

Humanitarian action in “interesting times”

Antonio Donini
Analyst

Expertise Note
April 2021



HUMANITARIAN
ENCYCLOPEDIA

This speech was delivered at the “Seminario Internacional: La acción humanitaria México – Centroamérica” on 18 March 2021 organised by the Instituto Mora, UN OCHA, and the Humanitarian Encyclopedia.

I have been asked to talk about the state of the humanitarian enterprise. But, first, I need to say a couple of things about the global context in which humanitarian action is situated.

The external context

Crises are moments of revelation. The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most serious crises of my generation. It may be with us for a long while. There is a lot of “static” in the air and it becomes difficult to see (and hear) clearly. At the same time, it is not too early to reflect on what has happened and what the implications are. Perhaps for the humanitarian system there will be a before and after the pandemic, as there was a before and after the Rwandan genocide. Sometimes crises provide opportunities for re-ordering the world, including the humanitarian world. Mostly, however, they do not.

Nevertheless, we are probably at a turning point in the state of the world. You may have heard the oft quoted phrase of Antonio Gramsci on the ‘interregnum’:

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”
(Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, circa 1930.)

Indeed morbid symptoms abound and you probably have your own list. I will single out four global trends that affect us all. They are inter-related and cumulative. These are:

- **The surge of runaway unregulated transnational (licit and illicit) capitalism**
- **War is more brutal, longer, more inhumane for civilians**

- **Climate crisis and its cortege of consequences for survival of life on the planet**

- **And, of course, pandemics – the current one and those to come**

What these four factors have in common is that they represent challenges far beyond the capacity of states to address, whether acting individually or in concert. Multilateralism is on life-support; the so-called rule-based order is increasingly breached by unilateral “make my country great again” approaches.

It is often difficult to distinguish law consisting of bureaucratic red tape or law that is meant to impede or manipulate humanitarian action from legislation pursuing legitimate aims (such as employment, social security and land planning laws). Such legislation is legitimate in that it applies to everyone, but inevitably it also constrains humanitarian action, including when not adapted to humanitarian emergency situations. It makes it more difficult to hire staff, to import goods, to build a camp, or to rent offices. Hardly ever do such laws foresee an exception in emergency situations and a humanitarian emergency is no general justification for not complying with the law.

These challenges are transnational at their core. Multilateralism was not conceived as a tool to deal with transnationality. Today’s institutions were designed for an era when Western dominance was largely unquestioned and the Cold War allowed for a certain geopolitical predictability. The current multilateral system is based on outmoded notions of sovereignty in a world transformed by globalising forces. In transnational times, sovereignty becomes a blunt instrument. Capitalism, like pandemics does not respect borders.

Because the institutions of multilateralism are failing, it turns out that the state is making a come-back. Tighter border controls on the outside correspond to quickly expanding surveillance practices within. “My body, my country, my borders...” has been the dominant, inward-looking rationale that also feeds on, and feeds a rising tide of nationalism.

This has affected first and foremost the most vulnerable. To the extent that the asylum seeker or the refugee has been visible during this period, he/she is most often seen as a potential vector of disease, an added burden on the health system or beyond the reach of the aid system. Migrants, especially the most precarious, have been the first to be targeted, the first to lose their jobs or be sent home. Access of aid agencies to the most vulnerable – refugees in Cox’s Bazar, war victims in Yemen – has been severely curtailed.

More fundamentally, perhaps, the pandemic seems to have produced new regimes of “unfreedom” and especially the “unfreedom of movement”. In the new world of biosecurity, solidarity and the crossing borders are only for the fittest. Asylum seekers and others requiring life-saving action are beyond borders, or pushed back at borders.

The internal state of the humanitarian enterprise

If we look at the internal functioning of the humanitarian ecosystem, the pandemic has revealed new pathologies or brought old ones into stark relief. I will single out three.

The **first** is the extreme fragility of the prevailing business model. The model is based on the cosy mutual back-rubbing relationship between OECD donors, UN agencies and the Red Cross Movement, and international NGOs. The visible part of the fragility is the fact that with the pandemic the model has failed: international aid workers have been withdrawn or are unable to return to the coal face of humanitarian crises, supply chains are broken, remote management shows its limits, local partners have been left hanging. This would be easy to fix if the pandemic recedes. But below the surface the problems are much deeper.

- On the one hand, money is becoming scarce while needs increase. The recession, like the pandemic, is here to stay. Western donors will likely have to prioritise domestic needs over international assistance – in order to avoid social turbulence at home. The UK has announced it will cut its aid budget by close to 50%; others may follow suit; in late 2020 Oxfam has shut down in programmes in 18 countries.

- The overall 39 billion US dollar global humanitarian appeal for 2020 was only 49% funded. OCHA’s financial data shows that during the past decade, humanitarian appeals have rarely been more than 60% funded. In the longer term, this trend may become even more dramatic. The massive economic impact of the pandemic on traditional donor countries could well result in an overall decrease in ODA. Moreover, population aging and fertility declining in OECD countries do not bode well for maintaining a healthy tax base. Increasing unemployment, will also mean less tax revenue. You can guess where the cuts will be made. Apart from MSF which raises its own resources, few aid agencies will be able to survive unscathed.

- On the other hand, with the West in retreat, other players are using their soft and not-so-soft power to occupy geopolitical space, including “humanitarian space” – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, UAE, (and we have to say thank you for their largesse while they bomb civilians). The love affair between the West and humanitarian action is fraying and it is unclear what will replace it.

The **second pathology**, which is linked to the first, is the intrinsic coloniality of the humanitarian system. It remains “of the North” (and of the West) despite its claims to universality which ring a bit hollow. When the dominance of the West on the humanitarian system was unchallenged, this was not such a big issue since it was the West that called the shots. But now the warts are showing. The system is outdated, out of sync with reality, ill-equipped for the increasing uncertainty and “interesting times” ahead. The software of humanitarianism still runs on colonial hardware..

Despite the fact that approximately 93% of the personnel involved in crisis response – including in particular first responders – are not from the West, the power, the networks through which it flows, the ethos and the apparatus are essentially Western. The way we look at the world, the zero point from which we look at it, the arrogance that shapes our perspective: these all have a toxic colonial odour. The debate on decolonising humanitarianism is only just starting.

Ask yourself: who controls the narrative? An African proverb summarises this well: “until the lions have their historians, history will always be written by the hunters”.

The **third pathology** is that the pandemic is showing us that humanitarian action as we know it has reached its structural limits and is now, possibly, on the cusp of retreat. The transition from the romantic phase to the technological, institutional, and governance phase is now complete. In other words, the energy that made humanitarianism a means to accomplish valuable ethical ends is waning. Humanitarianism has functioned as a “mobilising myth”. This myth provided a generation of aid workers, individually and collectively, with answers to questions about their place and social functions in the international arena. It has now lost its pathos. Humanitarians are caught between a rock and a hard place. They feel increasingly used and abused by politics – and the failure of politics. Think Syria. Think Yemen.

Our world is probably the most unequal it has ever been in human history. The pandemic is revealing how unequal our world is. Covid-19 does not affect people equally across age, gender, geography and social class. People on the move trying to cross the Mediterranean, people too poor to move or stuck in war-torn Afghanistan, Syria or Yemen are paying a disproportionate price. Often they face the double jeopardy of the inhumanity of war and the spectre of devastating illness. Covid-19 has only added more pressure to a system based on asymmetries of wealth and power inherited from an era when the West dominated the world – and promoted its values. This system is now on the defensive. It may have already reached its breaking point.

There are no easy recipes for tackling what has become a system-wide existential crisis.

The internal state of the humanitarian enterprise

Caught between the pessimism of reason and the flagging optimism of will, what is the reflective humanitarian to do?

Diversity is not necessarily a bad thing. A more narrowly focused “back to basics” humanitarian corner of the enterprise will likely survive built around the ICRC, MSF and a few other so-called “Dunantist” players that recognise themselves in the classical humanitarian principles. It will be smaller in size, informed solely by the views and needs of the crisis-affected, and focused on saving and protecting lives in the here and now. I see it as based around the principles of humanity and impartiality. Whether it will be neutral is a big question. Neutrality is a means to an end – not an end in itself. A back to basics agenda would perhaps be the best way of nurturing the values and ethos of an enterprise that may be battered, bruised, and often abused but is still often the only available safety net for people in extremis.

But many other forms of providing succour to survivors of war-related atrocities will coexist in parallel and sometimes in tension with the “old church”. These will be more political, or religious, or sovereignty-based or for profit or even military. The temptation to instrumentalise humanitarian action to achieve political goals will always be there (as it always has been). The good news is that it is now easier than ever before to document abuse, corruption, patriarchy and the like. Because those directly affected are often doing the documenting!

I will leave you with a final thought:

There is a spirited debate in humanitarian circles on the extent to which humanitarian action should be transformative. Deontologists (our responsibility is saving and protecting lives in the here and now) clash with consequentialists (if we do not engage with change we are complicit with the root causes). There is probably room for both

ethical positions in the future humanitarian ecosystem. Ultimately, the choice is a political one and likely to become more so in the next decades. The odds against the creation of a more just and sustainable global order are formidable. But is there any other option to save future generations from a spiral of collapse – war, pandemics, climate change and their reverberating effects -

than inventing new forms of politics and searching for new ways of thinking, living and working together to move the human dial towards justice? A profound transformation in the way in which we project ourselves towards a different future is needed. Not seizing this moment, however, means accepting the inevitability, and responsibility, of worse disasters to come.

Antonio Donini is a long time humanitarian practitioner and analyst. He is a member of the Advisory Board of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia. He is co-founder and member of the Executive Committee of United Against Inhumanity (UAI), a civil society movement that challenges the inhumanity of war and the erosion of asylum (<http://www.against-inhumanity.org>). Antonio can be reached at antonio.donini@gmail.com