Feinstein International Center

200 Boston Avenue
Suite 4800
Medford, MA 02155
USA

tel: +1 617.627.3423
fax: +1 617.627.3428
fic.tufts.edu

Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice

Looking Ahead: Making our Principles Work in the Real World

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Antonio Donini
Senior Researcher
Feinstein International Center, Tufts University

"Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future", or so says the poet.[i] The operative word here is "perhaps", the uncertainty of tomorrow. In other words, if you want to prepare for the future, beware of the lessons of the past: past is not necessarily prologue.

In these brief comments, I will deal with three related issues likely to affect the future of the humanitarian enterprise:

- How can we make it "of the world" rather than "of the North"?
- Has it become too institutionalized?
- Are we equipped for the black swans of the future?

My comments are informed by the findings of research we have been conducting at Tufts University on local perceptions of humanitarian action (Donini et al, 2006).

Let me start by saying that this is a truly remarkable event and that I am honoured that the co-chairs have asked me to address it. [Once they hear what I have to say, they may not ask me again…] We have in this room representatives of the near totality of an enterprise that mobilizes and spends on average some US$10bn per year in support of the most vulnerable, marginalized and disempowered[ii]. Bringing you together is no small achievement. Moreover, you are here to discuss and agree on a set of principles and undertakings aimed at making the act of addressing the needs of people living *in extremis* more effective, more respectful of ethical obligations and more accountable to beneficiaries. A lot of effort has gone into building trust and

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complementarities in the system and in reducing scope for competition and turf battles. Thus, the partnerships we are witnessing are a new and important development.

I will not comment on the principles. I believe that they are an excellent statement of intent. The proof will be in how they are operationalized. I will focus on what, perhaps, is missing.

First, as our research shows, the official humanitarian enterprise remains a select club in which the rules are set by a rather peculiar set of players who are generally far-removed from the realities of the people they purport to help. Where you stand is where you sit. While much good is done by the enterprise, its functioning is dictated by the interests of actors who sit in government, International Organizations and civil society in the North, including, increasingly, the boardrooms of the private sector and the situation rooms of the military.

Like it or not, humanitarian action is part of global governance, if not of global government (Kennedy, 2004). Even when it is not instrumentalized for political purposes, humanitarianism remains a dominant discourse. It lives in parallel with, and is sometimes subordinated to, processes of economic governance, political containment strategies, and military action that are functional to the interests of the "global North". And this despite the fact that the vast majority of aid workers and many humanitarian agencies are not of the North.

Of course, there are important variations in the level of alignment of humanitarian actors with political designs – after all the system also exports its antibodies – but the fact remains: power, money, the ability to make strategic choices affecting the lives of others are essentially in northern hands. Not a monopoly, but an oligopoly of the North.

Unlike the United Nations where all countries have a vote, there is no such "democracy" in the humanitarian realm. Countries that do not belong to the established donor club have little opportunity to influence the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise and even less to scrutinize the destination of its funds. At the UN, all countries have a stake in peace-building operations and must contribute to them, but the purse-strings and the reins of UN humanitarian activities are by and large the sole purview of the North. We have a Peace-Building Commission, a Human Rights Council, but no Humanitarian Council.

To a greater or lesser extent, the public in the North has an opportunity to influence government aid policy through elections, public hearings and the like. But much of the private (and private sector) aid escapes such scrutiny. The workings of militarized "relief" are even more obscure.

Furthermore, the contributions of non-Northern humanitarian players don't normally make it to the ODA donor hit-parade. Yes, we now recognize India and China as players and some of the Gulf States, but the contributions of the informal humanitarian sector – *zakat* and other tithes, remittances from diasporas, the contributions of affected countries and communities – are nowhere recorded. We are even more loath to recognize the life-saving contributions of elected entities such as Hamas or Hezbollah who practice their own varieties of succour to the most vulnerable.

On the positive side, our research shows that fundamental humanitarian values are shared by all cultures. Not so, however, the baggage, the cultural differences and the power relations that come with the northern-dominated humanitarian relationship. From the citadels of the North to the borderlands of Darfur and Kandahar, an outsider-insider dynamic permeates the humanitarian enterprise, with the outsiders calling most of the shots. It is not necessarily an expat-non-expat thing. An aid worker from a provincial town visiting a remote village will be perceived as an outsider, often just as much as a foreigner.

Challenge: How can we make the humanitarian enterprise "of the world" rather than "of the North?" Can we extend the partnership beyond the actors represented in this room? Can we envision an enterprise that is more mindful of other humanitarian traditions and cultures, less top-down and expat-driven?

Second, the perils of institutionalization. Some of you may recall with nostalgia those pre-email and pre-satphone halcyon days when important messages from remote field outposts were passed through crackling radios and unreliable telex machines. When neither worked, which was often the case, communication was dependent on hand-written notes entrusted to a truck driver. For all the advances in technology, all the training in management, 360 degree exercises, and contingency planning workshops, how well has the massive institutionalization that has taken place over the past 15 years of conflict and crisis improved the effectiveness of the sector? Are the 250,000 humanitarian aid workers of today doing a better job than those who battled for access and space in Biafra?

Undoubtedly, the unprecedented growth of the enterprise and the development of standards, procedures and techniques have allowed us to respond more promptly and effectively. The institutions of coordination, good donorship and complementarity of action have served the system well: there is more predictability and automaticity in emergency response, though problems remain in terms of proportionality and timeliness. But hasn't some of the flexibility and spontaneity that the enterprise was famous for been lost in the process? Has the quality of our mercy improved?

Institutionalization has resulted in strong pressures on NGOs to "act like a business" and "act like a government" (Cooley and Ron, 2004). Not surprisingly, senior staff and CEOs increasingly rotate between these different realms.

Our research shows that the programming of humanitarian assistance has become less flexible, less able to address the unexpected. There is an intense pressure to programme according to the deliverables defined in grants and in timeframes that are often unrealistic. The short – 6 months, one year – duration of grants discourages innovation and risk-taking. As organizations have grown and resources mushroomed, controls have become more tight and decision-making is increasingly distant from the field. Humanitarian work used to have a connotation of "voluntariness" – indeed this remains a key Red Cross principle – it has now become a career. It is defined by management objectives, standard operating procedures, human resource development tools – necessary as they are in any "business" – that create structures and organizational patterns that tend to stifle innovation and the questioning of the status quo. Indeed, promotion itself means that the most highly

experienced, respected, trained (and paid) aid workers are removed from the frontlines and are hunkered down in meeting rooms! (Walker, 2007)

Challenge: what are we going to do about it? Again, is a more inclusive, community-friendly humanitarian enterprise possible or are we locked into the current top down system? And again, what can we do to develop partnerships at the local level including in places where northern values and agendas are unwelcome or suspect?

Third, the Black Swans are coming (Taleb, 2007). Definition: Black Swans are "outliers" i.e., unpredictable and therefore unknowable events with (potential) severe impact on lives, livelihoods and even the survival of large population groups or entire civilizations. The consequences of a Black Swan can be serendipitous and positive (penicillin, lasers, the internet); but it is, of course, the negatives that are of concern. Chernobyl, the unexpected consequences of the breakup of former Yugoslavia and the demise of the USSR, the devastation wreaked by HIV/AIDS in Africa, Katrina[iii]…, all these are Black Swans.

We are not very good at predicting the future. In the1950s IBM predicted that only some 50 of the clunky computer machines it was building would be required for the entire US (Taleb, 2007). The point about Black Swans is precisely this: they are unknowable and may have devastating (humanitarian) consequences.

This has implications for the scope and shape of a humanitarian enterprise that is still based on Cold War and post-Cold War assumptions of what constitutes a crisis. It is essentially backward-looking. We are getting better at addressing last year's crises and perhaps today's. But is the enterprise adapted to the challenges that are likely to come our way in the coming decades?

If all humanitarians were eliminated by a virus that targeted them, and only them… would we re-build the enterprise the same way as it is now? Our data points to two areas where we are particularly ill-equipped and where urgent adaptation is required:

- the new asymmetrical wars à la Iraq and Afghanistan (but also now Somalia, Lebanon and perhaps tomorrow Chad or Nigeria or Pakistan) where humanitarian action has itself become asymmetrical and is perceived as taking sides;
- the emergence of catastrophic events or unending chronic situations where the system has to deal with compounded threats and vulnerabilities framed, in some cases, by conflict but also by natural hazard events, climate change, technological disasters, environmental displacement, pandemics, etc. Any combination of these could lead to frightening "civilization changing" events, i.e. unpredictable and possibly deadly Black Swans.

Conflict, in fact, may well be a lesser source of vulnerability than we are accustomed to… In Zimbabwe today, about 3,500 people are dying every week of HIV/AIDS in the midst of a deepening economic, social and political crisis. In many parts of the world threats of old and new varieties tend to combine and compound. Our traditional humanitarian approach is inadequate in such settings.

Chance favours those who are prepared, or as Yogi Berra put it: “you got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there”. Trying to predict the crises of tomorrow is not a very useful exercise. Investing in preparedness, is. Especially if it is preparedness of the indigenous variety. Making organizations more adaptable to shocks, strengthening partnerships at all levels, including with groups who have different agendas to help the marginalized and the oppressed, thinking outside our humanitarian box may be our best protection against the Black Swan.

Challenge: what can we do to prepare for events that, by definition, are unpredictable and may have widespread humanitarian consequences? Do we need to look for less hierarchical and decentralized structures that are likely to prove more resilient in times of crisis? Is the balance of investment between preparedness and emergency response right?

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In closing, while we can certainly applaud the improvements in the functioning of the humanitarian machine, there is no cause for resting on our laurels. Our research findings confirm that the humanitarian enterprise is vulnerable to manipulation by powerful political forces far more than is widely understood. Its practitioners are more extended and overmatched than most of us realize. Failure to address and reverse present trends will result in the demise of an international assistance and protection regime based on time-tested humanitarian principles. Humanitarianism may go the way of other “isms”.

Moreover, if the disconnect between the perceived needs of intended beneficiaries and the assistance and protection actually provided continues to grow, humanitarianism as a compassionate endeavor to bring succor to people in extremis may become increasingly alien and suspect to those it purports to help.

As we see it, the humanitarian project is in more serious trouble than is widely understood or acknowledged. Projecting the data from our 12-country sample onto a more global and future-oriented screen, we are doubtful that the current love affair of the international community with humanitarian action will continue deep into the 21st century. This love affair is currently based on two notions: that humanitarian action is functional to the security interests of the countries that are its traditional major contributors and therefore shape the humanitarian enterprise; that the current political economy of humanitarian action – the humanitarian marketplace – will continue to be dominated by like-minded northern and western-driven values, behaviours and styles of management.

Should either of these assumptions prove to be untrue, either because climate change or other risks force a paradigm shift in the North’s security concerns or because the Northern humanitarian monopoly is challenged by other players who do not accept “our” rules of the game, the current humanitarian enterprise may find itself in dire straits.

Meanwhile, humanitarianism, as traditionally framed and implemented, may well come to occupy a smaller place on the international screen, relegated to crises with low political profile in which the strategic interests of

the major powers are not perceived to be at play. The assistance and protection challenges of the Afghanistans, Iraqs and Darfurs will continue to pose major assistance and protection challenges. However, the situation in high-profile conflicts seems likely to be addressed increasingly, if at all, by an array of non-traditional actors, including international military forces, private contractors, and non-state actors rather than by card-carrying humanitarian agencies.

Over the past decade and a half, the humanitarian agenda has expanded to encompass activities such as advocacy, rehabilitation and peace-building, and development. Some would say that it has drifted away from its traditional humanitarian moorings. An evolution toward a more modest humanitarianism, delimited in scope, objectives, and actors, would not be an entirely negative development. It would reflect a realization that current global trends and forces that generate a need for humanitarian action can be neither redirected nor significantly contained by the humanitarian enterprise itself. This does not mean that humanitarians are uncommitted to a more secure, just and compassionate world but rather that they are realistic in recognizing that their first obligation is to be effective in saving and protecting lives that are in imminent danger.

Further reading

Alexander Cooley and James Ron, “The NGO Scramble. Organizational Insecurity and the Political Economy of Transnational Action”, *International Security,* Vol. 27, No.1, Summer 2002., pp 5-39.

Antonio Donini et al. *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions,* Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, 2006, available with all the supporting country case studies at: fic.tufts.edu

David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue. Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable,* Random House, New York, NY, 2007.

Peter Walker, Paper on donor funding trends for the GHD meeting, July 2007.

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[i] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

[ii] $18bn in 2005 according to Development Initiatives (2006) *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2006*. London: Development Initiatives, p. 10. This figure is clearly an anomaly driven by the response to the Tsunami. While the funding channeled by the governments of the 23 OECD member states are reliably recorded, there is as yet no reliable system to capture the entire universe of public and private humanitarian funding which would include for example, additional diaspora remittances in response to crises, funds raised from the public by NGOs, corporate and foundation contributions, zakat, tithes, funds channeled through Islamic foundations, and , importasntly, the contribution of affected states, their municipalities and communiites. Most of this data is either not collected, or not collated. The truth is that we do not have a clear picture of the total funding going into humanitarian action, nor do we have an estimate of how much of that funding is channeled through to different types of humanitarian agencies, international and national, nor the extent of double-counting when funds are channeled from funding to implementing agencies and to their national counterparts.

[iii] Although it is listed here because of its devastating consequences, technically Katrina is not a Black Swan. Had the human settlements in the Mississippi delta been organized differently and repeated warning about the state of the levies been heeded, the hurricane would have had relatively minor consequences.