

Ethics and politics of humanitarian action

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Why are many of us so uneasy when it comes to associating the word “humanitarian” with the word “politics”?

As we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the quintessential humanitarian body – the Red Cross Red Crescent - let us recall that Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross was a master practitioner of the political arts. It is thanks to his consummate political skills that this pioneering humanitarian movement - hosting us today - came into being.

But humanitarians keep running away from politics on the spurious fear that the nobility of their thoughts and the purity of their actions may get tainted. And yet, we know that the causes and consequences of the vulnerability that drives humanitarian action are largely of a political nature, and require politically mediated solutions.

If you go back in history, the feature that distinguishes the humanitarian movement from just charity or philanthropy is *politics*. All the great humanitarian advances - for example, the abolition of slavery, the treatment of the mentally ill, countering the brutality of criminal punishments, or the subjugated status of women, and moderating the brutality of war, were born from the humanitarian womb. But they were all political in their genesis.

In fact, all the greatest humanitarians in history – in every culture and every epoch – were, above else, politicians. It is their politics that drove them to become humanitarians – and not the other way round.

Thus, as we look forward at the ever greater, more complex, and interlinked challenges facing humanity, it is clear that we will need even more politics (of the right sort, of course!) to steer our way through them.

It is through politics that societies interact internally and with other societies to solve problems and figure out how to get along with each other. And as the world gets more democratised and globalised, more and more people demand to be involved in shaping the forces that affect their lives. Thus, in a wider sense, everyone is getting more political. Humanitarians can't be exempted.

So I say: bring even more *genuine* politics into the humanitarian enterprise – and make it more central and more explicit.

Turning now to some reflections on the prevalent humanitarian business model.

At its simplest, this is quite familiar to us. It is about organising in the best possible way to help *all* suffering people but *each* according to their needs. So through most of history, the humanitarian endeavour has been largely geared towards achieving four objectives: gaining access, defining needs, organising delivery and, of course, mobilising resources to do so.

However, it is a law of nature that simple life forms cant survive – others eat them up. Hence the inexorable momentum towards complexity. So it is with the humanitarian business model: it has had to evolve, and the pace of evolution has speeded up over recent decades.

There have been three strategic drivers of change in the humanitarian business model. Firstly, the shocks from new types of severe manmade crises and so-called natural disasters – especially as today’s crises have multi-dimensional impacts. Second, is the stimulus of education – turning more and more people from passively grateful recipients of relief to discerning consumers of services. Third, the disruption of science and technology – at all levels. Of course, there are also many other phenomena such as demographic shifts, migration and urbanisation but, in my view, these are not primary drivers of change but the consequences of more fundamental trends.

In practical terms, the critical change drivers are being manifested in a range of behaviour shifts that deform or reform, depending on your outlook, our original, simple business model:

- First, is the increasing focus on funders demanding the demonstration of concrete results from so-called humanitarian investments. It is a matter of regret that it is no longer enough to express compassion – but that it must be put into metrics. Often these metrics are of the reductionist kind that *quantifies* but not *value* compassion,
- Second, is the increasing demand for the professionalization of humanitarian workers. It is sad that the innate instinct to help – present in all humans – is no longer enough but must be polished and certificated through training.
- Third, is the expansion of the coordination industry. It seems that doing good where one can – often quietly and humbly - is insufficient. Today one has to be seen to do good – networked and connected with the good done by others.
- Fourth, is the rise of the regulation culture. Greater accountability and transparency are demanded from humanitarian actors because trust has eroded. The current debate is between those with a policing mindset driving top-down compliance and others with a more developmental mindset driving up standards. This is the difference between efficiency being seen as a lubricant of bureaucracy or a moral value.
- Fifth, and as a consequence of the above factors, is the increase in transaction costs of doing humanitarian work and the rise of what we may call the “humanitarian corporation”. Complete with jealously preserved brand identity and placement, these are trans-national bodies in varying formation. Some are franchising operations while

others are conglomerates with a holding company and many subsidiaries. Others still are vertically integrated enterprises with impressive practical capabilities. They may include private sector profit making enterprises. Monopolistic behaviour by humanitarian corporations is not uncommon in the pursuit of gaining greater market share of the business of misery alleviation. Compassion has thus become big business – needing the latest in business school insights for successful running.

- Sixth, and unsurprisingly, is the inevitable growth of competition among humanitarian actors. Competition may be good for better grades at school or winning medals at Olympics. But having witnessed so much of the dysfunctional consequences of competition, I have serious doubts that it results in better humanitarian delivery.

This critique is through a somewhat Northern lens. A wider worldview would also highlights three other trends:

- First, is the co-option of humanitarianism into broader multi-objective ambitions – such that humanitarianism is integrated into the human security paradigm with the emphasis more on *security* than on *human*.
- Second, are the challenges to fundamental humanitarian principles as we know them – from the varying perspectives of other cultures. The debate here is not about humanitarian values on which there is remarkable consensus everywhere but on their primacy especially in the context of parallel and equally valid demands for justice, fairness and human rights.
- Third, is the re-ordering of institutional relationships between global and national actors as local capacities become better developed with consequent impacts on the re-distribution of influence and power. This disrupts old patron-client relations and is not welcomed by everyone.

In summary, the humanitarian business model is seriously stressed: not just fraying at its edges but also hollowing at its core. Where does all this leave us on the ethics and politics of humanitarian action? I submit that these will require a new dispensation through new trust that will have to be earned rather than imposed by regulation.

If Henry Dunant was here he might have advised that humanitarianism cannot be reduced to a business or turned into a sector. He may have gone on to say: *If we curb the humanitarian spirit that is innate in everyone by over-professionalising, managing, and regulating it, it will shrivel – and humanity will be the loser. The job of humanitarian leadership, therefore, is to ensure that this does not happen, even as the organisation of the humanitarian corporation must be modernised and go from strength to strength.*

We can be sure that the great humanitarian organisations that are familiar to us from their daily appeals for one or other disaster or conflict around the world – will continue to have plenty of good work to do in the future. But what business they may be running could well be up for grabs.