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# IS HUMANITARIAN ACTION INDEPENDENT FROM POLITICAL INTERESTS?

Jonathan Whittall

- *Why the humanitarian aid industry - still largely associated with hegemonic power - is facing a crisis of legitimacy.*

## ABSTRACT

*he International humanitarian action should be about saving lives and alleviating suffering. This paper considers the impact that political influence has on humanitarianism and how this has polluted its work. The author examines the history of this influence since the Cold War until the 2007 financial crisis, noting its constant entanglement with Western political interests. Rarely seen in its pure altruistic form, this paper discusses the conflicts that arise from incorporating humanitarian aid into the wider political goals of state building, for example. Consequently, humanitarian NGOs face a crisis of legitimacy. In addition, the author asks whether humanitarian action will retreat with western power or be left exposed. With emerging powers playing an increasingly important role on a "three dimensional chessboard," he concludes with key suggestions for the sector to regain its legitimacy and not to repeat the mistakes of the past.*

## KEYWORDS

Humanitarian | Aid | Political interest | Doctors Without Borders | Emerging powers

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Institutional humanitarian action – represented most prominently by large NGOs from the Global North and the UN system – has significantly grown in the post-Cold War era of capitalism's political dominance. Humanitarian action for an organisation like *Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors without Borders (MSF)* can most simply be defined as the act of saving lives and alleviating suffering. However, the practice of delivering humanitarian assistance is carried out by an increasing number of organisations and includes a growing range of objectives that mirror a liberal democratic agenda. This broader form of humanitarianism has become closely associated with hegemonic power, both in terms of how humanitarian concerns have been used as a justification for military intervention and in terms of how humanitarian aid has been used as a foreign policy or military tool by donor governments. NGOs have in many cases become extensions of Western foreign policy. This has most obviously been seen in contexts such as Afghanistan where many NGOs supported and formed an integral part of US led stabilisation activities following the US invasion in 2001.

However, power is changing. Western hegemonic power is arguably in decline and powers such as Brazil, India and China are taking increasing space on the geopolitical stage. In an analysis of the BRICS voting patterns at the UN, Ferdinand confirmed that the most prominent divide between the Global North and South is over issues of development.<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand notes that the BRICS never take opposing positions on such issues, though there is greater cohesion within the India/Brazil/South Africa (IBSA) group. Ferdinand concludes that "their growing self[-]confidence, will heighten the travails of an already diplomatically embattled US at the UN"<sup>2</sup> and "this grouping is both emblematic

of wider global change as well as a significant factor in bringing it about. It points to an enhanced role for middle powers in the post-unipolar world.”

What has the relationship been between humanitarian action and Western power and how will changing power impact the future of humanitarian aid? This analysis offers an alternative narrative on the evolution of humanitarian aid and its current dilemmas.

Joseph Nye has developed a useful model for understanding current global power structures. He refers to current power dynamics as a “three dimensional chessboard.”<sup>3</sup> According to Nye: “The world is neither unipolar, multipolar, nor chaotic – it is all three at the same time.”<sup>4</sup> Drawing on the notion of this three dimensional chessboard, this analysis of the relationship between humanitarian aid and political power will refer to the three current power structures as: the uni-polar or the Western uni-pole; the messy multi-polarity of (re)emerging powers; and the diffusion of power.

In the Cold War, the provision of humanitarian aid by NGOs was confined to one side of a bi-polar political chessboard. It was rejected by a Soviet system on the one side that saw humanitarian aid as a tool of Western governments who sat on the other side of a geopolitical divide. A “*sans frontièrist*” element to humanitarian action emerged during this period, which rejected the ability of the nation state to deny access for humanitarian workers to conflict zones. However, this cross-border aid was often delivered in alliance with those groups resisting the Soviet system from the inside - such as the cross-border aid activities carried out into areas under the control of the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan following the 1979 Soviet invasion. MSF sought to extract itself from the influence of donor governments in conflict by rejecting to be funded by governments in politically sensitive contexts and chose to rely instead on private donations from individuals. However, other NGOs cemented their funding relationship with donor governments from the Global North.

At the end of the Cold War, and as the bi-polar chessboard was cleared, liberal democracy dominated and the white pieces of the chessboard controlled the playing field. Donors funded humanitarian aid in partnership with development activities. For NGO workers – whose sphere of influence grew exponentially - the combination of development and humanitarian activities was a way to “bridge the gap” and to “break the cycle” of emergencies by addressing the “root causes” of crises. This brought aid workers into a sphere of action whereby a political diagnosis and structural solution needed to be proposed. Liberal democracy was the political ideology that informed much of the individual aid worker politics in NGO headquarters. Duffield refers to this as the belief amongst some NGOs in the “‘moral’ cause of [W]estern governance.”<sup>5</sup> For donors, the combination of relief and development was a way to ensure coherence among the different tools used to consolidate the establishment of the liberal-democratic order in what were then referred to as “failed states.” An “unholy alliance” was consolidated between humanitarian organisations and western donors.<sup>6</sup> As MSF’s private funding increased it actively resisted the trend in the aid sector to combine development and relief activities within this “unholy alliance.” However, MSF still formed part of an overall aid system that it could not entirely extract itself from.

The provision of assistance has never been uncontested and attacks on the ability of humanitarian actors to operate in the uni-polar era were driven largely by what Kaldor described as the dynamic of “new wars.”<sup>7</sup> What emerged was an interest-based acceptance or rejection of humanitarian aid in what were largely internal conflicts based on the notion of humanitarian aid as something that might be manipulated to serve national military tactics. Humanitarian access was negotiated based on compromises with these local interests. The services that humanitarian NGOs had to offer gave a level of leverage in the process of negotiating access. Dominant states – such as the US and countries in Europe, who were also the primary funders of humanitarian organisations – were able to bully weaker states in the Global South to accept the humanitarian organisations that they funded, even when they were suspicious of the organisation’s influence, interests and motives. Although often not accepting funding from these states, MSF managed to benefit from the political leverage of the Global North during this period.

The exaggerated rise of a transnational “terrorist” threat following 9/11 saw the beginning of a new era for humanitarian aid. The foundations of securitised aid and mechanisms of delivery that had developed in the Cold War

world – and incorporated into liberal democracy with multi-mandated organisations delivering both humanitarian and development aid – were used in the new battle against terrorism.

A coherence agenda turned its attention to stabilisation approaches. This sought to build the legitimacy of certain groups such as the Afghan government through the provision of assistance in the areas under its control and to deny legitimacy to other groups such as the Taliban through the criminalisation of assistance that could benefit an opponent to western political interests. Humanitarian aid actors had to defend themselves from the risk of being associated with their Western donors. They re-asserted principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality in an attempt to create at least the illusion of a protected space of action outside of political interference. However, many armed actors such as the Al Shabaab in Somalia did not buy the distinction and aid organisations were targeted in Iraq, Somalia, Darfur and elsewhere. During this era, concerns were raised by humanitarian organisations about the “blurring of the lines” between humanitarian actors and military forces.

As a result of the overstretch of American power in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – combined with a financial crisis and a general loss in legitimacy of the West – the uni-polar chessboard became destabilised and American power began to decline. In its place, emerged a messy multi-polarity, a diffusion of power and, in some cases, pure chaos. This brought us to the current era of humanitarian aid delivery. The humanitarian aid system - still largely associated with hegemonic power - is facing a crisis of legitimacy. The question has now become whether humanitarian aid will retreat with the tide of western power or be left exposed?

Humanitarian action is still tied to the uni-polar chessboard where only the white pieces are wielding power. However, it is having to contend with a more complex power dynamic in which its identity is Western and its capacity is tied to Western political interests and institutions, but in which the white pieces of the chessboard are no longer the only players with power. The toolkit developed by humanitarian actors for defending their legitimacy to operate is coming into question as the currency of “humanitarian principles” have been eroded over time. In addition to this, the very effectiveness of humanitarian aid in delivering emergency assistance has been undermined by its incorporation into the liberal-democratic model (a model questioned and contested by an emerging multi-polarity defining itself with the rejection of Western models in general).

Indeed, the failures in humanitarian response are at least in part due to the political choices of many aid organisations to allow themselves to work with such a broad range of objectives - from promoting peace and stability to building state institutions to delivering life saving assistance. The reality however, as was seen in the case of South Sudan since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005, is that the political process of state building takes priority over the maintenance of an emergency response capacity - especially when all components of the international response to a crisis are merged under the umbrella of “resilience building.” Organisations like MSF and the ICRC have managed to maintain their emergency response capacity largely because they have maintained an independence of action. However, the tendency of the majority of NGOs in the liberal humanitarian era to want to do more and therefore to attempt to “bridge the gap” between relief and development, giving rise to multi-mandated organisations, has now been replaced by a desire to be cost effective by “building resilience.”

The way in which aid is conceptualised along the lines of integrating efforts toward a broader political agenda has resulted in a number of concrete implications for those actors who would normally be involved in the acute phase of emergency response. First, there is less direct action on the ground in emergencies due to a preference to rather build capacity or to work through local partners. Second, there is a tendency toward longer term heavy development programming that makes it difficult to switch quickly to light and quick emergency responses. Finally, there is a reduced logistical capacity due to reliance on UN integrated missions. This has resulted in a crisis of capacity in the aid world, leading *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) to recently ask the question – when it comes to emergency response – “where is everyone?”<sup>8</sup> This is not a technical failure of the aid system but rather rooted in the political choices of some of the largest aid organizations.

However, the discourse of humanitarian action remains trapped by the legacy of both a uni-polar world and Cold War bi-polar contestation for power. Within this framework humanitarian organisations either play a role in advancing the political interests of the Global North such as in Afghanistan where NGOs are incorporated into stabilisation activities, or they look for ways to distance themselves from the power of the Global North through an assertion of principles. This is coupled with discussions on improving the effectiveness of humanitarian aid that usually focus on solutions that will further entrench humanitarian aid into hegemonic power – such as is seen through the resilience building agenda. However, this overlooks how humanitarian actors should navigate a political multi-polarity where power has become diffused and a proximity to core state hegemonic power is a constraint on both the access and effectiveness of humanitarian aid.

The history of humanitarian action – particularly the way it has been practiced in the pursuit of broader goals and objectives than those implied by its most narrow definition – clearly points to it being a tool in the exercise of power. Humanitarian actors have blown in the winds of the prevailing political discourses – be it anti-communism or liberal democracy – as a consequence of their relationship with hegemonic power. However, humanitarianism in its minimal definition – and its simple act of defiance against the arbitrary exclusion of the means of human survival – points to it being a counter-balance to dominant power. However, for this to be a reality, humanitarian actors need to reclaim their place as part of a global civil society that acts in the interests of the marginalised, rather than in the interests of the core state.

Although organisations like MSF have managed to maintain their emergency response capacities, they still have to address the fact that the identity of the humanitarian aid system is largely tainted by its relationship with the Global North. This requires these organisations, and those who wish to maintain those organisations' access and effectiveness, to further distinguish themselves from hegemonic foreign policy interests and to become a truly global movement. They must work in alliance not only with those organisations from the Global North that dominate the humanitarian system, but also better navigate different dimensions of power by finding alliances with progressive civil society - including social movements, grass roots organisations and people mobilized in a non-traditional way.

This also requires a process of meaningful internationalisation of the largely western humanitarian system that could bring a genuine universality to the humanitarian identity. On an operational level, this new political landscape requires the assertion of a global sans frontièrism through a radical impartiality that actively goes beyond operating in zones under the Global North's influence; and ensuring effectiveness by returning to the basics of saving lives for the sake of saving lives.

These steps will not entirely solve the dilemmas and challenges facing humanitarian aid actors, but they will allow humanitarian actors to regain their legitimacy and face with integrity the push-back from those in power who see the delivery of assistance as impinging on their political and military strategies.

For donors of humanitarian assistance such as Brazil, China and India, amongst others, it is necessary to ensure that the same approach is not taken as donors from the Global North who have largely co-opted institutional humanitarian aid into their political and military objectives. Of course, states are entitled to act with their own interests in mind. However, non aligned states have an opportunity to assist in extracting humanitarian aid from western political power and protecting the delivery of assistance based on solidarity for survival with the most marginalised as an end in and of itself. This will not be achieved by entrenching state control over humanitarian assistance through the assertion of sovereignty but rather by extracting it from hegemonic power and protecting its independence of action.

## NOTES

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