Humanitarian Organizations and the evolution of Humanitarianism: The Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Humanitarianism could be best defined via the commonly referred guiding principles whereas the strategies adopted to achieve 'the humanitarian goals' and the achievements made or claimed provide a practical meaning to the principles. Particularly, the humanitarian organizations or agencies help to make sense of humanitarianism and its guiding principles via the assessment of the strategies the organizations adopt to address the humanitarian needs and their success histories. Accordingly, this article overviews the role of humanitarian organizations for the evolution humanitarianism and realization of the principles. It aims to assess their contributions in light of the contemporary humanitarian demands and the limitations observed in practice. Thus, the specific questions are what roles the humanitarian organizations play in preventing and alleviating human suffering? What has been achieved and what are the major limitations? Finally, the article aims to highlight the need for pragmatism and rethinking of humanitarian strategies given the complex humanitarian demands of the 21st century.

Keywords: Humanitarianism, Humanitarian organizations, Humanitarian principles

1. Introduction

The major actors in the humanitarian activities extend from the United Nations (UN) bodies (such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Program (WFP) and the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)) to the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), spectrum of the Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and the donors (Suhrke, 2002). While the historical roots of the modern humanitarian action goes back to the nineteenth century, the post-cold war era has particularly seen increase in funding, increased presence of the humanitarian NGOs and the expanded focus of the humanitarian works (Hoffman and Weiss, 2006).

Humanitarianism in general and the humanitarian organizations in particular are guided by the 7 principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality (ICRC, 2015). Among these, humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence were adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2003 as the core guiding values of the humanitarian activities. Humanity dictates that there is moral duty on all humans to help those in need with dignity and respect, impartiality requires humanitarian actions should be taken solely on the basis of need without discrimination on any grounds, neutrality implies abstaining from taking sides with any of the parties to a conflict and independence means humanitarian organizations should act free from aims or interests of states and other 'outside forces' (Bradley, 2016). Thus, humanitarian actions are 'expressions of empathy' towards all those humans in need and intended to ease their sufferings caused by man-made and/or natural catastrophes. As such the humanitarian bodies shall distance themselves from the actors 'responsible' for the situation that lead to the emergency and also their activities shall not serve the hidden interests of the states and other forces.

2. The Humanitarian Strategies

There are different strategies used by the global humanitarian agencies to achieve 'the humanitarian goals'. Emergency relief assistance represents the classical understanding of humanitarianism as provision of 'nothing but relief' to those affected by conflicts and natural disasters (Barnett and Snyder, 2008). Thus, the humanitarians act to save lives in the emergency situations through provision of the basics: food, blankets, medical treatments, water and the sanitary services. The major adherent of this strategy is the ICRC. The ICRC is known for "a highly principled approach" focusing on assuring access to the victims of the conflicts for the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Bradley, 2016, pp.67-68).

The integrated peace building approach implies focus on the root causes of the conflicts and the attempts to avert return to the difficult past. It integrates provision of the emergency relief with the support for the rule of law, institution building, strengthening of participation and democratic process (Yates, 2014). This may include working with those among the parties to the conflict but 'willing and capable' of ending it (Barnett and Snyder, 2008, p.154). Thus, the circumstances may require the humanitarians work with the armed opposition groups and/or the state institutions actively involved in the conflict to address the root causes of the conflict. This

approach is dominant among the UN agencies and the major humanitarian organizations. Another aspect of the integrated approach is disaster risk reduction as regards to the natural hazards. In this vein, the humanitarian organizations support effective functioning of the early warning systems to reduce disasters related to weather changes and tsunamis (Holmes, 2013, pp.342-350).

Witness information and advocacy is also one aspect of the integrated approach. The well-known humanitarian organization in this regard is the *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) which often stands as a "witness for those who could not speak for themselves" (Stein, 2008, p.133). The organization also engages in campaigns to enhance access to the health services such as medicines (Barnett and Weiss, 2008, p.37). The humanitarian organizations' advocacy activities combine research, public campaigns and dialogues with stakeholders targeting the international bodies, states, corporations and the public (Green, 2018, p.18).

3.   Overview of the Achievements

The modern humanitarianism has been associated with the number of achievements and positive developments. First, a significant number of people across the world benefited from the humanitarian activities. For instance, in a decade between 1985 and 1995, the nongovernmental aid agencies alone supported 250 million people (Yates, 2014, p.525). To add few specific examples, 40 per cent of the people of Somalia sustained their life by the UN humanitarian assistance till 2010 and in 2011 alone, 11.3 million people in the Horn of Africa survived drought and famine via the humanitarian aid (Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, p.71). Thus, while there may have been unmet demands and unattended sufferings, the humanitarian organizations saved millions of lives and eased the difficulties caused by the conflicts and natural disasters.

Second, there is an overall increase in the number of the humanitarian organizations (Barnett and Snyder, 2008, p.2). By 2013, there were about 4,400 organizations engaged in different humanitarian programs (Slim, 2015, p.1). This means the humanitarian catastrophes can be dealt-with by the spectrum of organizations with a large number of personnel, field experience and resources. In addition, it could enhance division of labor among the humanitarian organizations in the delivery of relief as some, in line with their organizational specialization, may focus on the medical services and others on food provision, drinking water supply and building of shelters (Bradley, 2016, pp.40-68). Another aspect of ascendance of the humanitarian organizations is their increased influence on the global humanitarian activities. Particularly, they often serve as a source of credible information, the frontline advocates and also as the channels for the delivery of services (Yates, 2014, p.525).

Third, in spite the gap between the need and what is available, there has been a massive flow of the resources intended for the 'humanitarian' activities. States, intergovernmental bodies, philanthropist organizations, corporations, private individuals and other stakeholders has contributed for the global humanitarian calls. For instance, total of USD 27 billion was put in place for the 'humanitarian' activities in 2016 (Allen, 2018, p.146).

Lastly, the contemporary tendency among the humanitarian actors to adopt a more integrated approach to address the human suffering could be argued another positive development. The humanitarian organizations' focus expanded from the immediate relief provision to the victims of conflicts and disasters to advancing human rights, provision of the basic services, promotion of democracy and state-building (Hoffman and Weiss, 2006). This helps to address the root causes and the dynamics of the situations resulting in the humanitarian catastrophes.

4.   The Limitations in theory and practice

Though the guiding values of humanitarianism are compelling and of strong intuitive force, realizing them on the day-to-day activities is a major dilemma. The principles could be easily defined in theory but the humanitarians and the humanitarian organizations often find themselves in practical situations where the basics could even be infringed.

The principle of humanity obliges the humanitarian actors to ease the suffering of all the individuals affected by the conflicts and disasters. But, the humanitarians could pull back from helping the needy. For instance, flowing escalation of the civil war in Somalia in the early 1990s, the humanitarian organizations such as the WFP withdrew their staff from the country (Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, p.68). During the US military invasion of Iraq, some of the aid organizations left the country in fear of kidnapping and other threats to their personnel (Fassin, 2010, p.24). The international humanitarian organizations leave behind not only the victims but also their own national staffs (ibid, pp.245-249; Slim, 2015, p.225). Thus, while the theory dictates that the humanitarians should serve all the lives in need, in the reality this moral obligation may stop where it seems to demand self.

Humanitarian organizations often face difficulties in maintaining impartiality. Thus, some humanitarian needs may not be addressed at all while the others of an 'equivalent' or 'less weight' get the attention, and also assistance could be diverted by the parties to the conflict. The major challenges of impartiality include lack of or limited information about the humanitarian needs, difficulty to prioritize among some of the needs, shortage

and/or less flexible nature of the funds from the donors, and limited access to the victims because of the geographical, logistical, administrative, and security constraints (Bradley, 2016, pp.45-54).

The principle of neutrality may be in question as well under certain situations. To facilitate access to the victims, the humanitarian organizations may have to negotiate with the armed groups that were part of the humanitarian problem or they have to request protection from the state which could implicate them as 'collaborators' with the government (Slim, 2015, pp.189-196). For instance, during the US invasion of Iraq, the humanitarian organizations were just behind the troops (Fassin, 2010, p.245) and upon the coalition control of the country, the organizations' activities were "coordinated through a system run by the western military" (Vaux, 2006, p.244). Therefore, limited access, declining respect for and increased attacks on the humanitarians (Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, p.160), could necessitate the search for a 'strong partner for the good end' effectively putting aside the principle of neutrality.

Another practical limitation of the principle of neutrality is related to the humanitarian organizations' tendency to focus on the 'high profile' or the well-publicized emergencies than comparably 'worse' situations. For instance, the humanitarians not only failed to save the hundreds of thousands in a small and 'less strategic' country called Rwanda during the 1994 genocide and actively call for attention of the world but also their activities were not effectively coordinated and safety of the civilians in the 'safe zones' was not ensured (Vaux, 2006, pp.246-247). Relatedly, advocacy activities by the humanitarian organizations tend to focus on the issues which tend to attract larger response than the 'low profile' ones; the views and interests of the local actors are often not included and the humanitarian principles such as neutrality might be infringed in the process (Green, 2018, pp.25-27).

In addition, as the states are the major financial contributors to the humanitarian organizations, the later often lack the freedom of action and has to be considerate of the demands/interests of the states (Barnett and Snyder, 2008, p.162). Donors not only neglect some of the humanitarian crisis but also often earmark funds to the specific activities and/or crisis causing uneven distribution of the humanitarian aid (Weiss, 2016, pp.104-105). These could mean the humanitarians may fail to act in line with the guiding principles in identification of the needy and the delivery of the relief services. In contrast, the MSF and other humanitarian organizations with the private sources of funding have the greater independence of action (Bradley, 2016, p.65).

Regarding the strategies, 'nothing but relief' strategy often failed to ensure betterment of lives of the victims. Rather, it reinforces the conflicts by motivating the parties to control/access the relief resources and also affects improvements in the overall situation by creating dependency and sustaining inequalities (Barnett and Snyder, 2008, p.148; Paulmann, 2016, pp.1-2). Thus, the relief activities may worsen sufferings of the victims, contribute for reoccurrence of the conflicts and sustain the root causes of the problem.

On the other hand, while attempting to address the root causes of conflicts could be praised as a holistic approach to ease the human suffering, it is difficult to realize. Parties to the conflict may want to sustain it and/or insist to defend their interests, the level of the material and societal destructions could already be significant, and the long-term initiatives may draw lesser empathy and resources than the emergency relief requests (Barnett and Snyder, 2008, pp.152-154). To extreme, the tendency to engage in the broader peace-building initiatives is presented as an evidence of the western influence (Douzinas, 2007, p.6; Leader, 1998, p.298).

Furthermore, though the surge in the number of the humanitarian organizations has positive implications, it has pitfalls too. It causes problems of coordination on field, competition for public attention and to secure funds and other resources, and delayed response to the emergencies (Allen, 2018, p.148). Thus, the humanitarian organizations could become preoccupied with the self-preservation activities (Yates, 2014, p.525). There is also differing interpretation of humanitarianism and the modalities of action among the humanitarian organizations causing some giving aid and the others not (Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, p.54).

Humanitarian organizations are also criticized for the tendency to patrimonialize than partner with the local bodies. Local workers or the nationals not only serve as the field operatives, receive unequal pay and have limited, if any, involvement in the decision making but also have incomparably less guarantee of their safety and even their life (Fassin, 2010, pp.248-249). They faced worst situations from Rwanda to Iraq and Syria at the hands of the conflicting parties and some paid the ultimate price of their life. In addition, there is limited use of the 'local knowledge' and low engagement of the beneficiaries (Stein, 2008, p.140). Nevertheless, an increased use of the local knowledge and participation of the beneficiaries could enhance the effectiveness of the relief services, contribute for the legitimacy of the humanitarian organizations and help to devise an integrated system to identify and address the future emergencies. One aspect of the unbalanced relationship between the international and the local humanitarians is the pattern of flow of resources. In 2018, about 96 per cent of the international humanitarian assistance allocated to the nongovernmental agencies went to the international nongovernmental organizations ('the international responders') whereas the national and local NGOs received less than 1 per cent (Development Initiatives, 2019, p.64).

5. Humanitarianism in the 21st Century: Towards an integrated approach

While several efforts were made and millions were supported by the 'agents of humanitarianism' for over a century, large scale human suffering continues causing significant growth of the need for humanitarian assistance (Holmes, 2013, p.393). By late 2018, total of 206.4 million people in 81 countries need humanitarian assistance to sustain their life (Development Initiatives, 2019, p.15). The challenges require a comprehensive/integrated approach at least for three main reasons.

First, countries often affected by the humanitarian crisis are not in track of comprehensive improvements. While one in seven from our planet's population live in the conflict-ridden countries, less than a fifth of these countries are expected to achieve the sustainable development goals (Curtis, 2020). In addition, the demands of one of the most affected groups in the humanitarian crisis, the young, are not only about the emergency support but also for a better access to education and health services, effective and strong institutions, and opportunities to participate in the processes (UNICEF, 2007).

Second, there is surge of the "the new wars" where the agents of the humanitarian crisis include an array of the non-state actors, where their goals are deep rooted and often identity based, where targeting the civilians in different forms has become one of the prime tactics and where looting and other violent methods of finance are widely used (Kaldor, 2018, pp.343-344). In these situations, strictly adhering to the principles and the relief only strategy could have little effect in alleviating the crisis.

Lastly, the major recipients of the humanitarian assistance are almost identifiable. For decades, countries such as DRC, Somalia and Sudan has been frontline recipients of the humanitarian assistance (Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, p.252) and joined by South Sudan, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen in the last decade (OCHA, 2019). Thus, spots of the major humanitarian disasters are known and concerted actions could be taken.

6. Concluding Remarks

The humanitarian organizations continue to increase in number and strengthen in the financial-human resources they direct. While certain ground principles are presumed as the guiding values of the humanitarian actions, they are often infringed and/or difficult to adhere to in practice. Thus, purity is impossible and shall not be expected. The humanitarians are not angels and their financial supporters are not saints. The billions of dollars may not be basically intended to ease the suffering of the needy across world.

If it is difficult to live-up-to the principles and limits in action are expected, a more pro-active stance to alleviate the human suffering should be readily taken. In this era of "revolutions in humanitarian affairs" characterized by the changes which are fundamentally affecting the humanitarian organizations and the outcomes (Hoffman and Weiss, 2018, p.11), circumstance based pragmatism is required. Thus, through a context-based holistic approach encompassing a combination of the strategies, enhanced cooperation between the local to global stakeholders and with an active role of the frontline humanitarian organizations, the limits in the theory and practice of humanitarianism could be well dealt-with.

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