

Viewpoint

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Humanitarian assistance: is it politically instrumentalized?

Hari Krishna Bhattarai^{1*}, Kshitiz Acharya², Anthony Land³¹Nepal Development Society (NEDS), M.Phil, MPH, IDHA²Nepal Red Cross Society, Earthquake Response Operation, M.Ed., IDHA³Associate Professor, Fordham University, USA**Received:**

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***Corresponding author**

hkrishnabhattarai@gmail.com

Nepal Development Society

Abstract

Humanitarian assistance, increasingly being used as a strategic tool, to fulfill the political objectives has been a widely discussed issue at national and international levels. Non-governmental Organizations including United Nations and its agencies are questioned on their neutrality while providing the humanitarian assistance in many places and more often during the complex humanitarian emergencies. This has not only raised questions on humanitarian principles but also created a very negative and counterproductive situation and thus limits an impartial, neutral and effective humanitarian action. The deontological approach might not be applicable in every scenario. One size does not fit all. So, consequentialist approach together with the morality of the action itself needs to be adopted for expanding the horizon of humanity without compromising the core humanitarian principles. All actors should respect the humanitarian principles. Humanitarian assistance is to be impartial and not driven by the politics of the conflict, aimed only at alleviating the people's suffering. The core humanitarian imperatives founded on neutrality and independence are the key tools to secure access to all communities in need; impartiality and humanity represent the essence of humanitarian philosophy and cannot be compromised.

Keywords: humanitarian, assistance, political, instrumentalized, crisis

Tweetable abstract: Humanitarian assistance is being used as a means of pursuing a political aim or relating to achieve a political end.

Introduction

Natural, man-made or complex humanitarian emergencies can emerge anywhere in the world. Global Humanitarian Assistance (GHA) Report reported around 677 million people are living in politically fragile, environmentally vulnerable or the countries having a combination of the problems [1]. In the past few decades, the global humanitarian movement and the scenario have changed significantly to respond the increased assistance need in both frequency and intensity, placing populations and assets at great risk. Because of that the humanitarian support system has evolved into an industry, with many organizations having different missions, mandates, and agendas [2]. United Nations (UN) mentioned that 25 billion US Dollar was spent in 2016 which was twelve times greater than fifteen years ago to provide life-saving assistance to 125 million people seriously affected by wars and natural disasters or both [3]. There is a huge gap in funding in humanitarian support. GHA has claimed estimated US\$ 15 billion funding gap to respond the current humanitarian assistance globally [1]. Apart from the funding gap and other challenges, humanitarian system is much criticized for inability to meet the basic requirements of affected populations in a timely manner and also the quality of response varying greatly from crisis to crisis [2].

Barnett highlighted the growth patterns of humanitarian organizations after 1990. In the article Barnett has given a comparison from very few humanitarian agencies working in Somalia in 1992 before the American intervention to 900 humanitarian agencies excluding UN and Red Cross in 2010 in Haiti earthquake [4]. The number of humanitarian NGOs and their presence in terms of geography, population and access to funding have increased significantly and thus international humanitarian action has become an increasingly powerful response to crises but not free from being politically instrumentalized.

Donini reported that the donor, aid agencies, state, rebel, individual and victim can instrumentalize the humanitarian assistance for different purposes [5]. For example, to advance their political and strategic interests; to raise money by showcasing their hardship and suffering; to gain access to resources and victims themselves might try to prolong their status in order to maintain access to basic goods and services.

Based on the existing literature, 'political instrumentalization' of humanitarian assistance can be defined as the use of humanitarian assistance as a means of pursuing a political aim or relating to humanitarian's function as a means to achieve a political end.

New humanitarianism in 21st century

The emergence of complex emergencies, changes in the context of both the donor and the host countries and the emergence of new players in the humanitarian assistance give rise to new humanitarianism in the 1990s. Nascimento clearly indicated the inefficiency and

inappropriateness of traditional humanitarian responses which is in general were based on the classical principles of impartiality and neutrality to respond the emerging complex humanitarian crisis. This new approach to humanitarianism has been applied with some success [7]. As an alternative to the putatively failed paradigm of classical humanitarianism, the new humanitarianism focusing on political analysis to creating space for liberal development, market economy and participative democracy, was proposed.

Humanitarian assistance is increasingly being used as a strategic tool to fulfill these political objectives. According to Curtis, this is mostly due to the changing nature of the conflict, geopolitical changes; global security concerns; the perceived failings of humanitarian action in recent emergencies; and domestic policy considerations in donor governments [7]. Further, Torrente argued that the unprincipled responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the US pushed the new humanitarianism in most negative and problematic features – politicization, human rights conditionality and erosion of classical humanitarian principles [8]. Similarly, humanitarian action's effectiveness is compromised by different factors but largely due to the donor earmarking, short funding cycles, unrequited pledges and late funding, tying contributions to a donor's own nationals, NGOs, and contractors, and donor's political interests [9].

This resulted in increasing problems and even more complex dilemmas to humanitarian actors. Terry who headed the Medecins Sans Frontieres for Rwandan camps in Zaire detailed in his book "The Paradox of Humanitarian Action: Condemned to Repeat?" the negative consequences of humanitarian assistance, based on the cases from Rwandan camps in Zaire, Afghan camps in Pakistan, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan camps in Honduras, and Cambodian camps in Thailand. She claimed that the humanitarian aid intended for the refugees in Zaire in fact strengthened those responsible for perpetrating genocide [10].

In Afghanistan, the humanitarian assistance has increasingly been criticized for being politicized and instrumentalized. As a consequence, it compromised the humanitarian principles, worsening the working space needed to provide humanitarian assistance for people in need [11]. Humanitarian aid has been conspicuously mobilized as a means for conflict management and counterinsurgency strategies. Humanitarian assistance could not remain apart on isolating the Taliban at any cost, including aid conditionality. Thus, humanitarian endeavour by NGOs is losing its neutral and impartial status because of these counterinsurgency, hearts and minds activities [12]. Hofman and Delaunay argued "the space to provide neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan has been lost, given away, or taken, and this is having dire consequences for the population [13]. Whether it is possible to regain and defend this space will not only affect the provision of assistance in Afghanistan alone but raises questions for in other conflicts affected regions as well."

Not only the NGOs but also the UN and its agencies are questioned on their neutrality while providing the humanitarian aid in many places and times. On the other hand, we have a clear evidence that the vulnerable populations are further pushed into serious humanitarian crisis simply due to the denial of government or a powerful non-state actor to the humanitarian actors to access the vulnerable populations. Bajoria has mentioned that the Sri Lankan government denied the United Nations aid agencies and humanitarian workers accessing to camps for internally displaced persons and to civilians trapped in the ongoing conflict between the military and the rebel group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009 [14]. This created a serious humanitarian crisis.

Consistent to Srilankan situation, in southern Somalia, in 2009, al-Shabaab, a terrorist militant group controlling most of southern Somalia, banned several international aid groups that resulted in widespread famine. Chad, one of the poorest country in the world suffering from conflicts and humanitarian crises where government restrictions have made it very difficult for humanitarian agencies to access many parts of the Lake Chad region resulting severe human sufferings [15].

Humanitarianism in Nepal Earthquake 2015

In Nepal, immediately after the 2015 earthquakes, that claimed 9000 lives, left more than 23,000 injured, and displaced about 2 million people suffered from a havoc of disproportionate aid distribution. National newspapers were inundated with the news about the discrimination in the relief material distribution. Political leaders influenced the humanitarian assistance to impress their cadres and voters. Amnesty International reported the discrimination in the distribution of relief, including on the basis of caste and gender, as well as political favouritism and patronage without regard to actual need. Vulnerable and marginalized groups have fewer and more fragile livelihoods options, less access to economic and social resources [16]. Such impoverished population were further marginalized and suffered by politically instrumentalized humanitarian aid and faced more barriers in accessing humanitarian assistance which further pushed them into crisis and devastation [17]. A study that focused on older and person with a disability, affected by the earthquakes identified factors such as longer distance, remote geography, lack of adequate information, discrimination by their own families, and low or no political influence to hinder the access to humanitarian aid [18].

These examples have further substantiated that the politically instrumentalized humanitarian assistance, especially during the complex humanitarian emergencies, not only raise questions on humanitarian principles but also create a very negative and counterproductive situation and thus limit an impartial, neutral and effective humanitarian action.

NGO led humanitarianism

As the number of Humanitarian NGOs are growing rapidly, the competition between them is inevitable. Mc Goldrick criticized humanitarian assistance as being an industry with an expanding crowded market place with many overlapping, multi-mandate and duplicating actors [11]. The author added that many organizations are taking advantage of their capacity to mobilize media, raise funds and influence the political players for their survival. In addition, the humanitarian organizations bear a burden to prove themselves to adhere to their constituency and the funding agencies particularly by being prompt and effective in intervention at affected communities. Fink and Redaelli stated that in some cases, NGOs engaged in relief operations can drive the donor and thus may forgotten or silent emergencies

receive little or no help from the international community, while other emergencies receive disproportionate funding [19].

“The future of NGOs in the humanitarianism is not simply an important question for NGOs; it is an important question for the sector” [20]. The hope of availability of humanitarian assistance is the key to populations in crises. While humanitarian workers have to practice and follow the principles of impartiality and independence, various interests of politicians, military forces and aid actors can obscure such a principle driven agenda. Such an interest driven situation can entirely impede the success of humanitarian agencies in reaching the people in need [21]. This warrants all humanitarian agencies to find a common ground to move forward to achieve their genuine goals of reaching a population in need, reducing the crowding of aids to a politically favored ethnic groups, population or regions. Only then will humanitarian assistance be fit to respond the complex needs [22]. Similarly, the donor should also work towards better humanitarian donorship which focuses on saving lives, alleviating suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of crises, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness [23].

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of humanitarian assistance is to save lives and alleviate the people's sufferings. Humanitarian agency has rights as well as obligations to provide assistance based on the humanitarian principles. The deontological approach might not be applicable in every scenario. One size does not fit all. So, consequentialist approach or mixed approach needs to be adopted for expanding the horizon of humanity. All actors should respect the humanitarian principles. Humanitarian assistance is to be impartial and not driven by political interests, serving the particular groups, region or population. The core humanitarian imperatives founded on neutrality and independence are the key tools to secure access to all communities in need. Therefore, impartiality and humanity represent the essence of humanitarian philosophy and cannot be compromised at any cost.

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