

Humanitarian action victim of its own success

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Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

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The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits – as well as the subsequent dilemmas - of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

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The international aid regime tends to exaggerate changes over the last decade in the nature of so-called humanitarian crises. Neither violence perpetrated against civilian populations nor the dilemmas posed to aid organisations attempting to assist them have worsened since the end of the Cold War. It is doubtful that victims of Salvadoran death squads or Vietnamese survivors of napalm believe that conflicts of the 1990s were more barbarous than those they lived through, and the dilemmas posed to aid organisations in the Khmer Rouge controlled refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border, and by the Mengistu regime's use of humanitarian aid in its deportation policy in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s were equally, if not more, ethically challenging than those of the last ten years.

It is not as much the crises as the international response to them that has changed with the end of the Cold War. Not only has there been a proliferation in the number of actors intervening in crises – with their differing mandates and priorities - but the main field of intervention has shifted from refugee camps on the periphery of conflicts to the very heart of contested territories. Aid organisations have more access to populations at risk than ever before and more exposure to the dangers of war, hence they directly witness more atrocities and have sometimes become casualties themselves. This, together with the emergence of terms like 'complex emergency', has given the erroneous impression that contemporary contexts are more fraught with horror and difficulty than those of the past. Emphasising this 'new' complexity has also become a convenient excuse for the shortcomings and perverse effects of humanitarian action, deflecting responsibility from aid organisations to the context in which they operate.

In fact, the most significant evolution in the aid field over the past decade has been in the concept of humanitarian action itself: it has become a victim of its own success. Ironically, the greatest challenge to humanitarian action does not come from warlords misusing relief supplies but from the very sponsors and practitioners of so-called humanitarian assistance. The popularity and moral weight the term 'humanitarian' possesses, and the sense of omnipotence that has accompanied the expansion of an aid industry full of good intentions, has distorted and eroded the concept of humanitarian action to a point where it has lost sight of its original objectives.

Western governments have been the most obvious usurper of the humanitarian concept, in a variety of clearly discernible ways. First and most commonly, governments have deployed a 'humanitarian' response to crises of the last decade as a way of avoiding becoming embroiled in the politics of a country deemed beyond their national interests. As a highly visible yet low-risk response, the deployment of humanitarian assistance commends itself to politicians, mollifying the intense yet short-lived impulse of the general public to 'do something' in response to images of suffering. The most obvious example of this was during the Rwandan genocide, when no government was willing to send in the personnel and resources necessary to stop the slaughter, but deployed troops and assistance to the Rwandan refugee camps to combat the cholera and dysentery epidemics. Preferring to only address the 'humanitarian' aspects of the crisis, the soldiers did nothing to prevent the army and genocidal regime ensconcing themselves in the refugee camps, with devastating consequences for the refugee population. Similarly, Western governments dealt with the Bosnian conflict in a 'humanitarian' manner, deploying blue helmets to protect aid personnel and supplies while doing nothing to stop the slaughter of civilians in enclaves such as Srebrenica. Bosnian Muslims recognised the limits of humanitarian action better than most aid organisations did, declaring that the food aid and medicines only allowed them to die in good health.

Second, governments have on occasion invoked humanitarian concerns to do just the contrary: to provide moral justification to action which has clearly political intent. This is not new: in the 19th century humanitarian rationales were invoked in several military conquests, and as recently as the mid-1980s Ronald Reagan labelled US aid to the Nicaraguan contras 'humanitarian aid' to help it pass through Congress. There has, however, been an increase in this trend. Operation Provide Comfort in Northern Iraq in 1991 was proclaimed to be a triumph of humanitarian concern but in reality served to prevent the influx of millions of Kurds into Turkey to avoid destabilising this important US ally. More recently, NATO's intervention in Kosovo was presented as a 'humanitarian war' despite the oxymoron: it contradicts the fundamental rationale of humanitarian action to countenance killing in its name. Putting a stop to the Belgrade's oppression of the Kosovars was a worthy act, but an intensely political one that was equally motivated by a desire to see an end to Milosovic and to test NATO's new strategic framework. In order to be humanitarian, any action must be motivated first and foremost by concern for the welfare of victims, wherever and whoever they are. Most military interventions claiming humanitarian intent of the last decade, however, have been undertaken in countries of national interest to the intervening power: the Americans in Haiti, the French in Rwanda, the Russians in Georgia, the Australians in East Timor, and the Nigerians in Liberia. Moreover, a state is a political actor and as such can never claim the independent and impartial status so crucial to the concept of humanitarian action. Clearly state interventions, however commendable or regrettable in themselves, cannot be humanitarian.

Western governments have also sought to commandeer humanitarian notions in support of political actions pursued abroad. French NGOs were strongly encouraged to work in areas covered by Operation Turquoise in Rwanda in order to give the actions of the French troops a humanitarian flavour, and the US Government has openly called for American NGOs and their humanitarian activities to be part of the overall 'war on terrorism'. The US military food drops into Afghanistan last year were labelled 'humanitarian' despite being part of the military campaign to 'win the hearts and minds' of Afghan civilians, as if providing food alone was enough to qualify as a humanitarian gesture. The US, Japanese and South Korean governments similarly throw a humanitarian cloak around their donations of food aid to North Korea, evoking a moral obligation to help famine victims as a means to subdue domestic opposition to aiding an enemy state. In reality, however, the food aid has long been a tool of diplomatic persuasion with Pyongyang, aimed at securing political progress on a range of predominantly security-related issues. By definition, any aid given to induce political, religious or economic compliance is not humanitarian aid: the only compliance that should be sought with humanitarian aid is to conditions that will ensure that aid is given to those most in need. But refugees in China say that the food is not reaching those who need it and that people continue to suffer in spite of the largest UN food aid operation in history. Instead of assuming the political and diplomatic processes needed to deal with Pyongyang, donor governments use 'humanitarian aid' as a bargaining chip in a country beset by famine, and do nothing to ensure that the aid actually reaches the starving. This is surely the nadir of contemporary 'humanitarianism'.

But Western governments are not the only culprits in the distortion of the concept of humanitarian action: many aid agencies themselves are complicit in this masquerade. The principal problem from which many others stem is that the popularity of humanitarian action as a remedy for human suffering has created a veritable aid industry which increasingly responds to a market logic rather than a humanitarian logic. As the size of aid organisations have expanded so have their overhead costs, and decisions about where to intervene and who to assist are determined by the amount of government funds available: few aid agencies have sufficient private donors to be genuinely independent of government priorities. Hence massive disparities occur in the treatment of victims in, for example, Kosovo and Angola, despite the claims of universal concern espoused by aid agencies. The search for funding opportunities and overweening belief in the morality of their actions has also lead aid agencies to expand their activities beyond humanitarian concerns and into conflict resolution and peace-building activities, all the while professing to uphold humanitarian

principles. But, as the aid operation in North Korea clearly shows, peace-building and humanitarian action do not share the same principles or objectives, and pursuing one invariably requires sacrificing the other. In North Korea it is humanitarian action that is being sacrificed in the name of peace as aid agencies continue to operate in the country in spite of the wanton disrespect of all the minimum conditions for operation the aid organisations set for themselves. They are unable to assure that their aid goes to those most in need and refugees in China say it is not. Yet aid agencies remain in the country as a 'bridge to peace' with the outside world, in the hope that peace will eventually improve the humanitarian situation in the country. But whether or not their efforts will contribute to peace, North Koreans have continued to suffer while aid agencies collaborate with the regime and pretend that the aid operation has been a success.

The aid industry pretends that a great deal of progress has been made over the last decade in improving the technical efficiency, coordinated responses, and accountability of aid organisations to donors and to the people in whose name they intervene. But neither the technical provision of relief, nor perfect coordination or even signed adherence to humanitarian principles guarantees the humanitarian nature of assistance. This can only be done when aid organisations have the independence and lucidity to reflect upon the motivation, means and methods, and consequences of their actions to genuinely assure that their assistance is helping those most at risk of suffering and is not serving some other purpose. The aid industry needs to recognise that humanitarian action has limits and that there are other, equally worthy forms of action that are more appropriate to certain types of crisis. Military intervention was the only way to stop the Rwandan genocide so it was appropriate that humanitarians called for it rather than accept to be substitutes for the only action that could really help the victims. Humanitarian agencies could be a little more humble in what they believe they can achieve. Indeed, it is a sobering reminder that in spite of all the progress the aid industry thinks it has made over the last decade, Herbert Hoover managed to negotiate better humanitarian standards for food aid in negotiations with Vladimir Lenin during the 1921-22 Russian famine than the UN, Red Cross movement and NGOs are able to do in North Korea today. After difficult negotiations, the American Relief Association that Hoover headed managed to secure full freedom of movement for its aid workers and retained control of the food aid to ensure its impartial distribution. With such conditions assured, the ARA was able to establish 16,000 feeding stations which helped to feed ten million Russians for eleven months. Hoover recognised 80 years ago what aid organisations fail to see today: that unless aid organisations can act independently of political authorities and control, monitor and evaluate their aid, they risk seeing their aid benefiting the oppressors rather than the oppressed.