1.6. Humanitarian aid: charity, ideology, and deceit
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Introduction

"Humanitarian: adjective that confirms the poor opinion that most of the planet's inhabitants have of the human race. This is not the dictionary definition, at least not yet, but given the rate that we are going it will be soon"[1]. Nowadays, as everything bears the title "humanitarian", both problems and solutions, anyone who works in the humanitarian sector with a critical spirit and the knowledge of how limited their actions are must be involved in the exhausting debate on its high expectations and its thorny contradictions. Although the adjective "humanitarian" is today used to describe activities and scenarios that are anything but that, diverting attention from the political causes behind the emergencies, very few concepts are as incantatory as humanitarianism.

This idea stems from the absolute moral which states a person in need must be helped simply because it is the right thing to do: an expression of the dignity and value of each individual. It entails providing assistance and protection to populations threatened by natural crises or human rights violations. The end of the Cold War introduced the idea of an international political system that could forestall wars through a complex system of negotiations, mediation between warring parties and comprehensive peace enforcement. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many believed that a prodigious mix of free market and democracy would turn the world into a peaceful consortium of modern, civil nations in which both geographical and human barriers would be knocked down so as to turn "all friends and enemies into "competitors"[2].

Pacification, a war-free society, is but a pious hope. Wars take up increasing front-page space alongside the natural calamities often caused by human action. Humanitarian interventionism burst onto the scene in order to ensure collective security, like some sophisticated geopolitical weapon. The manner in which humanitarian crises are addressed tends towards a standard institutionalized formula, which is regarded suspiciously by governments and peoples in developing countries, and involves specialized organizations and agencies, as well as severely conditioned media coverage. The current approach to humanitarian aid was drawn up in France at the end of the eighties[3]; it was integrated into UN policy as part of Boutros Ghali's An Agenda for Peace, in the optimistic presumption that the international community could manage the resolution of conflicts or even lay the foundations for a "new world order". As this is nowadays a concept shared by the majority of our global society, a sort of creed of collective values that justify and give

rise to certain interventions and behaviours, the current approach to humanitarian aid has been considered as "humanitarian ideology"[4]. It is based on four types of concepts and principles:

1. the moral principle of "doing good" (charity, solidarity, pity and compassion);
2. the legal principle of observing international law, as laid down by the Geneva Conventions;
3. the political concept of the duty/right to intervene in order to prevent massacres and to safeguard the civilian population;
4. the economic and social concept of development aid; many consider humanitarian aid to be an integral part of this.

The year 1999 marked a turning point and wiped away any residual presumption of innocence. Three events, which were anything but independent, brought humanitarian aid face-to-face with the ambiguities of its success. In March 1999, NATO commenced its bombardment of Kosovo, with President Clinton christening this war a "humanitarian mission". A few weeks from the end of this humanitarian war, Bernard Kouchner, a paladin of *sans frontièrisme* (no borderism) and father of the duty/right to intervene, was appointed special UN representative in Kosovo. In autumn, Norway's Nobel Committee decided to award the Peace prize to *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), justifying its decision on account of its support for the organization's independent and impartial, rapid and effective action, as well as its ability to mobilize public opinion against abuses of power in the name of politically committed humanitarianism. It is difficult to imagine a more provocative series of events. Although for some the appointment of Bernard Kouchner as UN proconsul in Pristina was a victory for intervention in defence of innocent victims, a good part of the humanitarian community recognized the perverse implication of his appointment, which had come to symbolize humanitarianism's definitive loss of autonomy from government interference[5].

Within this sequence of events and the cultural welding between the right to intervene and humanitarian war, awarding the Nobel Peace prize to MSF on one hand entailed risks of legitimation, and on the other highlighted the crisis faced by humanitarianism in a bitter paradox. Jean-Christophe Rufin, the French doctor in charge of *Action contre la Faim* (ACF) and ex vice-president of MSF, described it as "the sense of malaise and languor", and "the sadness and the strange feeling of failure"[6].

A short history lesson

Although humanitarianism is universal and timeless, it has also been coded for conflicts with the regulations and principles of so-called International Humanitarian Law by the 1949 Geneva Conventions and by two additional protocols in 1977. This body of legislation is a tacit compromise between the political and military needs that degenerate tragically into armed conflict and the human conscience, the humanitarian imperative. The role of safeguarding these regulations was entrusted to the International Red Cross, the independent guardian of all humanitarian prin-

ciples: the principles of humanity (saving human lives and alleviating suffering); impartiality (intervening only on the basis of need without discrimination); neutrality (not taking a position on who is right or wrong among the contenders); and independence (keeping humanitarian objectives free from political, economic and military ones)[7]. How far these principles are actually put into practice is the subject of heated debate. As mentioned above, humanitarian legislation is an explicit compromise: given that war is inevitable despite pledges by the international community in the United Nations' statute, it should at least follow common rules that mitigate its inhumanity. This was the birth of the odious oxymoron "ethics of war".

The prototype humanitarian organization was the Red Cross, which was founded in Geneva in 1863 by Henri Dunant, after his dramatic experience at the Battle of Solferino. Founded as an independent, neutral organisation, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross rapidly branched into national committees, which in 1919 became the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent; however, National Red Cross committees often followed armies and thus were anything but neutral. The ICRC was excessively neutral, however, when it did not intervene in the Holocaust, despite being aware of what was happening in Nazi concentration camps from 1942. This complicity in the name of sovereignty was repeated during the Biafran war in 1967. During the course of this war, Bernard Kouchner and a team of French doctors decided to break away from the CICR because they disagreed with its approach. In 1971 they set up MSF, the model for the modern humanitarian aid organization. In the wake of the anti-authoritarianism at the end of the 1960s, restless humanitarianism, unaccommodating and interventionist, took the upper hand[8].

Shortly after the Great War, Save the Children (STC) was founded in the United Kingdom to help Austrian and German children who risked starvation. During the Second World War a group of progressive intellectuals from Oxford founded the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, better known as Oxfam, to help Greek civilians being starved by the Nazi invasion. After the war, the UN set up its humanitarian aid agencies: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the United States, the major Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) for humanitarian aid are often run by religious groups: the American Friends Service Committee was founded by Quakers in 1917; Catholic Relief Services by Catholics in 1943; and World Vision International by evangelical groups in 1950 to assist the victims of the Korean War. Other US NGOs are lay: the International Rescue Committee, which was founded on lobbying by Albert Einstein to assist opponents of Hitler and to evacuate Jews from occupied France; and the Cooperative for American Remittances in Europe (CARE), which was founded after the Second World War and then renamed Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, one of the largest humanitarian aid multinationals with branches in eleven high-income countries. In France, Bernard Kouchner, who was worried by humanitarian aid's excessive independence from politics, left MSF and founded *Médecins du Monde* (MDM) in 1979; in the same year, ACF was founded on input from intellectuals such as Bernard-Henry Levy. In Italy, Gino Strada founded Emergency in

1994; but Italy's humanitarian aid is also run by religious organizations such as *Caritas* and government organizations such as *Protezione Civile*. This is not the only example of a government organization as many governments have humanitarian aid offices, often embedded within their development agencies. The world's biggest financer of humanitarian aid was founded by the European Union in 1992 and is known as the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO).

Historically, wars are clearly the greatest producers of humanitarian aid organizations. During the Second World War, however, and even less so during the Battle of Solferino, there was no CNN. It is especially since the advent of world media networks that humanitarian crises have burst into our homes. The great famines of Ethiopia and other countries of the Sahel in the last decades of the twentieth century are no longer local tragedies; they have almost become a global event (who could forget the Live Aid concerts?). We watched a live broadcast of Marines arriving in Somalia, who immediately had to speak to journalists to explain their mission. The two Gulf wars opened with pictures of streaks of light that ploughed the skies of Baghdad. The Balkan wars marked the 1990s. There gradually emerged a negative correlation between the international political and media profile of a crisis and the ability of the international community to act in respect of the principles of international humanitarian laws. In the meantime, television broadcast everything. We almost witnessed the tsunami itself, a freak wave that crashed into our screens alongside the advertisements. Catastrophes and business are contradictory only on the surface. Even humanitarian aid has become a business to some extent; all major agencies and humanitarian organizations have a marketing office seeking new shares of the donations market. Nowadays we can even make donations sitting comfortably in front of the television: a text message is convenient and anonymous, just like the victims of wars and natural catastrophes. As in every self-respecting business, there's no shortage of sponsors because consumers appreciate a humanitarian touch on a detergent or a computer operating system[9].

In recent years, and especially since September 11 2001, the perception of "human security" has changed within the international community. This concept combines peace and development in a new metacultural framework, one that also covers the issue of "health security"[10]. On the basis of this criteria, the world's regions are divided into arenas of intervention for world powers; there are regions considered breeding grounds for terrorism, such as the Middle East; others where the main aim is stability; others are considered of scarce strategic interest, such as Sub-Saharan Africa. This reclassification of the world chessboard shifts debate from the relief and development continuum (i.e. the transition from emergency to long-term development aid) to the link between aid and security. Aid is increasingly viewed as a tool in the fight against terrorism and for the promotion of international security.

Scale

In 2003, Official Development Assistance (ODA) from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries who were members

of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) stood at about 69 billion dollars (642 billion dollars were spent on the armed forces the same year). About 39 billion of this amount came from EU countries, the rest came from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland and the US[11]. This amount had remained at about 60 billion dollars a year for about ten years, with highs and lows, after the surges of the 1970s and 1980s. Since 2001, with the advent of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and since 2003 with the Monterrey conference, ODA has started to grow again at a rate of about 10% per year (debt forgiveness to poor countries accounts for 70% of this increase), reaching 106.5 billion dollars in 2005 and 104.4 billion in 2006. The huge injections of money into Afghanistan and Iraq are part of this sum.

It is difficult to estimate how much ODA is actually used for humanitarian aid. In 2005, OECD calculated this amount at about 18 billion dollars, but this was also the year of the tsunami, which probably accounted for one-third of the total[12]. Nor is it easy to find out whether this proportion is stable or increasing in the long term. It has definitely increased in proportion to the increase in all ODA since 2002; there are clear peaks during wars (the Gulf, Balkans, Great Lakes, Sudan and East Timor) and natural catastrophes (famine in the Sahel, earthquakes in Asia and Latin America, flooding in Mozambique and Bangladesh, and the tsunami). The recent inclusion of public humanitarian aid in the budget for military expeditions makes it even more difficult to quantify. In 2005, OECD classified 3 of the 18 billion dollars of humanitarian aid under the item "post-conflict and peace building". ECHO stated that it contributed about 600 million euros a year to humanitarian aid (539 million in 2002 and 671 million in 2006), about 30% of the global total of government aid; individual EU countries contributed another 25%[13].

Official humanitarian aid, which comes from OECD countries only, also needs to be added to aid from Arab countries, Brazil, China, India, and Russia, all of which are reluctant to publish their figures (a total of about 5 billion dollars a year has been calculated). There are also volunteer associations. The large organizations (MSF, MDM, ACF, STC, Oxfam, CARE, etc.) have budgets that vary from 20 to 500 million dollars per year. It is estimated that these associations manage an annual total of 6-8 billion dollars in aid. The figures, however, are approximate because some NGOs run development programmes as well as humanitarian intervention. In addition, others act on appointments by governments and UN agencies and use funds that have already been included in other budgets. ECHO, for example, ploughs about 50% of its budget into NGO-run interventions. The peaks linked to particular events also need to be taken into consideration. In 1985, the famine in Ethiopia alone attracted about 4 billion dollars[14]; in three years, Oxfam has collected almost 300 million dollars for the tsunami[15]; in Iraq estimates for humanitarian aid stand at 862 million dollars in 2003, 875 million in 2004, 453 million in 2005, but only 95 million in 2006[16]. Although the funds raised and managed by small associations are not easy to ascertain, the hefty budgets of UN agencies are: UNICEF collected 513 million dollars in 2006 for about 50 humanitarian interventions, 1.129 million in 2005 (again for the tsunami)[17]. WFP spends 1-2 billion dollars a year on food aid in emergency situations[18]. In 2006 UNHCR had almost 1.5 billion

dollars at its disposal, two-thirds of which earmarked for humanitarian intervention[19]. Part of the budgets of UN agencies comes from governments and thus has already been included in the global budget. In 2006, for instance, ECHO gave 37% of its emergency funds to UN agencies.

A good part of the resources geared towards humanitarian aid is spent on materials and logistics. A considerable part is also spent on human resources, both locally and abroad, in accordance with the intervention carried out. A part of the funds is also used for the overall management of the organization itself. NGOs, at least European ones, tend to limit this share as much as possible. STC has a ceiling of 15% of its income; MSF has 20%. In the US, the ceiling is over 30%. Government and UN organizations tend to spend higher portions of their budgets on management; this is due to their structure, which in general is weightier than that of an NGO, and partly to the higher wages they pay their personnel.

Effectiveness

Literature includes a whole host of examples of ineffective humanitarian aid[20]: the sending of slimming products to starving populations and powdered milk to new-borns in refugee camps where water is scarce and contaminated; the distribution of high-heeled shoes to flood victims and medication unsuitable to local illnesses, nearing its expiry date, or with instructions in languages that were incomprehensible to health workers; not to mention the enormous quantities of humanitarian aid that ended up in the clutches of the dictator at the time. In technical terms, things have undoubtedly improved in the last 20 years. All of the major organizations have established operational protocols that prevent the most serious errors and run procedures that speed up intervention and facilitate the launch and development of activities in accordance with tried and tested methods[21]. These factors enable general mortality, as well as that for specific diseases such as measles[22], to be reduced rapidly, the worse forms of under-nutrition to be controlled[23], and the transmission of the most frequent infections to be prevented[24]. There is still no lack of political drift however. Consider the UK and US's "bombs and bread" campaign in Afghanistan in 2001. This move was harshly criticized by organizations such as Oxfam and MSF, not only because it was illegitimate and technically inadequate, but also because the colours of the humanitarian rations packages were indistinguishable from those of the unexploded cluster bombs scattered across the country during military operations to fight Bin Laden.

How can we measure the effectiveness of humanitarian aid? By definition, humanitarian aid is actually an indicator of failure because it always arrives when disaster has already struck; its only objective is to alleviate and reduce damage, sometimes only providing short-term relief. But what happens to the local economy after a region has been inundated with free products? Many populations who have fallen victim to humanitarian crises mainly need livestock, machinery, ploughs, seeds and spare parts. They need hard cash because after the first few days of a crisis generally a local economy is established: consequently for a few dollars more,

people can get hold of what they need to keep hunger at bay, fix their homes and return to the economic and social life they had before catastrophe struck. However, the population receives what it needs for the first few days (blankets, food, medication, etc.), but not always what is indispensable to produce and to pick up life and work from where they left off. The post-emergency is often worse than the emergency itself, but does not guarantee the same visibility and never fills the front pages of newspapers.

During armed conflicts, humanitarian aid often contributes to an escalation in conflicts and massacres; one example is the region of the Great Lakes after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Aid is often a source of income for the warring factions, either through legitimating war criminals by inviting them to sit at the negotiating table or through attempting to reach political compromises based on exclusion[25]. Nor should it be forgotten that, in order to maintain high levels of technical effectiveness, humanitarian aid organizations are supported financially and logistically (e.g. air transport and communications) by the governments and armed forces involved in the conflicts. This leads to the increasing trend of integrating humanitarian aid with military action, as occurred in the Balkans, then in Afghanistan and Iraq, with enormous harm being done to the principle of independence and range of freedom of humanitarian action. How can the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian aid be measured in these cases? And what should be said about the utter ineffectiveness of some humanitarian interventions such as those in Darfur, which has to deal with Sudan's deliberate policy of laissez-faire? Also remember that in order to access donor funding, some humanitarian organizations may be tempted to set up only in areas that are considered interesting by the donors themselves, i.e. the crises focused on by the media, to the detriment of other crises that are overlooked.

Aid or interference?

The concept of humanitarian intervention is set against the backdrop of the power relationship between rich and poor. There are no examples of low-income countries providing humanitarian aid to high-income countries with violation of sovereignty, with the partial and not entirely pointless exception of Cuba's offer to send emergency medical teams to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The northern-hemisphere based nature of humanitarianism is heavily reflected in the way the media, and the press offices of the humanitarian organizations themselves, portray the people and events being sent aid. They lead the citizens of donor nations to see countries in crisis situations as inept and incapable of solving their own problems, not only due to a lack of material resources and technology, but also because they are victims of corrupt leaders. These countries are thus objectively inferior. Donors, and the organizations that represent them, are automatically doers of good, bringers of a civilizing mission: just as they were in colonial times. As nineteenth century imperialism was veiled with a humanitarian justification, it is no coincidence that some intellectuals from the southern hemisphere see

modern humanitarian aid as another politically suspect, if not morally repugnant, initiative, regardless of how honest and effective its intentions.

Low-income countries are unable to solve or alleviate their problems, therefore rich countries have a duty to intervene, or a right to intervene in the event of resistance, opposition, or obstacles to intervention of any type (e.g. duties, permits, bureaucracy, etc). There is only a minute logical step from the right to intervene to humanitarian war and to preventive war. Theorized warmongering in the name and on behalf of humanity may seem ideologically weak, to the extent that every time we need to have our memories jogged: "the Shoah is the original post-modern sin, the metaphor for evil to be defeated and prevented, one that rises as a criterion to classify any conflict"[26]. The term "ethnic", however, has become a multipurpose word for defining a vast range of different phenomena and has become a synonym for disorder and anarchy. Words are getting mixed up. According to German sociologist Ulrich Beck, the new policy of interventionism is "a mix [...] of humanitarian generosity and imperialist reasoning" that is born "when the classic distinctions between war and peace, domestic politics and foreign politics, attack and defence, law and abuse, civilization and barbarity [are] toppled"[27]. The civilian population is both loot and target, military means and scapegoat: "the massacre of villagers, men, women, children and the old, rarely strays from the script; it repeats itself each time like the attack on the Indian camp codified in epic Westerns"[28].

After seeking to legitimize the right to intervene once and for all by portraying it as a "humanitarian war" and a "war for law", it was once again redefined ad hoc as "preventive war" for the most recent permanent fight against terrorism. This legitimization of war overturns the pledges of the UN Charter, which sought to free future generations from this plague. Now it is proposed as the "work of generations", as many as it takes to free the world of tyrants. Under this logic, NGOs are drawn in as "force multipliers". It matters little that the right to intervene is applied selectively and only where humanitarian aid is associated with economic interests (oil, minerals and strategic natural resources) or geopolitical ones (control of politically strategic areas).

Aid or a sleeping pill for our conscience?

The invitation to make a donation by text message comes to us from the TV screen, often from one of our favourite TV personalities. The postal or bank account number is mailed directly to our homes so that we can make a donation. To avoid post office queues, we can donate directly via internet or direct debit, so that we have to think about donating once a year, if not once in our lives. We are completely detached from tragedy, which is relegated to a media event. We delegate action to the humanitarian aid organization that we found the most physically appealing. In this way, we are gradually getting used to the idea that the responsibility for addressing humanitarian crises is both individual and private, like the NGO we give our money to, not collective and public. The act is individual and private, but reserved for white citizens in high-income countries with high rates of civilization.

The people we help are not the subjects or protagonists of their own stories. Often they are merely bit players while the report shows the aid being distributed. In this way our collective and individual imagination progressively excludes the idea that the problems (nutritional, health, social, economic, etc.) can be addressed with mid – and long – term policies, i.e. with more far-reaching strategies. The only interventions that stick in people's minds are the high-profile, short-term ones in an emergency. The complexities of humanitarian crises are slowly disappearing and are being replaced by the simplification of advertising and donations.

The extremely important role played by the media is demonstrated by the efficient control over information imposed by governments and the military with the consequent manipulation of information and responsibilities that has led to the gradual politicization of the humanitarian aid system. British journalist Robert Fisk recounts how, during the First Gulf War, which he defines "the least known of recent wars among ordinary people", the news provided by the US's Joint Information Bureau (JIB) was reduced to "an entertainment suitable for all the family", where the head of JIB "was marketing the war" and "we journalists were its salesmen"[29].

Conclusions

Humanitarian ideology tends to consider the victims of war and natural catastrophes as mere objects of aid rather than individuals in temporary difficulty who are fully capable of dealing with the social and economic challenges thrown down by their environment. In the same way that over the last thirty years credits have plunged many poor countries into debt, making them dependent on rich countries and international financial organizations, today aid is gradually preventing aid-dependent countries from addressing their own crises. Furthermore, humanitarian aid often focuses on the right to survival and overlooks the right to life with all of its economic, social and political issues. Indeed humanitarian aid tends to help people without asking too many questions about the complex web of causes behind humanitarian crises. It does not act on the mechanisms that lead to the need for humanitarian aid. This creates a vicious circle where crises are repeated, thus benefiting humanitarian aid organizations, which are able to survive and grow. As French historian Bernard Hours writes: "Under the spotlight, [humanitarian ideology] claims to work towards human dignity. In the shadow, where sense always lies, this is an undertaking of deadly excess"[30]. Unfortunately the cliché that considers humanitarian aid organizations to be untouchable because they "do good" is an obstacle to any criticism of their role. Only through critical thought can we help humanitarian aid out of the spiral that tends to associate it with the very causes of the disasters and tragedies it aims to alleviate.

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