

# How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

Written by Anahita Bordoloi

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ANAHITA BORDOLOI, AUG 18 2020

The debate surrounding traditional, or 'old', humanitarianism and 'new' humanitarianism is still very much relevant today as it is yet to be decided which has the more effective tenets for humanitarian organizations and agencies to abide by. As the preeminent proponent of traditional humanitarianism, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defines humanitarian assistance as "the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those in immediate need because of conflict and natural disasters," (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 5). However, a new perspective on the role of humanitarianism has gained popularity since the late 1960s, following the Biafran War, which is dedicated to tackling the structural causes of poverty and suffering (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 82).

'New' humanitarianism revolves around the agenda of protecting human rights and is associated with the provision of sustainable aid, as opposed to only relief, in the form of reconstruction and peacebuilding (Abiew, 2012: 204). Thus, many newly-formed organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and other like-minded pre-existing ones insisted that humanitarianism should go beyond the parameters defined by 'old' humanitarianism "in the conviction that aid had to become more political and break free of its original neutral principles if it was to become effective and morally coherent," (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 112-113).

This leads one to question how important neutrality is in providing humanitarian assistance. In order to answer this question, it is first important to discuss what being 'neutral' connotes. 'Neutrality' is a highly contested concept, comparable to the likes of 'power' and 'democracy' (Rieffer-Flanagan 2009: 892). Simply put, "to be neutral means not to favor either side, and not to care who wins and loses," (Seybolt 1996). More specifically in the context of conflict, neutrality is the principle of abstention from any action that may further the interests of either party to a conflict (Weller, 1997: 443). The ICRC perceives neutrality to be essential as "in order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature," (Plattner, 1996: 168). Neutrality is often mistaken to be the same as impartiality, but impartiality implies a positive duty to take equal action towards both parties of a conflict whereas neutrality implies negative limitations to not take actions which could be perceived as favouring one party over the other (Forsythe, 2005: 175).

This essay will argue that the importance of neutrality in humanitarian assistance is dependent on the goal desired, whether that is short-term relief or long-term peacebuilding. Furthermore, this essay argues that neutrality is a key means, not an end, for the provision of humanitarian assistance because while long-term peacebuilding is desirable in theory, it is highly problematic to execute in practice. Firstly, this essay will discuss the advantages of maintaining neutrality in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Next, the shortcomings of maintaining neutrality will be outlined. Lastly, this essay will conclude by highlighting how despite the difficulties of doing so, humanitarian actors can and should still strive to remain neutral.

### Neutrality as Key to Humanitarianism

Despite the rise of 'new' humanitarianism, neutrality is still perceived by many to be a key principle in the provision of humanitarian assistance. While numerous humanitarian actors argue for the maintenance of neutrality, the following

# How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

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discussion will be looking mostly at the ICRC as it is known to be the leading proponent of neutrality in the humanitarian sector. Neutrality is one of the ICRC's core principles (the others are: humanity, impartiality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality) which it strictly abides by as they allow for the better provision of relief (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 3).

Firstly, maintaining neutrality allows for the creation of "humanitarian space", which is a safe space for both humanitarian workers and victims in need of aid (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 4). As defined by Seybolt, "humanitarian space takes the form of agreed upon norms between belligerents and aid organizations – such as a recognition that aid should go to the civilian victims of war, that populations under the control of all sides are eligible for help, and that aid personnel and supplies should receive safe passage," (Seybolt, 1996). If humanitarian aid workers are viewed to be agents of outside powers instead of as truly neutral, local warring parties are quick to kidnap and kill them, thus putting aid workers in the way of harm (Abiew, 2012: 204). The creation of humanitarian space gives the ICRC greater access during a conflict situation. As Rieffer-Flanagan summarizes, "the ICRC defends the principle of neutrality by the access it gains to vulnerable individuals," (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 895) as maintaining the trust of both sides of a conflict is key to reaching as many victims of conflict as possible (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 895).

Secondly, the ICRC upholds the principle of neutrality as it epitomizes the values of humanitarian universalism (Abiew, 2012: 205). Neutrality affirms the rights of all people to life and liberty, regardless of "race, creed or nationality," (Seybolt, 1996). Thus, in order to assist those in need without discriminating based on where they live or their political and religious interests, the ICRC believes it is of great importance to refrain from choosing sides during a conflict or taking any sort of political stance (Abiew, 2012: 205). Thirdly, aligning with particular state interests and partisan agendas takes away from the goal of humanitarian aid agencies in conflict settings (Barnett, 2005: 724). Fundamentally, the ICRC is motivated by the concern to care for victims of crisis situations, whereas national governments that also provide aid are primarily motivated by national or partisan agendas (Forsythe, 2005: 173). Furthermore, taking a political stance also hinders the creation of humanitarian space for aid workers to provide assistance to as many people in need as possible (Barnett, 2005: 724).

It is important to note that this does not mean the ICRC and similar organizations do not recognize that humanitarianism was created because of politics and that their actions do have political consequences (Barnett, 2005: 724). Instead, these humanitarian actors try to create a neutral space within the politics of humanitarianism (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 890), aptly described by Forsythe as "the politics of being non-political," (Forsythe, 2005: 181). The ICRC resists being drawn into power politics by carefully constructing policies which help improve the lives of victims in need in ways which account for the power politics of all parties involved (Forsythe, 2005: 181). It is also important to note that the ICRC has always considered neutrality as a means of carrying out its mandate to help victims of conflict as opposed to an end in itself (Plattner, 1996: 169). Successfully maintaining neutrality is something the ICRC has learnt from its past experiences. As Rieffer-Flanagan summarizes, "whether it was dealing with Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, various communist countries during the Cold War, or warlords in the 1990s, the ICRC has had to walk a fine line in defending its humanitarian principles while maintaining the confidence of all," (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 890). Further in-depth examples of the ICRC's ability to provide much-needed humanitarian assistance through the upholding of neutrality will be discussed later in the essay. Therefore, neutrality is very important in the provision of humanitarian assistance as it provides humanitarian actors, such as the ICRC, with the humanitarian space needed to provide relief to as many victims of crisis as possible without discrimination, whilst also allowing aid workers to carry out their duties safely and to the best of their abilities.

## The Rise of 'New' Humanitarianism – Neutrality as an Outdated Concept

However, the principle of neutrality has increasingly come under attack with the rise of 'new' humanitarianism. While many scholars and humanitarian actors still recognized the importance of neutrality, they argue that it was only applicable given the geopolitical context of the international order in the past, "in which the only type of conflict was the classic inter-state conflict, with a clear separation of military and civilians, of relief and development assistance, and in which the sovereignty of a state was inviolable," (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 80). However, recent international politics is increasingly characterized by intra-state conflict and crises with political causes, also known as complex emergencies (Seybolt, 1996). As Seybolt argues, complex emergencies "are not earthquakes or volcanic eruptions,

# How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

Written by Anahita Bordoloi

but rather, often intentionally created, violent situations where at least two sides seek incompatible ends. Any significant action on the ground by an outside party in a highly charged political environment will affect the political outcome, even if humanitarian," (Seybolt, 1996). Thus, it is argued that the only actors that can be truly neutral during a complex emergency are those who are completely uninvolved (Seybolt, 1996) and so, "when players deliver food and medicine equally to all sides before the conflict ends, they do not have zero effect on the political outcome," (Seybolt, 1996).

Additionally, the changing nature of conflict in the international order has led to the assertion that neutrality should be rejected, and humanitarian NGOs should take embrace a more expansive, politicized approach as new conflicts are characterized by the violations of human rights (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 90). As Chandler states, "the strongest critique of needs-based humanitarian action is from the human rights movement itself, which argues that responding to crises by sending humanitarian relief is merely an excuse to avoid more vigorous responses," (Chandler, 2001: 699). Even those who believe that humanitarian action and the promotion of human rights are not truly reconcilable share the view that to follow 'old' humanitarianism's way is to not do enough (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 112). Thus, neutrality has become a "dirty word" in humanitarianism (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 87) and the ICRC's insistence on maintaining neutrality when working with victims of human rights abuses is seen as being "complicit with murderers" and reinforcing "a murderous status quo" (Barnett and Weiss, 2008: 37).

The belief that humanitarian aid cannot be apolitical, especially given the violation of human rights in complex emergencies, led to the expansion of humanitarianism's agenda as it was realized that grave human rights abuses could not be stopped solely with the provision of humanitarian relief (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 113). At the same time, Western states came to be much more involved in humanitarian operations, especially as aid donors (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 112). As Gordon and Donini summarize, "the new humanitarianism – the alignment of humanitarian assistance more or less closely with Western liberal peace agendas – offered an extremely attractive vision of a potentially transformative approach able to address the structural conditions that endangered populations," (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 87). Even though the basic rule that humanitarian actors should not take sides in a conflict vaguely remains, the principle of neutrality has lost its validity among NGOs and aid workers as it is deemed more important to cooperate with political and government actors and to form a common strategy with them (Schloms, 2003: 47). The rise of 'new' humanitarianism is seen as beneficial to all humanitarian actors as humanitarian NGOs are able to expand their agendas to provide long-term assistance in the upholding of human rights as well as gain more funding to do so, while donor governments are able to stop conflicts from turning into perpetual emergencies and also close the gap between relief and development (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 90). As Rieff summarizes, "the realities of the field and the new agendas of donor governments had made such a transformation inescapable," (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 112).

Thus, organizations such as the ICRC are heavily criticized. Given the rise of new practices and interests due to 'new' humanitarianism, the ICRC has had difficulty showing that its decision to remain neutral is rooted in legitimate concerns of wanting to maintain discretion and confidentiality and thus, access to as many victims of conflict as possible (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 96). The ICRC is argued to be lacking "the ability to explain its position in a way that provides ethical credibility in the arena of public morality," (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 96). Another criticism against humanitarian aid agencies who choose to uphold neutrality in their practices is that neutrality is used to hide their "lack of accountability, needs assessment and other formalized operational procedures," (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 91). Therefore, the rise of 'new' humanitarianism has deemed neutrality as unimportant, and in fact a hindrance, to the provision of humanitarian assistance as the focus of humanitarianism has shifted towards the provision of long-term, human rights-based assistance which requires allying with partisan interests and donor governments' agendas, thus effectively politicizing the work done by humanitarian aid organizations.

## Why a Return to Neutrality is Desirable

Even though the agenda of 'new' humanitarianism turns away from neutrality as a way to tackle the new forms of conflict in the current international order, it is important to question, "even if there is progress and evolution in international affairs, is humanitarianism the appropriate instrument to further those developments?" (Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, 2002: 305). In response to the claim that 'old' humanitarianism's adherence to

## How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

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neutrality does not solve the underlying structural problems causing conflict, it can be argued that humanitarianism is best suited to provide immediate relief to save lives (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 121). In fact, the intended purpose of humanitarianism is to provide relief and save the lives of those in crisis situations, and not to address the underlying causes of these crises (Barnett, 2005: 724). It can be argued that 'old' humanitarianism already plays a large enough role in the international order. As Barnett highlights, "all international orders have winners and losers and thus require their quota of victims. Humanitarianism interrupts this selection process by saving lives, thus reducing the number of sacrifices. However, it does not aspire to alter that order; that is the job of politics," (Barnett, 2005: 724).

Additionally, the lessons of previous complex emergencies have shown politicizing humanitarian assistance can in fact be detrimental to the provision of relief. Partnering with states has ultimately harmed the work of humanitarian aid organizations much more than just undermining their neutrality (Barnett, 2005: 724). Firstly, even proponents of a human rights-based humanitarian approach are wary of closely working with Western governments as in many cases it provides them with the "appearance of doing something in the face of a tragedy while providing an alibi to avoid making a riskier political or military commitment that could address the roots of a crisis," (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 108). As Gordon and Donini argue, increasing the importance of political considerations in the decision-making of humanitarian actors increases the potential for the humanitarian system as a whole to be manipulated towards the pursuit of the political goals of Western donor governments as opposed to the pursuit of humanitarian goals (Gordon and Donini, 2015: 108). Thus, while it is true that most complex emergencies occur due to human rights abuses, it is important to question "whether it is wise or realistic for NGOs to rely on the possibility of a world order that would make intervention possible in situations other than those involving a great power's self-interest," (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 118).

The coercion of humanitarianism by Western governments to pursue their own political interests can be best seen in the case of Afghanistan. Aid agencies and the UN pleaded for the help of Western governments throughout the 1990s, arguing that it was one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters, and yet the UN only received around 50 percent of the monetary aid it had requested (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 118). However, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US and its allies made huge financial commitments to provide relief and development in Afghanistan as the country now became a national security concern for the US (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 118). Another example is of the US insisting on coordinating humanitarian action during the NATO invasion in Kosovo (Barnett, 2005: 731). As Barnett outlines, "although they [the US] justified their role on the grounds that it would improve the relief effort, they had more self-interested reasons: in order to sell the war at home, the combatants wanted the favorable publicity that came with being televised delivering food to, and building shelters for, displaced populations," (Barnett, 2005: 731). In some cases, donor governments have even made transparent threats to humanitarian aid agencies. For example, in 2003, USAID administrator Andrew Natsios explicitly told humanitarian organizations in Iraq that they were obliged to show the American flag for having accepted US funding, and if they refused then they would be replaced (Barnett, 2005: 731).

In addition to the use of humanitarianism as a cover for furthering the interests of Western governments, the politicization of humanitarian aid has also led to the undermining of other basic humanitarian principles as aid agencies were funded by and worked in line with the agendas of governments, which were combatants in conflicts themselves, in places such as Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq (Barnett, 2005: 724). This in turn impairs the work done by humanitarian organizations on the ground. For example, a survey conducted in Iraq between 2006 and 2007 shows that US-based NGOs were not trusted by locals as their neutrality, impartiality, independence and genuine desire to provide humanitarian assistance was threatened by their connection to the US government and the blurring of military, political, commercial and humanitarian roles (Abiew, 2012: 209). The research team concluded that "some aid organizations [that remained in Iraq] are seen by others to have become instruments in the "global war on terror" by embedding with controversial military forces, confirming for some the perception that the humanitarian community had been wholly compromised," (Abiew, 2012: 209).

Furthermore, while the context in which the humanitarian sector operates is political, this does not mean that humanitarian action itself has to be political as well (Abiew, 2012: 212). By forgoing their key principles and politicizing their work, humanitarian aid organizations essentially create a new group of "undeserving victims", which

# How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

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in turn leads some scholars to question whether there is anything about 'new' humanitarianism which is truly humanitarian (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 115). 'New' humanitarianism's agenda of taking political stances implies that "aid may be selectively allocated to certain groups or victims, or withheld from others, depending on their political usefulness, instead of being allocated according to, and proportionate to, needs alone," (Abiew, 2012: 208). In addition, the integration of humanitarianism and politics has also been the reason for attacks on aid workers as warring parties associate them with Western political and military agendas, which in turn has affected their ability to deliver relief and assistance to those who need it most (Abiew, 2012: 208).

Lastly, scholars have argued that incorporating humanitarian work into the framework of long-term peacebuilding diminishes humanitarian organizations' ability to provide relief in conflict areas (Abiew, 2012: 208). Schloms argues that humanitarianism is unable to play a meaningful role in peacebuilding processes in crises characterized by social disruption, rampant insecurity and collapsed statehood (Schloms, 2003: 53). This is because empirical studies have shown that aid can only play a role in strengthening political structures and peacebuilding if functional state institutions already exist. Thus, "a functioning political regime positively influences aid, not vice versa," (Schloms, 2003: 53). Therefore, although the human rights-based and long-term peacebuilding agenda of 'new' humanitarianism is desirable in theory, it does not translate in practice, and in fact restrains humanitarian aid agencies from fulfilling their humanitarian purpose and undermines their delivery of relief. As Chandler summarizes, "where humanitarian aid started out as an expression of empathy with common humanity, it has been transformed through the discourse of human rights into a lever for strategic aims drawn up and acted upon by external agencies," (Chandler, 2001: 700).

## Conclusion – Humanitarianism Need Not Be Political

This essay agrees with the argument that complex emergencies usually emerge from human rights abuses and that "humanitarian action cannot put a stop to armed conflicts and so is limited in its objectives," (Plattner, 1996: 162). Therefore, humanitarian agencies taking part in Western military interventions is only justified in the gravest of situations, such as against genocide, as in the case of Bosnia (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 120). However, collaboration with military agendas is not desirable as a norm of humanitarianism, as Rieff asserts, "to argue for military intervention on political grounds –to believe that it would have been right for the United States to side with a Bosnian state based on citizenship and multiethnicity against a Serb nationalism based on blood, or to finally finish off Milosevic in Kosovo – is not the same as to promote military intervention on humanitarian grounds," (Rieff, "Humanitarianism in Crisis," 2002: 120). This essay also agrees with the fact that humanitarian aid organizations face numerous difficulties in maintaining neutrality given the emergence of new intra-state conflicts with political causes.

Nevertheless, to reiterate, "while the context in which humanitarianism operates may be political, humanitarian action need not be political," (Abiew, 2012: 212). Instead, while neutrality is difficult to adhere to, it should be treated as the means to help provide aid to as many victims of conflict, and as quickly, as possible. Thus, ICRC neutrality is not impossible or outdated, instead the ICRC just needs to "carefully craft its policy decisions to remain and appear as neutral as possible," as per the crises which denote the current international order (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 915). Neutral humanitarianism cannot be achieved automatically and needs to be carefully constructed (Forsythe, 2005: 181) and this can only be possible "when applied by capable personnel, acting within proper organizational structures, and supported by adequate resources," (Forsythe, 2005: 200).

Furthermore, humanitarian aid agencies need to plan in advance to minimize the effects of some of the disadvantages of maintain neutrality, which can be done without violating the principle of neutrality (Seybolt, 1996). In fact, in response to the argument that humanitarian assistance cannot remain apolitical to provide long-term assistance, the ICRC has shown that it is in fact possible to remain neutral and undertake long-term socialization successfully. For example, the ICRC has been actively working in Israel and the Palestinian territories for over five decades (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 913). Despite the Western connection of the ICRC, its work has been widely accepted by Palestinians (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 913). Moreover, despite working with Palestinians held in Israeli jails, the Israelis have also accepted the work done by the organization, which can be attributed largely to the ICRC's ability to portray itself as a neutral organization (Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 913). Thus, neutrality is important in the

# How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

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provision of humanitarian assistance as it “provides a laudable standard to which humanitarian actors should aspire,” in order to provide relief to those in need as effectively as possible (Seybolt, 1996).

Therefore, this essay has demonstrated that the importance of neutrality in the provision of humanitarian assistance depends on which camp of humanitarianism one agrees with, ‘old’ humanitarianism, which supports the delivery of short-term relief, or ‘new’ humanitarianism, which supports the expansion of humanitarian actors’ role to address the structural causes of conflict. This essay has argued that while ‘new’ humanitarianism attempts to resolve conflicts with a human rights-based agenda and by partaking in long-term peacebuilding and development processes, this approach in fact limits the success of the work undertaken by humanitarian aid organizations and workers. Instead, this essay argues for a return to ‘old’ humanitarianism’s adherence to neutrality – not as an end goal, but as a means to provide relief to as many victims of conflict, without discrimination, and as efficiently as possible. As Rieff encapsulates, “it is not simply a question of a retreat from neutrality, but still more importantly of retreat from the universal right to relief based on human need,” (Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*, 2002: 315).

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## How Important is Neutrality in Providing Humanitarian Assistance?

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