, regard it as a backward step. One area of work that would potentially be dropped under such an approach would be human rights. While the time is obviously ripe for a re-thinking of what are the core elements of humanitarianism, the inclusion of protection and the protection of human rights are not for negotiation. Returning humanitarianism to the place it was when I first started in the business would only return us to a situation of the “well-fed dead” where humanitarians focused on goods and services with no thoughts for the real causes or effects of humanitarian suffering.

A few of the key issues that seminar participants may well want to discuss might include:

- What should be the essence of humanitarian action? A “purer” set of actions concentrating on life-saving service delivery or a broader concept that addresses root causes and long-term responses to massive suffering and human rights abuses? Do we need to redefine the nature of humanitarianism in order to better meet the humanitarian needs of those affected by increasingly complex crises?
- How can we further humanize the political agenda without politicizing the humanitarian agenda to the extent that neutrality and impartiality are compromised? Can we reclaim the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action within the current dominant paradigm of international relations? Does that require greater independence from or integration with the language and practice of international diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacemaking, peace-building and promotion of human rights?
- How can humanitarianism escape its association with the West and the North? Can it construct itself as a universal enterprise, especially in the Islamic world?
- Is there any hope that the concept of “the responsibility to protect” can survive the US-led invasion of Iraq?
- Is the UN the most effective focal point for the co-ordination of international neutral and impartial humanitarian action? What are the comparative advantages of the UN, NGOs, the Red Cross Movement and the private sector?
- What, if any, should be the role of the military in humanitarian operations? How should the humanitarian-military linkages be defined and managed?