

Humanitarian Responsibility

Rony Brauman

2001

*Etats généraux de l'action et de droit humanitaire, Colloque organisé par le CICR, Paris,
27 et 28 novembre 2001.*

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.

The *Centre de reflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) was created by Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999. Its objective is to encourage debate and critical reflexion on the humanitarian practices of the association.

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.

Humanitarian Responsibility

Rony Brauman

Where does our responsibility lie, and what grounds do we base it on, when we take action in situations of violence that are the main theatre of humanitarian interventions? What are we accountable for as actors, as witnesses, as citizens, as human beings? It seems futile to look for consensus here because the answers inevitably refer back to the various images that humanitarian actors have constructed for the social and political roles of their movement. A response does exist though, a response that seems to arise by default: our duties should be largely restricted to the use of the most appropriate methods and skills; in short an obligation to deliver¹.

Actually, working towards the improvement of services and the establishment of measurable targets (distribute X tonnes of food to Y people in Z region, achieve 80% of vaccination cover X in Y region for the Z age group, efficiently install X water points and Y shelters etc.) is anything but self-evident. There is no doubt that motivation, and the volunteer's desire to improve a given situation, are the primary stimuli. However, as we too often see, this enthusiasm can be quickly and cheaply satisfied by purely 'symbolic' acts or a wordy and ultimately sterile activism. Also, market adjustments function differently in the aid world than in the 'trade' world. As the people who pay for our services are not those who receive them, it is only the capacity for communication of the different actors, and not the satisfaction of the 'recipient', which differentiates fundraising bodies from one-another. Therefore, pure economic rationality, if it exists, compels aid agencies to devote more attention to those who provide the money than to those who benefit from it. In other words, they are tempted to play on the field of communication and its benefits rather than the field of action and its imperatives. The situation is exacerbated by the humanitarian actor's status as a glorified social worker; he benefits from that positive prejudice of "better than nothing", thus enjoying a comfortable margin of indulgence.

The dominant conception of the humanitarian responsibility is largely expressed in a professional code of ethics and the normative obligations that logically form part of it. Our methods must be standardised as much as possible in an effort to enhance the objectivity of our assessment procedures, thus increasing our efficiency. This is nothing less than attempting to ensure that our actions match our declared intentions. We can only agree to this latter obligation, but it is important to stress that rather than being obvious, it actually arises from a conscious decision to act and that act is not just a natural extension of the commitment of each individual actor: it is itself conditioned by conflicting institutional interests. Although the problem of humanitarian responsibility arises as soon as the issue of means is considered, it is certainly not limited to that issue and it is on this very point that the consensus begins to crack. The value of the action must also be demonstrated by measuring its impact. But this requirement immediately introduces another question: what, precisely, are we measuring? And there's the rub: the obligation to deliver resources and skills are likely to become ends in themselves.

In North Korea for example, we have every reason to fear that all food aid is used to support the survival of the regime and its main supporters - army, civil service and police, the apparatus directly responsible for keeping Pyongyang's Big Brother in power. The fundamental paradox of humanitarian action, which William Shawcross defined as "fattening the torturers to feed the victims", has become an open contradiction in this country: we fatten its torturers to the exclusion of anyone else. The victims are supposed to benefit from the goodwill of the very regime that

¹ Cf 'The Sphere Project', www.sphereproject.org

plunged them into a famine so severe that, despite the vast resources deployed, its consequences still cannot be estimated. The testimony of the North Koreans who managed to cross the border into China is unequivocal: none of them received a single grain of rice through international aid. Some humanitarian organisations decided to withdraw from the country, wearied by long and fruitless attempts to penetrate the state's armour and reach the population. They were forced to admit their inability to escape the state's constant surveillance. Other organisations pretended to believe that the crisis was due to climatic disorders impacting on a "complex geopolitical context". They praised the smooth operation of this 'operation in solidarity' and appealed for greater efforts, to the great satisfaction of the country's most eminent torturers.

The North Korean brand of tyranny may be unique but its singularity only emphasises the inability of part of the international humanitarian movement to accept that, in certain circumstances, humanitarian action may be hijacked by those in power and become another tool of oppression. It should be noted that some of these charitable institutions are extremely enthusiastic about the development of standardised evaluation procedures, the "impact measures" referred to earlier. This is highly significant, for some organisations believe that they have assumed and fulfilled their responsibilities in North Korea by ensuring that their action is 'technically correct', an accomplishment that enables them to claim they have relieved the distress of famine victims. Other NGOs have highlighted the regime's complete hijacking of aid and the persistence of famine, claims supported by the refugees' testimony. As it happens, this radical disagreement owes nothing to obscure sectarian rivalries and still less to any ideological dispute over the nature of the Pyongyang regime. It transcends issues of technical norms and standards and stems entirely from a divergence over the assessment of the practical conditions for action. What exactly is meant by the creation of an "operational framework" when we cannot even move freely in the affected areas? How can we respect "the most fundamental conditions...so that we can keep alive the people afflicted by disaster" when the only contact with the local population is through official interpreters and government agents? What is meant by establishing "systems that make our staff accountable" when no information is available apart from that provided by the regime? This conception of humanitarian responsibility, totally detached from the hard realities (the political environment) and entirely centred on its own *modus operandi*, provides advance justification for the refusal to examine the practical consequences of an operation. This is where the essence of our responsibility comes into play: it takes precedence over the obligation of means, however important that may be.

North Korea aside, anyone who cares to take a dispassionate look at recent history will discover that the humanitarian movement has been directly involved in criminal policies on several occasions: Cambodia and Ethiopia during the 1980s, and Rwanda and Zaire-Congo in the 1990s, to cite but a few. This consent to a sacrificial logic has always been obscured by the invocation of "fundamental humanitarian principles". It is high time we realised that these principles can only mean something within a space of minimum freedom. In his preface to Amnesty International's book *Doctors and Torture - Collaboration or Resistance* (London, Bellew, 1991), Paul Ricoeur takes the example of a doctor who treats a victim of torture; the doctor does his best, calms the patient, stitches his wounds, sets him back on his feet. Once treated, the victim is taken back to the torture chamber. The doctor's attitude, Ricoeur argues, amounts to putting himself in the position of the torturer although, in strictly visual and phenomenological terms, he is simply acting out his role as a care professional. He is doing his job but he is deaf and blind to the environment in which he operates, and therefore to the meaning of his actions. His gestures may be technically informed and medically correct, but they dissociate him from an "ethic of solicitude" and place him in the position of servant of barbarity. Humanitarian teams can find themselves in similar situations. This is when it becomes essential for us to step back to ensure that our actions respond not to the imperative to act but to the goal of relieving suffering, because the latter is not an automatic consequence of the former.

Analysis of past humanitarian interventions reveals that, where the control of populations is vital to the interests of those holding political power (whether in the form of an official regime or an armed opposition), three conditions need to be met for truly independent action. Firstly, we must be free to engage in dialogue with the people we seek to assist, unimpeded by the obligatory and systematic presence of a representative of any power. This is a basic question of dignity; it establishes the difference between the servicing of ailing organisms and a human transaction, in other words between a zookeeper and a humanitarian volunteer. Secondly we must secure, as far as practical conditions allow, the right to move and assess needs freely. We realise that this may be restricted in a situation of conflict and insecurity, but it has to exist. Humanitarian actors cannot continue to accept its absence, as some have done in North Korea and other countries. It is essential if we are to avoid becoming a simple logistic auxiliary reduced to executing the choices made by local powers. The final condition is no less important: we must be allowed to monitor aid distribution and ensure that it does not simply contribute to the maintenance of existing power.

The conditions for a decent humanitarian operation are in place when we can ensure that the aid is reaching the area where it is most needed and when we can speak freely to people who can thus communicate their requirements, comments and criticisms. There is obviously no instrument that can measure the extent of this "humanitarian space" other than the judgment of humanitarian teams in the field. And we should not expect to be granted this space immediately. It is not a matter of freedoms granted but always of freedoms to be fought for and defended because they are contrary to the agenda of those in power. Assessment of a situation from these different perspectives allows us to resist the exploitation, indeed the dehumanization, of humanitarian action. Once we admit the possibility that humanitarian action may be used against the people it is meant to assist, we can accept the idea that in certain cases abstention may be preferable to action. By doing so we restore meaning to the concept of action, an intervention resulting from a carefully thought through decision rather than an automatic reflex. Our first responsibility is to establish, through peaceful pressure, an operational framework within which we can fully respond. Then and only then can the question of means and technical skills be properly addressed.