There is a New Humanitarianism for a New Millennium

It is

Principled

Ethical

Human rights based

It will not stand neutral in the face of genocide or human rights abuses
It will assess the long term impact of each humanitarian intervention on development and peace
It will withhold aid if to deliver it could pro-long conflict and undermine human rights
It rejects the traditional humanitarian principle of neutrality as on the one had morally repugnant and on the other hand unachievable in the complex political emergencies of the post Cold war world

It is favoured by many prominent humanitarian actors amongst governments and NGOs and walk into many emergency departments today including that of CAFOD, ECHO, Christian Aid and ACTIONAID and you will find discussion papers proposing a new set of principles for their humanitarian action

Above all it is New and like New Labour here in the UK – it is a clear, conscious attempt to break from the past, from the traditional humanitarian principles that guided us for almost a century but which for many are now discredited

Many of the proponents of NH are completely open about the fact that it is more political

We all know that the humanitarian aid agency that won the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of the 20th century – MSF- is a very different animal form that which won it in at the start of the Century – The International Committee of the Red Cross

When MSF won the prize, Bernard Kouchner, one of their founder members, was open about the distinction. He said:

“MSF’s work was political from the start. I hope the prize marks the recognition of a type of humanitarian work which fights injustice and persecution”

So, the advocates of NH are not reluctant to admit that theirs is a fundamentally political project. In fact the fashion today is to present A-political, neutral humanitarianism as morally dubious – the kind of humanitarianism that turned a blind eye to the Nazi holocaust, fed genocidaires in Rwandan refugee camps and is known to say that women’s rights are nothing what-so-ever to do with humanitarian relief
So what makes up this NH? In my view there are two main aspects to NH – human rights and developmental relief. It is my contention that both these new elements are pushing humanitarian action into a more political role.

Let’s look at them briefly.

The Rights based approach that has been adopted by almost all NGOs in their long term development work, is now increasingly being adopted by emergency departments as well.

The rights based approach demands that all humanitarian aid be judged on how it contributes to the protection and promotion of human rights.

It is radically different from traditional principles of humanitarian relief – and is a move away from the universal right to relief based on human need. One agency that is debating the need to base their humanitarian actions on rights is Catholic Relief Services. Their discussion paper shows how going down this route will fundamentally change their work:

“When considered through the Justice/human rights lens, the mere provisions of food stuffs or medical support is an insufficient response to a humanitarian crisis.”

A highly significant aspect of the rights approach is that for the first time, it allows for the introduction of conditionally into the delivery of relief. This is spelled out in the ECHO discussion paper on this:

“From a rights perspective, access to victims of humanitarian crisis is not an end in itself, and will therefore not therefore be pursued at any cost. Access will be sought IF it is the most effective way to contribute to the human rights situation”

And indeed we have seen this in Afghanistan where aid has been withdrawn form victims of humanitarian crisis because of human rights concerns.

SECOND feature of NH is developmental relief – what I have called in my paper – goal orientated humanitarianism.

Since late 1980s agencies have started thinking beyond straight relief and started thinking about their interventions on the basis of how they can contribute to longer term sustainable development and peace.

The trend is partly a response to accusations that aid often fuels conflict and the “Do No Harm” school which has challenged agencies to ensure that humanitarian relief is not doing more harm than good.

In a major new study for the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, Peter Uvin concludes that goal orientated humanitarianism is becoming the dominant trend:
“There is clearly a broad trend towards an increased use of humanitarian assistance as part of a more comprehensive strategy to transform conflicts and decrease violence.”

It is certainly favoured by the UK Government. Clare Short, the International Development Secretary, in a major speech setting out the principles for a NH, said: “Many now want to go beyond private charity which simply alleviates the worst symptoms of crisis to search for and support a just regulation of the conflict.”

Like the Rights approach, developmental relief is also a move towards a more conditional aid. If a case can be made that relief aid would be manipulated in a way that would strengthen fighting forces or fuel conflict, aid can and should be withheld. Tess Kingham, MP and member of the International Development Committee clearly states her view that even humanitarian aid should be conditional on positive outcomes:

“Surely, taking a view of the wider good – for long term interest of the people – to actually achieve real stability and development that it may be better to withdraw aid”

I found a great summary of New and Old Humanit’n in the report of the International Development Select Committee on Conflict and Post Conflict Reconstruction. It was from Mikael Barfod, a senior official at ECHO – who may be here today. There’s no prizes for working out which one Mikael favours. Describing Old, traditional humanitariansim, he says:

“You don’t get mixed up with development and you don’t get mixed up with human rights – that is none of your business. You certainly don’t speak out because that is dangerous. The whole thing is action orientated and it’s morally self-justifying because when you provide humanitarian aid, you are doing something good”

NH, on the other hand,

“Here you would actually say, there is no way we can handle this situation without linking up with human rights issues, without linking up to development. To understand the real impact, we have to be part of the political process leading to peace. That is what we’re here for”

So NH is very, very persuasive. It offers what Hugo Slim has called a new “Moral Banner” for us all to walk behind. It offers the chance to shake off the uneasiness we all feel when we’re accused of criminal naivety, when all the evidence shows that the relief effort has been used to strengthen the war effort

And NH is not just a series of discussion papers – we have already seen it in practise – in Afghanistan where relief aid has been withdrawn because of the Taliban’s denial of women’s rights. In Great Lakes– where aid agencies publicly withdrew from the Rwandan refugee camps rather than feed genocidaires who may use aid to re- invade Rwanda

But if NH was all good we wouldn’t be having this conference today. The truth is that for many of us it is failing to provide the new moral banner we seek. Today is
chance to pause and look critically at NH before we bow to the significant moral pressure to adopt it.

As way of kicking off the day, I just want to briefly list a few good reasons to pause before embracing NH.

1. Are we really ready to turn our back on the universal right to relief aid in times of crisis that formed the basis of the humanitarian tradition. The conditional nature of NH has and will make it morally justifiable to leave human beings without aid for political reasons.

2. Abandoning neutrality, as NH seeks to do, will inevitably risk the loss of access to the victims of humanitarian crises. We cannot expect immunity or humanitarian space if we opt to speak out against one side – or indeed as some actors in this debate have suggested – show solidarity with the side we believe to be right.

3. Are we really capable of accurately predicting the long term impact of humanitarian aid interventions on the overall political situation? There was a massive consensus among aid agencies that the pre-requisite for a lasting peace in the Great Lakes was the closure of the Refugee camps in Eastern Zaire – In line with NH principles many of us did our bit to make that happen – but the camps did close –resulting in the loss of thousands of lives and the shameful involuntary repatriation of a million refugees – did it create peace? Far from it – two civil wars and untold suffering.

4. With NH we risk the creation of groups of what Oxfam’s Nick Stockton has termed “undeserving victims”. By withdrawing or withholding humanitarian aid from one group of people in need, we send the message to the world that these people are beyond the pale. The withdrawal of aid from Rwandan refugee camps seem to confirm the oft repeated charge that the Rwandan refugees were genocidaires who should be denied refugee status – hardly surprising then that the slaughter of thousands in 1996 and the involuntary repatriation passed without massive public outrage.

5. If humanitarian agencies start to do politics with aid, our calls for governments to separate aid from foreign policy start to lose all credibility.

6. There is a real danger than NH becomes the new form of colonialism – one where the western concept of human rights is considered morally superior and one where humanitarian aid is used as a way of transforming people and institutions in the third World in our own image.

So to conclude. I am not denying that all sides in conflicts have always sought to manipulate and gain political advantage form the use of humanitarian aid. But the commitment to traditional principles of neutrality and the universal right of people to relief in times of suffering have been some form of barrier to the politicisation of aid. NH for the first times sees agencies themselves in the forefront of promoting aid as a means of achieving wider political goals including human rights and peace.