

# The Role of Independent Volunteers in Humanitarian Crises

Written by Izabela Pereira Watts

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Much has been said about volunteers and humanitarian responses. With more than 60 million refugees worldwide (UNOCHA, 2015, UNHCR, 2015), independent volunteers are the buffer that fulfils the urgent needs left by incapable and ineffective failed States and International Organizations. With the spiralling rise in the outbreak of humanitarian crises worldwide, there is a permanent call for volunteers. Therefore, one must inquire: what is the role of independent volunteers in humanitarian crises? Where States fail to avoid crises and protect their citizens, volunteers are important actors in peacekeeping that fill the gap in addressing the constantly evolving set of challenges that occur within failing states. Peacekeeping, with its complex web of interests, challenges, competing objectives and actors, owes much to volunteers as the main agents in affecting positive change to the otherwise unchangeable. Volunteers have long been the vital interface between peacekeeping and affecting real change on the ground.

Many indicators might be either subjective or difficult to accurately assess for how effective the role of helpers in humanitarian *situs* is in actuality. International humanitarian assistance has developed considerably since its birth in the 19th century with the creation of the International Red Cross. Within a global governance paradigm, Liberal Institutionalists have emphasized the benefit that international institutions can bring to a disordered framework of sovereign states. Measuring the collective and individual impact of volunteers following man-made disasters such as war, or natural disasters, is a methodologically complex endeavour.

World Refugee Day, observed June 20 each year, is dedicated to raising awareness of the situation of refugees throughout the world. Beyond word choices between 'refugee' or 'migrant' (UNHCR, 2015) what matters is that humanitarianism in itself is in crisis. Yet, the problem remains much more complex and so colossal that it seems unsolvable. Constant new dilemmas must be addressed. The issue can be addressed in a broad spectrum of ways. In order to delineate the influence of volunteers in humanitarian crises, it is necessary to review the fundamental and guiding principles of humanitarian law and to contrast them with the reality of the calamity on the ground. The role of independent volunteers in humanitarian crises will be analysed firstly regarding the hero syndrome and the unlikely hero result. Secondly, the importance of the principle of humanitarian law and its challenges for independent volunteers will also be examined. In this article, independent volunteers are associated with non-state actors such as NGOs and INGOs, as well as with the private sector. The major humanitarian non-governmental system includes the Red Cross organizations, Church-related agencies, medical and educational volunteers as well as U.N. volunteers and worldwide corporations such as Save the Children, Oxfam, and Amnesty International.

### The Hero Syndrome versus Feelings of Frustration and Futility (FFF)

At the international level, there is an intersection between collective responsibility, community and human security. As an example, the notion of crimes against humanity is one expression of the adoption of human rights as measures of human dignity and how international organizations can support democratization and peace (Poast and Urpelainen, 2015). Regardless of how far away the conflict is, or the different personal point of view that one may have, the image of a Syrian refugee baby drowned on a Mediterranean beach or the classic picture of an Ethiopian baby deceased from hunger and about to be eaten by a vulture have a *moral* call. It is immoral to watch human atrocities and be

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apathetic, indifferent and inactive. This morality is the pillar of the political humanitarian principle of the responsibility to protect (R2P). The human existence takes precedence to sovereignty and other constraints of international law as well as to the balance of power from the realist viewpoint of international relations.

Volunteers are often given two opposing labels. They are seen as good souls, quite naïve and at the same time very brave. They can also be tagged as part of the conflict, by creating more mess or harm, often driven by financial motivations for their own personal business endeavors. The fact is: frequently, independent volunteers are those moved by this moral impetus of solidarity to do “something, somehow, for someone”. This is the *hero syndrome* of the “doers” that picture themselves as warriors without weapons (Junod, 1951) forgetting that it might be necessary to ‘shake hands with the devil’ as in the classic failure of Rwanda (Dallaire, 2005).

Those who have been in the humanitarian field very well know that sooner than expected, notwithstanding the amount of enthusiasm, the FFF will invade their psyche and take priority of thoughts as in a cause-and-effect dynamic: *Feelings of Frustration and Futility*. Among the refugees and conflict disasters political feuds and fake NGOs co-exist alongside often politicised rhetoric. However, volunteers do humanitarian work that International Aid Organizations are not doing (Greig, 2015). Furthermore, there is an appealing motto of “have fun and Save the World” that traps rogue volunteers into a more realistic image of international humanitarian tourists (Borland and Adams, 2013). Individuals working within foreign aid agencies might discover that fraud, greed, corruption, apathy, and political agendas permeate the industry in response not only to disasters but political agendas and economic opportunity (Schwartz, 2008).

The role of independent volunteers in humanitarian crises is precisely to assist in the transformation of the reality by being the interface between the main agents as well as reaching the unreachable and most needed in a timely manner. As warriors, volunteers are in battle on the frontline. However, they have a different *leit motiv* and mindset than soldiers or freedom fighters. Psychologically, they experience the indescribable and their lives are at risk. Volunteers face a psychosomatic impasse between the Hero Syndrome versus FFF.

## Humanitarian Principles and Its Challenges

Non-governmental organizations and their volunteers have proven to be a necessary governmental and intergovernmental operational partners, providing material, medical and moral relief as well as care wherever it may be needed. However, International humanitarian assistance comprises a complex network of government agencies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, and individual volunteers that resembles a ‘non-system’ (Beigbeder, 1991). In Haiti, after the earthquake in 2010, it was estimated that 10,000 NGOs were acting in the ground (Peace, 2010). Inevitably, it is impossible to coordinate, monitor and evaluate their activities especially within a failed State. Suspicions of corruption have triggered foreign donors to detour the Haitian government and channel financial and material assistance through NGOs. Subsequently, making Haiti a “Republic of NGOs” as some organizations were “cashing-in” and causing more harm than helping or rebuilding. NGO’s and INGO’s projects often have more money than the entire Haitian Government. Among other consequences, the Haitian government has little chance to develop the human or institutional capacity to deliver services. Similar circumstances can be found in other cyclical humanitarian places such as South Sudan, Congo and Iraq and other fragile states (Brock et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding humanitarian crises as well as the crisis of humanitarianism industry in itself, there are rights and duties that should be obeyed by independent volunteers in emergency responses while “preventing and alleviating human suffering wherever it may be found, protecting life and health and ensuring respect for the human being” (ICRC, 1965). There is a controversial claim of a ‘right’ to receive and a ‘duty’ to provide humanitarian assistance beyond borders, as well as the possible need for a status to be accorded to international volunteers (Beigbeder, 1991) For example, should humanitarian non-governmental organizations provide relief assistance with discretion, neutrality and impartiality or should they denounce publicly human rights violations, at the risk of being expelled from recipient countries and having to stop their assistance? Ethical dilemmas are a constant feature of humanitarian operations.

Where good intentions and imperial project designs intertwine, it is not enough to be a “Doer”. The role of

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independent volunteers in humanitarian responses should follow the four principles of humanitarian action. First, humanity: the purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings. Second, impartiality: humanitarian action must be carried out without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. Third, neutrality: peacemakers should not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature. Fourth, independence: autonomy from the political, economic, and military is fundamental although actions are subject to the local laws. The humanitarian principles have practical operational relevance, including to ensure safety to humanitarian personnel as well as sustained access to affected people (OCHA, 2012). The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (ICRC, 1965) also consider voluntary service, unity and universality as principles as it understands that voluntary relief movement it is not based on financial gain, there should be one representative for better coordination and equal status as well as shared equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other worldwide.

More than the responsibility to protect, there is also the responsibility while protecting (RwP) (Ferris, 2011, SIPRI, 2012, Almeida, 2013). All the humanitarian principles are fundamental to guarantee the role of independent volunteers. However, the main value remains the one of “do no harm”. Good intentions are not enough. In humanitarian responses the main challenges are to react to time, continuity, costs, selectiveness, and accountability. The time is now. From emergency to development, it requires continuity. It is always easier to start, hard to maintain, and strategically challenging to leave. It is impossible to do all in the four corners of the earth. There is a practical need for selectiveness that clashes with ethical questions: how to determine the neediest victims of crises? In the politics of protection and the limitations of humanitarian relief, hard choices must be made when saving lives (Moore, 1998, Damrosch, 2000, Kaldor, 2001). Additionally, someone has to pay the free lunch. The economic impact of violence to the global economy reached \$13.6 trillion in 2015, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms (IEP, 2016).

It is important to mention that private business also plays a fundamental role in the humanitarian industry to move from relief towards development. Private companies have the budget and rapid mechanisms to create jobs, infrastructure and opportunities that emerge in the aftermath of the crisis and on the path towards peace and prosperity.

## Conclusion

Much can be said around the rhetoric involving humanitarian workers. The truth is: independent volunteers do play an important role in humanitarian crises by helping to fulfill the needs which States and other sovereign Institutions cannot provide. However, there is no such thing as “true independence” when the reality on the ground is feelings of frustration and futility in a multi-billion dollar industry. The humanitarian industry is shaped by covert interests, lack of accountability and ineffective coordination. The goodness of volunteer service should not be an unquestionable dogma, beyond been paid or unpaid. Ethics and citizen-diplomacy are strictly related to humanitarian volunteerism. The notion of good works as civic responsibility is politically acquiescent rather than transformational. Historically, volunteers have been also used by some governments as hidden agents in the conflict.

The role of independent volunteers in humanitarian crises is precisely to assist in the transformation of the reality by being the interface between the main agents, and being able to reach the unreachable and most needed promptly. It is methodologically complex to determine the impacts that are individually and collectively made by volunteers. The role and statutes of international humanitarian volunteers and organizations is limited by rights and duties in order to avoid turning volunteers into tourists as well as national States, and to prevent turning failed states into “Pseudo-Republics of civil society anarchy”.

On the 51st anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, it is a good opportunity to revisit the contemporary relevance of the role of independent volunteers in a world with constant humanitarian emergencies. Independent volunteers must not overtake or diminish the role of the State, but to contribute to its progress. Beyond not doing any harm and the need to respect the humanitarian principles and moral values, the role of independent volunteers can only be safeguarded if the principles of the R2P are as germane as the responsibility *while* protecting. Yet, the problem remains much more complex and so colossal that it seems unsolvable. In peace studies, conflicts that cannot be solved are categorised

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as conflict management and sometimes, conflict transformation. That is what we can hope for. Legal and political conundrums might differ, and criticisms on transparency, effectiveness and accountability persist. Nevertheless, and while humanitarianism is in crisis, the moral answer to the role of independent volunteers in humanitarian responses is: every life counts.

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**Izabela Pereira Watts** has been nominated in 2013 “Top 99 Young Professional World Leaders in Foreign Policy under 33” by the global Affairs Magazine, Diplomatic Courier (USA). With a large professional experience in democratic governance, political affairs and international cooperation, she is a lecturer and PhD candidate researcher on International Relations and Political Science at Charles Darwin University (Australia). She holds a Master’s degree in International Affairs, Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution (Argentina) and Master’s degree in Economics and Political Sciences and undergraduate degree in International Affairs (Brazil). She has experience in Asia, Latin America, Africa and Europe. She has worked with several International Organizations such UN (DPKO-UNMIT), UNDP, UN Women, Organization of American States, as well as with the private and public sectors as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil. Her expertise includes the fields of international cooperation, elections, humanitarian affairs, political affairs, governance & public policies, strategic analysis in the areas of socioeconomic development and gender in conflict zones. She is also a former Columnist for electronic journals of international analysis with many publications and international awards.