

How humanitarianism is changing

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Humanitarian action is both misunderstood and contentious. The lack of clarity and consensus regarding its purpose and principles has direct, and sometimes tragic, operational implications.

Historically, action to relieve suffering and save lives in conflict rested upon a 'deal' between organisations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent and belligerents. In essence, those who wished to intervene claimed the right to assist those affected by the conflict; in return, they undertook that their interventions would not confer military advantage to either side.

The basic values and principles for humanitarian aid agencies are set out in a Code Of Conduct agreed between leading non-governmental humanitarian agencies. This stresses the primacy of the 'humanitarian imperative', and the duty to act impartially, without regard to race, creed and nationality or any adverse distinction. It also emphasises the independence of humanitarian actors from political agendas. In order to be effective, the deal has required that all sides understand it, and have an incentive to abide by it.

The principles of humanitarian action have come under increased strain as its boundaries with development, diplomacy and defence have blurred. Policy coherence is important; but once humanitarian action ceases to be seen as distinct, then the deal that binds those intervening and belligerents risks being weakened. In short, the security of humanitarian operations and access to affected populations is compromised.

Humanitarianism and development

The respective roles of humanitarian action and of development may converge, but they are distinct. The nature of this distinction is not always understood within the broader aid community. For example many people associate humanitarian aid simply with the logistical supply of truckloads of food, a necessary but inherently unsustainable means of enabling people to cope with what is sometimes

seen as a temporary interruption to development.

Greater awareness of the protracted and repeated nature of many crises challenges the idea of relief as a temporary palliative. Populations from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe face sustained threats to their lives and livelihoods lasting years or even decades, from disease (including HIV/AIDS), violence and political instability. Relief, while important, is not enough: sustained efforts to provide a social safety net and social protection are required.

We have explored these issues in greater depth through our work on HIV/AIDS and agricultural rehabilitation and our contribution to the ODI-wide study on aid in so-called 'poorly performing' countries.

What all such work highlights is the increasing convergence between the humanitarian and development communities in their analysis of the causes and political dimensions of vulnerability. HPN's Network Paper on livelihoods and protection in Somalia is one example of how this interface is being explored, and its very practical programming implications.

However, there are legitimate differences between the objectives and operating principles of the humanitarian and developmental communities. In particular, while the former is concerned with the short-term goal of saving lives, the latter is concerned with policies that make lives and livelihoods sustainable in the longer term. The two fields work to different rules in their relations with states, the first often seeing the state as a key part of the problem, the second seeing it as a critical partner.

These differences raise dilemmas over the management of resources and competing priorities. Sustained progress will depend on achieving greater mutual understanding across the



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development and humanitarian communities of the function and limits of different models of intervention.

Humanitarianism and security

There have been increasing linkages between humanitarianism and security. After years at the margins of international affairs, the past decade has seen humanitarianism thrust to the fore. The idea of 'humanitarian intervention' – the international use of military force in order to address or prevent violations of human rights – has become more common.

The term 'humanitarian war' was used in Kosovo in 1999. While counter-terrorism provided the primary rationale for international intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and of the Taleban regime has also been justified by an appeal to human rights and the humanitarian imperative. In this context, humanitarianism has become tightly linked with international security.

Defining the interface between humanitarian action and diplomatic and security concerns is not easy but drawing on case studies, including Afghanistan, HPG is seeking to provide a basis from which to promote a dialogue between these different interests on the division of labour in the field of protection.

Defining the 'brand'

Within the humanitarian community itself, what constitutes humanitarian action, and how it should relate to development, diplomacy and defence has also become contested and confused. As the number of organisations engaged in the delivery of humanitarian assistance has proliferated, so too have the interpretations of humanitarianism and the rules that should govern it.



Medical supplies being unloaded from a Belgian air force plane at Baghdad's airport, May 2003
(© REUTERS/Kieran Doherty, courtesy www.alertnet.org)

HPN is a key forum for debate on these issues. In the aftermath of the bombing of the UN compound in Baghdad in August 2003, the group worked with partners at the Feinstein Famine Center, Tufts University, to input into roundtable discussions in London and Geneva to review the implications for humanitarian action more broadly.

The idea of humanitarianism has evolved over the past decades. It has become more familiar to many on the international stage, with many of its principles and values increasingly informing the actions of other aid, diplomatic and even security actors. But by becoming many things to many people, its identity has become confused and contested.

Clear communications about the strengths and limitations of humanitarian values, principles and operating modes has been critical to the success of the humanitarian project, and will remain so.

- www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct
- www.ifrc.org/what/values/principles