

Are NGO Agendas Dictated By Western Assumptions?

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LAUREN DURAND, SEP 26 2012

NGOs, despite their altruistic motives, have always been imperialistic to a certain extent. Since the creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863, humanitarian aid has been guided by the principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality (ICRC 2011). The Cold War tempered with those principles because donor countries were more inclined to provide development assistance to their allies. Nonetheless, immediate relief was always provided regardless of the foreign policies of great powers (Fox 2002). The end of the Cold War caused a radical change by politicising humanitarianism and creating neo-humanitarianism, a supposedly enhanced form of assistance better adapted to “new wars” (Weiss 2007). This essay will argue that new humanitarianism has worsened the imperialistic character of NGOs. This essay does not seek to doubt the noble intentions of NGOs and their activists but it questions the gaps between aims and outcomes created by the inappropriate strategies employed by Western states. First, I will argue that universality, one of the core principles of humanitarianism is challenged by a new human-rights based approach which has hierarchised victims into deserving and underserving. Furthermore, new humanitarianism rejects neutrality and urges NGOs to seek the moral high ground. Finally, the excessive economic and political dependency produced by new humanitarianism makes NGOs the tool of Western imperialism.

During the Cold War, the main goal of NGOs was to provide immediate relief to all populations in conflict zones without discrimination. Aid was prioritised in terms of needs. After the fall of the Soviet Bloc, humanitarianism took a turn: the principle of universality preached by the ICRC was replaced by a human rights-based approach (Fox 2002). In their efforts to impose a Western idea of a civilised society, donor countries created conditional aid (De Torrente 2004). Relief aid became a means to achieve political westernisation by selecting the populations worthy enough of help. This politicisation of NGOs is questioned because it assumed they are morally superior and capable of deciding who deserves help and who does not. Donor countries only award help to states willing to abide by the rules they set. Conditionality does not correspond to the needs of developing states. In most cases, the implementation of democracy prevails over the rights to safety, food or water. Sierra Leone was the victim of conditional aid when Western states withdrew their support with the intention of starving out the autocratic regime in power. Instead, the biggest toll was taken by the population when famine broke out (De Torrente 2004). The refusal of assistance acts as a sanction and aims at encouraging states to respect “universal” principles such as market liberalisation or democratisation that will promote their development and growth (Sujay 2009). New humanitarianism is oblivious to cultural relativism and the notion that Western structures may not be adapted to developing states is not even considered. This proves that former colonisers have not learned their lessons and still try to impose unadapted measures on societies different from their own. Conditional aid shifts the accountability of NGOs from the developing state and its population to the donor state.

Furthermore, conditional aid is a violation of international law. Indeed, the fourth Geneva Convention on the protection of civilian persons in time of war explicitly establishes the duty of states to provide humanitarian assistance to population “without any adverse distinction based, in particular, on race, nationality, religion or political opinion” (ICRC 1949). Moreover, the refusal to provide aid directly violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by denying people the “right to life” and the right to “food, clothing, housing and medical care” (UN 1948). By giving up universality, NGOs are ignoring their *raison d'être*: international humanitarian law.

Bernard Kouchner, founder of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), a classic neo humanitarian structure, was the first to claim the inefficiency and limitations of humanitarianism due to its refusal to engage politically (Rieffer-Flanagan

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2009). He asserted the ICRC was an accomplice of crimes against humanity for helping undeserving parties in a conflict and refusing to denunciate violations of human rights (Chandler 2001). Aid agencies were criticised after the Rwandan genocide when they delivered aid to a million refugees in Zaire in 1996. Most of those refugees were the “genocidaires” themselves who could now reorganise and finish what they had started (Storey 2010). Moreover, NGOs relied on local Hutu elites to manage refugee camps since they were thought to already possess the leadership skills. The downside was that those elites could take advantage of their power positions and use aid as leverage to impose their political views on refugees (Belloni 2007). NGO officials justified their actions by stating that since no one else was willing to feed these people, they were the ones who had to do it (Storey 2010). The critiques of their action implied that NGOs were expected to take a moral stance and only help the deserving victims of conflicts instead of providing aid without discrimination. Universality is no longer a capstone of humanitarianism and thus NGOs are starting to be considered as instruments of the Western world.

Along with universalism, impartiality of NGOs is also challenged. New humanitarianism advocates for an engagement in long term action that would create peace and end conflicts (Chandler 2001). Humanitarian relief is turning into goal oriented development aid. “Denunciation” and “right to intervention” replaced neutrality and impartiality as the guiding principles of humanitarianism (Chandler 2001). By invoking a responsibility to protect, Western governments justify their interventions in sovereign states. NGOs considerably trespass their mandate and appropriate the role of peacekeepers and diplomats which they cannot legitimately hold. The violation of national sovereignty was acceptable when it was for relief purposes but the altruistic imposition of structural changes resembles colonialist behaviour. Rieffer Flanagan argues that neutrality was anyway never really present in humanitarianism because if NGOs decided to provide aid to both parties or to neither of them, it automatically benefited the stronger party (2009). NGOs are therefore encouraged to take sides in conflicts if morality requires them to since there is always unintended consequences anyway.

This goal oriented humanitarianism, by seeking long term solutions, neglects the short term and essential objective of relief: saving lives (Fox 2002). Whereas before the Cold War, governments were able to distinguish between humanitarian relief and development aid, they now seem to have merged into one. Because NGOs try to engage in peacebuilding operations, they adopt a policy of “do no harm” which dictates that in case their actions might cause future problems, they should not act (Chandler 2001). NGOs are therefore compelled to make prophetic assumptions on the evolution of complex emergencies that are unravelling as a result of a myriad of uncontrollable and unpredictable factors. Belloni argues that this reckless behaviour only prolongs war and misery (2007).

Human rights based humanitarianism is designed to address the root causes of the conflict and create sustainable peace. Instead, it simply creates a sentiment of resentment towards donor countries. As a result, conditional aid can be a threat to the safety of NGO personnel (Fox 2002). Being the sole vehicle of funds, they gain power beyond their capacity. Seen as the agents of imperialism, humanitarian workers are targeted by anti-Western movements and parties of the conflict. The ICRC learned this lesson the hard way in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) when four of its personnel were killed as the result of their decision to take aid away from the most powerful faction in order to reallocate it to its more needy opponent (Mills 2005). While this was a politically neutral decision, it was seen by the disgruntled warring party as favouritism. As a result of those casualties, the ICRC withdrew from DRC and neither group benefitted from assistance. The lack of safety of personnel in the field therefore limits their ability to distribute aid since they are not be able to access certain zones. New humanitarianism, in addition to exacerbating the divide between North and South, seems to have decreased the possibilities of aid agencies.

Finally, NGOs are by their nature and structure inherently prone to imperialism. NGOs are know as the third sector but over the years, they have slowly merged into both the first sector, the state, and the second sector, the market. The omnipresence of NGOs in developing countries has created an economic and political dependency in those states and may end up harming the local leadership. Humanitarian aid has therefore become institutionalised as part of the state and is no longer considered external intervention (Hearn 2007).

NGOS are characterised by hierarchies and multi-billion dollar budget that make them appear as transnational corporations rather than members of the civil society (Petras 1999). Those self appointed altruists depend almost completely on contributions from donors such as foreign countries, international organisations or individuals who

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“invest” in developing states. NGOs are forced to act as profit making businesses in order to survive (Sujay 2009). They must engage in publicity as if they were advertising poverty. The media is the largest medium of fundraising. They tell the story of the poor African victims being oppressed by their corrupted governments and being saved by the wonderful NGOs (Chandler 2001). Journalists engaged in “pornography suffering” (Chandler 2001) to create awareness among the public and induce them into sending donations. Those deceptive methods participate in creating a patronising image of African states as incapable children needing to be rescued.

Moreover, the “membership” system of NGOs has delegated a small portion of power to uninformed foreigners reading about issues on the internet and persuading themselves they are acting for the greater good (Petras 1999). NGOs impose their will and the one of Western states and thus ignore local values. For example, MSF was faced with an ethical dilemma in Somalia when they were unable to amputate a number of people suffering from severe infections because the people in question only wanted to live if they could do so with their bodies whole (Bell and Carens 2004). MSF felt their mission was being threatened because they were unable to carry their mandate but the point of view of the Somalis was essential and needed to be respected. Imposing measures in that case would have been cultural imperialism.

As well as being increasingly integrated into the neo-liberal market system, NGOs are also politicised. Despite their appellation of “non governmental” organisations, they are not only exceedingly dependent on foreign governments, but are also starting to act as such themselves (Hearn 2007; Petras 1999; Shivji 2007). This is due to their heavy reliance on donor countries who dictate their behaviours and policies. As a result, funds are directed according to donor countries’ geopolitical interests (De Torrente 2004). In case of excessive violence, the reaction of the international community and therefore NGOs is usually mediocre as show the example of the DRC were little is being done to improve the situation. Belloni argues that the will to intervene militarily and provide aid is directly proportional with the geographical proximity of the threat (2007). This is why developed states gave five times more aid to Kosovo in 1999 than they gave to Sudan. NGOs are therefore bound by the ambitions of donor states. This absence of transparency endangers their legitimacy.

Governments are also dependent on NGOs because they use them to uphold their international reputations and image of good Samaritan (Sujay 2009). However, this does not mean that NGOs are free to act as they please. Because they are guided by the will of Western states, they are to follow political agendas. Fletcher argues that NGOs simply act as “transmission belts” for foreign policies and ideologies to replace local structures, knowledge and hierarchies (2003). Humanitarian agencies are even being accused of replacing existing political elites by taking over their responsibilities (Storey 2010: 385). Donor states do not admit to this imperialism and designate this relationship as a partnership for development (Shivji 2007). To build up their legitimacy, donor states are increasingly trying to “indigenise” (Hearn 2007) NGOs by creating local branches. From 1988 and 1996, the number of local NGOs tripled in Kenya in an attempt of the West to fade its obvious presence (Hearn 2007). Nonetheless, those new NGOs are still very much controlled thus this reform of top down humanitarianism is simply an illusion.

The recent reforms of humanitarianism and NGOs have led them to become the tool of imperialist donor nations who have caused them to renounce their core values. The rejection of neutrality and universality to the profit of denunciation and intervention was, according to Kouchner, the first step towards efficiency. However, this has only highlighted the already existing sentiment that Westerners think they are morally superior and deem themselves capable of making decisions that will determine the future of whole nations. The politicisation of NGOs has been widely questioned. Indeed, their increasing reliance on donor states’ ideologies has disrupted their actions and pulled them away from their original purpose: immediate relief. The legitimacy of NGOs is being questioned as they take on the roles of interim governments, development agencies or peacekeepers. The deepening and widening has caused humanitarianism to be associated with imperialism as NGOs take on duties they are not qualified to assume.

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