



Politicizing Humanitarian Action According to Need

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Every profession struggles with a number of key words that are both central and yet ambiguous within its wider purpose. And every profession has a ghost which seems to haunt it wherever it goes - an unresolved issue that can never quite be laid to rest.

Politics is such a word and such a ghost for humanitarians. We have a love-hate relationship with politics. We regard politics as a Madonna when it is creating an international criminal court or banning landmines. But then we despise it as a whore when it bombs Serbia, fails to invade Darfur or pursues its own national interests. We adore the clean paper of international treaties but abhor the dirty business of actually doing politics with its state selfishness, hard choices and inevitable compromises.

Humanitarians must seem a contrary bunch to politicians and government folk. We know we want humanitarian action to be at the heart of politics and yet, at the same time, we don't want humanitarian action to be political. We castigate politicians for politicizing aid in some places and then shout at them for not being political enough in others.

We long to be free of politics and simply be humanitarians. Some of us even dream of a special humanitarian space where we can be left to get on with our job in peace amidst a war. Yet we know that it is political power which both starts and stops the suffering of war. And we know that it is political power - our own or that of others - which lets us work or not.

I want to do two things today:

First, I want to have a little meditation on politics and needs. In so doing, I want to out the fact that many humanitarian needs are really political needs that require political response. Thus, I want to affirm the apparent paradox that the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative

is **politicizing humanitarian action according to need**. This is not the contradiction it sounds. Politicizing a public good is something to celebrate.

Secondly, I want to encourage everyone in this room to do **three big things** in the year ahead: meet people's physiological needs; be honest about how you can meet people's safety needs, and respect donor governments' own legitimate political needs and limits.

The Myth of Humanitarian Needs

As we confess our muddle over politics, we find consolation in the creed given to us by the greatest of our Swiss ideologues, Jean Pictet. In his doctrine of impartiality and needs, Pictet seems to have secured for us a trusty vessel with which to stay afloat above that thing which we both want and fear in equal measure - politics.

In the idea of needs as our second fundamental principle, humanitarians feel we have found a way of keeping politics at bay. The doctrine of needs allows us to explain to others that we are not political but only concerned with suffering itself. Simultaneously, it also enables us to make demands on politicians in an apparently apolitical way "according to needs" and not according to political vision, parties, ideologies or favoured groups. It means we can call constantly for political action without being political.

Like most good doctrine, the idea of needs finds a rather mystical way of resolving a paradox. The doctrine is not perhaps as simple as humanitarians like to pretend. To make it simple requires an element of myth, and a good spoonful of humanitarian faith is needed to help swallow this principle. **The myth, of course, is that needs are not political.**

We get round the profoundly political nature of needs by saying instead that needs are basic, fundamental and just deeply human. Our humanitarian belief is - quite simply - that needs pre-exist politics and that meeting them should thus transcend particular political priorities and policies.

This is why we like to use the phrase “humanitarian needs” when we speak of what we want for people so as to give these needs a transcendent quality that puts hunger, shelter, safety and health above politics. We all think that civilians should not be made to suffer and that people should always be free to live a life of dignity, even in war. We believe that these needs are somehow supra-political or apolitical.

Like all good myth, there is truth in this but not necessarily fact. Human needs do pre-exist politics. And one can even become suitably passionate about this idea until, of course, you are displaced, widowed and hungry yourself in a place like Darfur, northern Uganda or Iraq. Then, you know that your deprivation is politically made and that, if they are to be met, your needs will have to be politically realised somehow. It becomes obvious then that your needs are deeply political.

Your various general needs may pre-exist this war and be a defining part of your very human-ness but your specific needs are shaped by and dependent on the politics of your current situation. This is when you also need politicians - good ones - to help meet your needs. And this is when humanitarians need politicians too - to supply aid, to respect humanitarian law and to generate political solutions.

This is what is so exciting about the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative. It is an alliance that explicitly and seriously recognises that suffering civilians need good politicians and that humanitarian agencies need good politicians too.

Quite rightly, the GHD acknowledges that humanitarian action is a profoundly political project. The GHD asks that humanitarian action be deeply politicised but politicised according to need not national interest. It wants governments to be actively and powerfully humanitarian. This stands firmly in the tradition of Jean Pictet and the whole Geneva humanitarian project. Political needs require politicised humanitarian action in the best sense.

I share this desire to politicise humanitarian action according to need and just want to use the remaining few minutes I have to prioritise three key aspects of needs-based donorship.

Physiological Needs

One cannot talk of a philosophy of human needs without paying homage to the great Jewish American psychologist and thinker - Abraham Maslow - much quoted in development literature but not mentioned much as yet in the humanitarian discussion of needs.

Born in Brooklyn in 1908, the eldest of seven children of poor Russian immigrants whose father was a barrel maker, Maslow drew on his own experience and his observations of others to devise his famous hierarchy of human needs. Maslow categorised human needs into five sets of needs - physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem and self-actualisation needs - and developed the theory of needs gratification into a wider philosophy of the good life.¹

Humanitarian action at its most basic is concerned with the physiological needs. These are needs which have what Maslow calls a specific “somatic locale”. But when such physical needs completely grip a person they affect much more than that locale (the stomach or the mouth) and dominate the whole horizon of that person - often rendering them incapable of meeting or even desiring higher human needs. In the grip of hunger, they are thus profoundly compromised as human beings. They are “hungry all over”, as Maslow puts it.

The traditional paradigm of humanitarian assistance uses a deficit-replacement approach to focus on needs like hunger, thirst, health and shelter and tries to fill the gap with relief commodities co-ordinated through a needs assessment system like the CAP.² This “gap-cap” model drives the current IASC Assessment Framework and most NGO humanitarian models too.

The principle of focusing on people’s physiological needs is enormously important. This is how millions of people suffer and die in war and disaster. These are the needs that are often paramount

¹ For the best selection of Maslow’s writings on this subject see Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 3rd Edition, revised by Robert Frager et al, Longman, 1987.

² This approach is well explored by James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hofmann, *According to Need? Needs Assessment and Decision-Making in the Humanitarian Sector*, HPG Report 15, ODI, September 2003, London.

and totally preoccupying. Unmet physiological needs kill people in large quantities while often also preventing them from even beginning to meet their higher needs.

We all know this. But we also know that physiological aid is given inequitably across the world's emergencies and that needs assessment remains unsystematic and the subject of donor scepticism.³ This challenge around physiological needs must be met by the GHD. Assessment must be refined and agreed. Political masters must be argued with and convinced to ensure that core budgets of your governments are insulated and protected for physiological needs.

This is the first big thing you can really continue to concentrate on in the year ahead. The world will be a better place if all of you in this room and all of your staff around the world continue to work on meeting the physiological challenge. And every time it seems difficult or is in danger of becoming overly-complicated in the way that international initiatives tend to do, just stop and quietly imagine what it is like to watch your children die of hunger and disease in a war you did not want, do not particularly understand and are in no position to stop. Such moments of compassion will surely keep you motivated.

Safety Needs

Maslow's second set of needs are around safety or what humanitarians are now calling protection needs. Here humanitarian action is now catching up with Maslow as it recognises that people's primary need in war is often for safety.

In situations like northern Uganda, people may have access to food and shelter but may still be incredibly vulnerable to attack, abduction, rape and selective male massacre. Here, people's physical needs are met but their safety needs are not. In other situations like Darfur, people have become hungry, thirsty and ill because they were so unsafe they fled as a result - so giving up their access to food, health, shelter and water. In other words, their safety needs were so

³ This is made clear in Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, *The Charity of Nations: Humanitarian Action in a Calculating World*, Kumarian, 2004 and also in Darcy and Hofmann op cit.

threatened that they traded their physical needs for their safety needs.

In situations like these where safety needs are unmet, a new paradigm of humanitarian action is emerging but is still very unclear. This paradigm is not based on a deficit-replacement model that uses commodities to satisfy physiological needs but on a threat-protection model that is not sure what to use to satisfy people's safety needs.⁴ If only we humanitarians could simply deliver protection items, but we cannot.

Here is the second big thing that we can all do - governments and humanitarians alike. We can begin to specify precisely how safety needs can actually be met. This requires a bit of honesty on all sides. First it requires a bit of humanitarian myth-busting and secondly a bit of political truth-telling.

The humanitarian myth-busting requires an admission that people's safety needs are hard core political needs not to be dressed up or dumbed down as humanitarian needs. It means realising that talking good humanitarian donorship around safety needs will mean talking about hard political instruments of state power rather than soft political instruments of state welfare. It is more likely to involve a conversation about supplying soldiers with guns than nurses with blankets.

At the moment, acceptable public discussion of protection strategy amongst humanitarian agencies is strangely self-censored. At a programming level, discussion of protection is confined mainly to the latrine issue - how to site latrines in a way that protects IDP women from harassment and rape. At the international political level, it is compressed into platitudinous calls on governments for more of that apparently magic potion called political will. But carefully sited latrines and undirected political will are never going to protect people on their own. Real policy choices around hard political instruments will have to be made - by politicians.

⁴ See Darcy and Hofmann op cit. p6 "The humanitarian protection agenda is not susceptible to the commodity-based approach that tends to characterise humanitarian assistance".

If safe latrines and unspecified political will really are the limits of what humanitarians feel it is politically appropriate to talk about when discussing people's safety needs then they should admit it and say they have no comment on hard political strategies for protection. If, on the other hand, they are prepared to talk specifically about hard instruments like police, military monitors, force and specific agenda items for political negotiations then they must be prepared to bring their community-based experience to the table to inform international policy making around civilian protection.

This, of course, mean politicising the subject matter of war by giving political content to people's needs and designing specific political and military strategies to meet them.

Donor Government Needs

Finally, if agencies are prepared to lift the humanitarian veil from people's needs in war and to recognise them as political needs with political solutions, then the governments and politicians that many of you represent must reciprocate by a bit of truth-telling of your own.

Governments will better donors when they are honest about the political choices they face and the limits of what they are prepared to do to protect people in countries that are not their own. Interestingly, perhaps, governments can be most honest when they also use the idea of needs - their own needs and the needs of their citizens.

Donor governments have needs which are legitimate but different to humanitarian concerns. The people represented by your 25 governments have important domestic needs of their own and your governments have responsibilities to meet these needs by protecting their citizens, their armed forces and by pursuing a foreign policy that is in their interests as well as in the wider international public good.

Humanitarians have the luxury of being a single issue moral community with no responsibility for state level decision-making. Politicians and governments have no such luxury but have to choose, prioritise and combine a wide range of political, social and economic needs and interests. This is legitimate - especially if they are

representative governments. But such domestic responsibilities are bound to lead to a clash of needs and to an inevitable inconsistency of response around the world - particularly on the more challenging political question of protection needs where risks of political confrontation run high around the use of hard power instruments like diplomatic pressure and armies.

Being a good protection donor requires clarification of donor needs. Where are domestic government needs likely to clash with the safety needs of foreign civilians? What hard political instruments and resources can be reasonably expected from your donor governments? What are the likely financial trade-offs between investment in hard military protection instruments and soft physiological commodities? Can core physiological budgets for food and health around the world be assured when protection instruments are increased in one or more priority countries?

All this adds up to the larger strategic question: how far can protection be given according to need or will it usually be driven largely by a preference to protect political allies or undermine political enemies? Being a good protection donor means being transparent about your government's needs and limits. This will allow maximum humanitarian energy to be put into working with what governments can do rather than into endlessly asking for what they cannot do.

Conclusion

The 23 principles of the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative are a lot even by humanitarian standards! In the year ahead, it may make sense to focus your energies on a few big things. As I have suggested, these might be:

- Continue to make real progress on **assessing and meeting people's physiological needs equitably** around the world.
- **Work out what makes people safe** - which political instruments really protect people and what makes a good protection donor.
- **Be frank with one another about the legitimate needs of donor governments** and their own limits in the face of political risk.

Concentrating on these three things might make a real contribution to what I see as GHD's overall goal of politicising humanitarian action according to need.

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