

Invited Paper: The Humanitarian Enterprise

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition that we face some difficulties in our understanding of the word "humanitarian." A related difficulty involves understanding what constitutes humanitarian behavior. The accepted understanding of the term was that it was descriptive of behavior somehow distinct from the norms of societal action in that the term described a selfless response to the world's crisis. As the heart of this understanding was the assumption that there was a clear acknowledgement of the individual needs of others.

I suggest that there are complications in our preferred view of humanitarianism. For example, there are organizations described as humanitarian by virtue of their mandates and activities. But comments abound on how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) compete with each other or are irresponsible in managing their performance. In other words, behavior normally expected in the world of business. On the other hand, we customarily bestow praise on in the actions of the individuals employed by NGOs. Implicit in the preferred view, is a tendency to assume a virtually seamless overlap between individual and organizations working in the field of humanitarian assistance. This overlap is based on an unsupported assumption.

To begin: a humanitarian, for the purposes of this paper, is a person acting to support others during a time of need generated by crisis. We assume that this assistance is provided in an independent manner with no element of self-interest. One question this raises, however, is under what circumstances impartial behavior becomes significant to the beneficiary as opposed to the provider of assistance and other interested parties. We will attempt to respond to that point later in this piece.

I define a humanitarian organization as a structure created to assist in the implementation and furtherance of humanitarian goals. Such an organization is guided by a mandate reflecting the motivation of the individuals it employs. Humanitarian organizations present a framework for community action in support of a generally accepted moral posture; a posture reflecting an image of selfless action guided by imperatives that are primarily normative as opposed to pragmatic.

Interestingly, and this seems counter-intuitive, my sense is that recognition of the difficulty referred to above, is shared more among those concerned with analyzing humanitarian action than among those directly concerned with providing it. Looking at the question of who is most concerned with an understanding of the term humanitarian is informative. It is worth noting that there is a considerable difference in the sense of the term when used by an individual actor as opposed to references to humanitarian action viewed within a political or institutional context.

Responding to a crisis represents a combination of motivation and behavior. Examining the linkage between the actions of the individual and those of the organizations begins to give us a better sense of the nature of the problem.

This paper is premised on a conclusion that those in need are less and less well-served as the scope of disasters increases and the nature of conflict resulting in conditions of individual need become increasingly complicated. Accepting this conclusion indicates that a serious rethinking of our long-standing assumptions on the basic elements required in the provision of humanitarian assistance is in order. Please note, however that we are not discussing efforts resulting from local initiatives. The reasons for this conclusion are presented below.

- The humanitarian enterprise is based on what is essentially an ad-hoc accumulation of presumed to be like-minded institutions. Elements of the system emerged in response to the need to “fill gaps,” as a model for improving the reach of humanitarian assistance through the process of identifying short falls in assistance.
- This approach has, over time, and, given this proliferation of organizations, specialized and otherwise, created patterns of response that are inconsistent with the needs of the situations it exists to address. A considerable amount of attention is, as a result, necessarily paid to questions of cooperation and coordination.
- There is the necessity to think in terms of a more global approach enabling greater cooperation with institutions such as the World Bank. This forces the reinforcing of functional separations between direct assistance and longer term-programs. Developing a coherent strategy to accomplish this requires a needs based and means-tested approach.

- Organizational and individual motivation are seen as essentially identical, with the attributes of one ascribed to the other. However, there is a demonstrable disconnect which has consequences for staffing, planning, and decision making. It also affects public impressions of the options available to organizations during response.
- The consequence of the intrusion of political, social, and cultural agendas is increasingly evident as is the growing impression that humanitarian organizations are essentially constructs of exclusively Western thinking. This view, in addition to complicating relations with local communities, authorities, and NGOs, also impacts individual working relationships.

THE EVENT AS A STARTING POINT

A disaster striking a community may be used as a starting point for analysis. This may seem like a simplistic approach, but thinking of this event in holistic terms is useful when considering the structure of today's humanitarian enterprise. It is quickly apparent that there are contradictions between this view and the operational procedures of most humanitarian organizations. Many organizations tend to develop specializations and therefore want to operate within a comfort zone created by frequent application of that specialization. Expand this behavioral pattern to a host of organizations responding to an emergency and the possibilities for an ineffective response are evident.

As things stand, planning and resourcing for a response are viewed through the lens of separate organizations. Yes, there are initiatives, such as the cluster approach, aimed at managing agency performance in a more organized manner. The subtext to operational reality is very much a function of institutional imperatives. Therefore, response frequently becomes a reflection of the acting out of individual organizational requirements with the added burden of attempting to impose coherency.

Today's system is wedded to a multi-institutional structure that has developed over time. Thinking in terms of a humanitarian response template composed of patterns reflecting the number of organizations, their mandates, specializations, donor bases, etc., it is difficult to see how the resulting template fits the holistic event. Our community, comprising many organizations, each with its own mandate, procedures, support base, and history still functions in an episodic manner in the face of requirements for cooperation and coordination.

A further assumption is that humanitarian action, in the strictest sense, is essentially defined by individual motivations such as a sense of what is right and simple empathy. Organizations undertake an obligation to facilitate the work of the individual, but essential institutional obligations, such as satisfying donors whose view of things may be politically motivated, can greatly influence their ability to provide impartial support. A humanitarian act reflects individual behavior. If, for example, one considers empathy to be a critical element in any description of humanitarian behavior, it is difficult to relate that feeling to organizational behavior.

This presumption that there is an automatic carryover of the individual ethos to organizations employing them completes our ability to evaluate what may be and has been

done as part of the response. Organization support humanitarian work to the extent their options (financial or political, for example) allow them to. This point is important. Couple this observation with the previous comment on the ad-hoc manner in which the humanitarian system emerged, and it is arguable that these represent built-in fault lines that serve to diminish the possibilities for effective understanding of organizational roles during responses. In addition, the frequently unacknowledged break-downs in communication between field workers and headquarters, with both sides working from differing premises also impacts a coherent response to the event.

In the face of these ambiguities the importance of leadership becomes unfortunately evident. It is primarily through effective leadership that the humanitarian enterprise functions at credible levels.

FINAL COMMENTS

Headlines describing the needs of the victims are often closely followed by reporting deploring the lack of coordination. The lesson learned (over and over) is that the solution resides in developing effective coordination mechanisms and obtaining buy-in to their implementation. While following this approach has succeeded on the ground, it is usually in an episodic manner, and often as the result of individual initiatives. It has proved very difficult to institutionalize coordination structures that function in a predictable and effective manner. Clearly there are limitations on the extent to which organizations will reduce their profile as this has implications for their dealings with their constituencies, the press, and their donor base.

If we, therefore, assume that the system is not likely to reshape itself overnight, it is obvious that it is imperative to expand the options available for the sharing of information and facilitating serious discussion on resource allocation and the development of cooperative modes of operations. Longer-term approaches will turn upon the extent to which a combination of the greater volume of need stemming from the impact of disasters striking on a larger scale, and humanitarian organization leadership supported by enlightened donors can begin to influence, in a fundamental manner, the nature of humanitarian action.

In the meantime, and again, this is where leadership at the headquarters level is critical, groups of organizations (clusters, if you will), need to begin working on response strategies and putting them in place before taking independent action. This posture should be extended to all aspects of operations including training and reporting. Absent moving in this or a similar direction, we will continue to be less than consistently effective in utilizing the potential of the humanitarian enterprise.