

HUMANITARIAN AID AND INTERVENTION:
THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION

Humanitarianism Sacrificed: Integration's False Promise

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In recent years, there have been concerted efforts to ensure that the different components of the international response to crisis-affected countries, whether conducted under the banner of the United Nations or not, are integrated in pursuit of a stated goal of comprehensive, durable, and just resolution of conflict. This includes a drive to purposefully make humanitarian assistance to victims, one of the principal forms of outside involvement in crisis situations, supportive of the “international community’s” political ambition. The implication of the coherence agenda is that meeting lifesaving needs is too limited in scope, and that the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence that have typically characterized humanitarian action should be set aside in order to harness aid to the “higher” goals of peace, security, and development.

There is no doubt that, beyond immediate survival, peace, political representation, justice, and socioeconomic development rank high among the wishes of people attempting to survive amid conflict and crisis—leaving aside for a moment the very different meanings they may give to these broad and ill-defined concepts. However, transforming humanitarian action into a presumptive tool of conflict resolution is unjustifiably and unnecessarily detrimental to people who suffer the ravages of war. First, the assertion that

meeting essential needs can go hand in hand with promoting peace and development is belied by the conditionality and selectivity that characterize the actual deployment of humanitarian assistance under the coherence model. In reality, aid is often either deployed as a reward or denied as a sanction in the name of a brighter future, which results in many avoidable deaths. Second, sacrificing or sidelining the humanitarian imperative of immediately saving lives based on assessed needs for future unproven benefits is not only ethically untenable—it is also unnecessary. This is because the role of aid in conflicts is misunderstood. The use of aid as an incentive in conflict zones does not promote peace any more than aid directly provided to those in need fuels war. Third, to link purposefully the deployment of aid to the broader international response to crises as a matter of consistent policy requires a leap of faith—or rather a willful denial of reality—that actual international responses serve the interests of conflict-affected populations. In particular, it overlooks the fact that deliberate neglect—aside from the selective allocation of aid—is often the main form of international political engagement.

It is critical that humanitarian organizations first and foremost focus on their responsibility to provide direct assistance to people in immediate need, wherever and

whoever they may be. Rather than accepting the instrumentalization of humanitarian action in the service of political ends, however well intended, or as a mask of the lack of political interest to respond to crises, humanitarian actors must always be in a position to challenge governments to meet their principled responsibilities—both with regard to humanitarian action itself and with regard to the political nature of conflict and crisis. For it is mainly the failure of governments to act that both undermines humanitarian action and allows crises with massive human consequences to persist.

POLITICS AND THE ALLOCATION OF AID

The coherence agenda's euphemistic promise of carrying out lifesaving assistance while at the same time promoting longer-term conflict resolution and development obscures the stark trade-offs that often take place in practice. Instead of impartiality—the allocation of assistance based on immediate need alone—its operating principle is triage between “deserving” and “undeserving” beneficiaries, under which aid is allocated based on people's expected contribution to the presumably higher goals of peace and development.

The crudest form of triage is conditionality. Making the delivery of aid conditional on a moral and/or political choice, such as the legitimacy and the policies of the authority in charge, is a long-standing practice of development assistance. Yet the coherence agenda extends this development logic to humanitarian aid for victims of conflict and crisis, which has long been defined precisely by its unconditional nature. A most egregious instance of humanitarian aid conditionality was the decision by the United Nations in Sierra Leone, supported by key donors such

as the United Kingdom, to withdraw staff and cut off emergency assistance to a beleaguered population after the AFRC/RUF toppled the internationally supported government of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in 1997. A study by the Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue noted that the AFRC/RUF were eventually ousted militarily rather than “starved” out of power and called this willful denial of assistance that only hurt a desperately vulnerable Sierra Leonean population “one of the most shameful episodes regarding international humanitarian action in modern times.”¹

A second kind of triage is the denial of immediate assistance in the interest of reaping future benefits. For instance, would-be refugees are often “contained” inside a war zone in the interest of not creating, or worsening, an intractable long-term refugee problem in neighboring countries. The closure of Pakistan's and Iran's borders to refugees during the U.S. military offensive against the Taliban in late 2001 is one such example. The policy of introducing cost-recovery schemes to fund health-care services, not only in economically and politically stable developing countries but also in intensely poor and conflict-ridden ones, is based on a similar premise.² The longer-term interest of building a sustainable health-care system is viewed as paramount, despite the often-catastrophic effects on the delivery of immediate lifesaving services for the population. In Burundi, for instance, the population has been weakened by years of war, displacement, and bitter

¹ David Bryer, “Politics and Humanitarianism: Coherence in Crisis?” Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, February 2003, p. 11; available at www.hdcentre.org/datastore/files/pandh.pdf.

² Tim Poletti, *Healthcare Financing in Complex Emergencies: A Background Issues Paper on Cost-Sharing*, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, November 2003.

poverty, and suffers from unacceptably high mortality rates. Against this background, a recent study by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) found that, under the “full cost recovery” policy introduced in 2002 at the behest of major donors, close to one-fifth of the population was denied access to primary health care for financial reasons.³

The third kind of triage is selectivity, where assistance is not provided to certain victims because doing so is expected to compromise “more important” political interests. In Angola, following UNITA’s negotiated surrender in early 2002, the UN-led international response to the massive nutritional emergency affecting hundreds of thousands of civilians and ex-UNITA fighters was woefully late and inadequate, resulting in thousands of unnecessary deaths. In the face of government mistrust, the United Nations’ primary objective was to secure a role for itself in the peace process, particularly in the area of demobilization and disarmament, the monitoring of human rights, and the oversight of eventual elections. While aid was not explicitly used as a bargaining chip, the United Nations did not pursue the humanitarian imperative vigorously and independently for fear of compromising these political interests. Instead of ringing the alarm, pushing for access, and mobilizing resources, the United Nations refused to contemplate an urgent humanitarian intervention in the quartering and family areas—where death and malnutrition rates were well above emergency thresholds—before a comprehensive agreement covering all aspects of the United Nations’ activities there had been reached with the government. It further enjoined NGOs not to break ranks in order to present a unified front to the government, for instance, by calling on donors not to fund NGOs, such as MSF, who sought independ-

ently to provide assistance in the midst of the emergency.⁴

Conditionality and selectivity of aid are most pronounced in cases of external intervention, when armed force is used by Western powers (either under the aegis of the United Nations or not) against one of the parties to a conflict, such as in Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, or Iraq, followed by an international stewardship of the “liberated territories.” In these instances, aid is conditionally deployed to reward allies and promote politico-military goals, and the resources mobilized for assistance are in stark disproportion to actual needs—as the allocation of over 50 percent of the UN worldwide humanitarian aid budget in 2003 for Iraq attests.⁵ Moreover, independent humanitarian action is also compromised and undermined by the way humanitarian values are co-opted and subsumed at the service of the interveners’ politico-military agenda. In these interventions, arguments about collective security are meshed with references to universal morality, such as the promotion of democracy and human rights. Ostensibly minimizing harm and visibly providing assistance are therefore key means of legitimizing what are being presented as “just wars.” A well-publicized focus on the “humanitarian” component of the intervention also serves to obscure and sideline the

³ Médecins Sans Frontières, *Access to Health Care in Burundi: Results of Three Epidemiological Surveys*, available at www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2004/burundi_2004.pdf. The introduction of a lower, “all-inclusive flat fee” in MSF programs to mitigate the impact of full cost recovery also resulted in almost 10% of the population being excluded from health care.

⁴ On Angola, see Médecins Sans Frontières, “Angolans Left to Die: Abandoning the Humanitarian Imperative,” October 2003; available at www.doctorswithoutborders.org.

⁵ See UN OCHA’s financial tracking system at www.reliefweb.int/fts.

scrutiny of crimes that may be committed during the prosecution of military operations and is an essential component of the political battle for support in home countries.

When governments keen on “winning over hearts and minds” make all assistance, including humanitarian aid, an integral part of their overall politico-military enterprise, it can have damaging consequences for the ability of humanitarian organizations to gain access to populations in need, and for the safety of aid workers.⁶ This is because the fundamental principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality not only characterize humanitarian action’s single-minded purpose of alleviating suffering, unconditionally and without any ulterior motive—they also serve as operational tools that help in obtaining the consent of belligerents and the trust of communities for the presence and activities of humanitarian organizations, particularly in highly volatile contexts. Making aid organizations associates of Western politico-military efforts makes them prominent targets for violent opposition, particularly for extremist groups for whom killing unarmed aid workers is an easy means to further their strategic goal of destabilizing and undermining the international community’s political project (which in reality is highly dominated by the agenda of Western powers). Making aid conditional on the population’s collaboration with military forces, as was announced in leaflets distributed by the U.S. military in southern Afghanistan, for instance, contributes to suspicion and violence against all aid workers.⁷ The result is that the ability of humanitarian organizations to access populations and deliver assistance is severely curtailed—as the current situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq illustrates. In Afghanistan, which currently receives much less attention than Iraq, tar-

geted attacks against aid organizations have escalated as fighting between the Afghan government backed by the U.S.-led coalition, on the one side, and insurgents, on the other, continues to rage. More than thirty international and national aid workers have been killed since early 2003. On June 2, 2004, three international and two Afghan MSF staff were murdered in Baghdis province in an attack for which the Taliban claimed responsibility.⁸ In contexts like this one, subjecting assistance to conditionality and selectivity in pursuit of higher politico-military goals makes meeting even emergency survival needs more difficult, as illustrated by MSF’s recent decision to withdraw from the country.

HUMANITARIANISM IN PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE

These examples show that when political objectives and immediate humanitarian concerns conflict, the hierarchy of priorities inherent in the coherence agenda often results in humanitarian interests being sacrificed or sidelined in the name of a “greater good.” The conditional and selective assistance implied by the coherence agenda results in ethically unjustifiable and practically

⁶ See Nicolas de Torrenté, “Humanitarian Action under Attack: Reflections on the Iraq War,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 17 (Spring 2004), pp. 1–30.

⁷ One leaflet pictured an Afghan girl carrying a bag of wheat and read: “Pass on any information related to Taliban, Al Qaeda and Gulbaddin to the coalition forces in order to have a continuation of the provision of humanitarian aid.” Another leaflet read: “Any attacks on coalition forces hinder humanitarian aid from reaching your areas.” See Kenny Gluck, “Coalition Forces Endanger Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan”; available at www.msf.org/countries/page.cfm?articleid=409F102D-A77A-4C94-89E0A47D7213B4D5.

⁸ See Médecins Sans Frontières, “Doctors Without Borders Shocked by Killing of 5 Staff in Afghanistan,” press release, June 3, 2004; available at www.doctorswithoutborders.org/pr/2004/06-03-2004.shtml.

avoidable loss of life. While often mistakenly presented as promoting a win-win equation of lifesaving aid and peace, in practice the coherence approach poses unacceptable and unnecessary trade-offs.

Ethically, there is no justification why future benefits derived from achieving peace or development should outweigh the immediate right of victims to receive lifesaving assistance. Humanitarian action is built on an ethic of refusal; that is, it “directly challenges the logic that justifies the premature and avoidable death of a part of humanity in the name of a hypothetical collective good.”⁹ For medical practitioners in particular, there is a clear ethical obligation to direct efforts to prevent death and alleviate suffering. Political, socioeconomic, and other conditions define a framework of possibilities, and political, socioeconomic, and other consequences of taking action must be taken into account—but doing so should and could be done without fundamentally compromising the lifesaving imperative that underpins the medical act.

Further, from a purely consequentialist view, it is not evident why providing humanitarian aid independently will in fact impede progress toward peace and development. Indeed some have made the opposite point, that the delivery of humanitarian aid in wartime conveys values of humanity and fraternity that are communicated to all parties in a conflict and hence play a key role in the construction of a meaningful peace. Francis Sejersted, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, noted in his presentation speech at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in 1999: “The peace Alfred Nobel was thinking of when he established the prize was a peace that is rooted in men’s hearts and minds. By showing each victim a human face, by showing respect for his or her human dignity, the fearless and selfless aid worker creates hope for

peace and reconciliation. That brings us to the heart of the matter, to absolutely fundamental prerequisites for peace.”¹⁰

In practice, conditionality presumes that allocating aid as a reward or denying aid as a sanction are effective political instruments. Not only is the evidence for this scant, but the rationale for making aid a tool of conflict resolution—a means to an end rather than an end in itself—is based on a flawed premise. In recent years, it has somewhat paradoxically been derived from the conventional wisdom that “aid fuels war,” particularly in conflicts where access to resources is seen as a primary driver. This has led to arguments that by understanding how aid contributed to conflict, it could be shaped to promote peace, a notion popularized under the banner of the “do no harm” approach.¹¹ But there is a critical difference between viewing aid as a causal factor that motivates or defuses conflict and simply understanding that aid necessarily impacts the dynamics of conflict in a manner that varies depending on the conditions under which it is distributed. What is in fact at stake for humanitarian organizations is to maximize the benefits of aid delivery for the affected population while minimizing its unavoidable negative side effects, such as co-optation and diversion by armed groups.

⁹ Jean-Hervé Bradol, “The Sacrificial International Order and Humanitarian Action,” in Fabrice Weissman, ed., *In the Shadow of ‘Just’ Wars’: Violence, Politics, and Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 5.

¹⁰ Speech available at www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/1999/presentation-speech.html.

¹¹ See Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999). Anderson does argue that aid is good, and that her focus is not on removing it but on making it better. However, there is little discussion of how a potential conflict of interest between peace promotion and immediate relief should be handled, opening the door for interpretations that promote minimizing or even withholding aid in order to “do no harm.”

This entails ensuring that there is humanitarian space—the possibility for the independent assessment of needs, deployment of aid according to needs alone, and close monitoring of the delivery of assistance to the intended beneficiaries. In exceptional circumstances, humanitarian space shrinks to the extreme: the negative can outweigh the positive and abstention becomes the best option. This occurred when the genocidal authorities’ total control of the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire dictated that aid served to strengthen their grip over the population more than alleviate its suffering. Similarly, MSF chose to withdraw its operations from North Korea in 1998 because the greater part of the aid was irrevocably co-opted by government officials. In order to minimize the potential or actual negative impact that aid can exert on the dynamic of conflict, it is the responsibility of humanitarian organizations to be vigilant about the conditions under which aid is deployed. This meaning of responsibility, however, is wholly different from deciding to whom and how aid should be allocated to serve political goals.

There are in fact no cogent principled or pragmatic reasons to sacrifice or sideline humanitarian action. By extending the logic of development assistance in peacetime to humanitarian action in war, the coherence approach both misunderstands and undermines the specificity and relevance of humanitarian aid for victims of conflict and crisis. Humanitarian action is a reaction to actual observed need and suffering. As long as a crisis continues to create victims, humanitarian action carried out independently and impartially to meet their urgent needs remains extremely relevant. When the needs generated by the conflict abate and as an uncontested political authority emerges, humanitarian aid should be accompanied and eventually superseded by reconstruction

and development assistance. It is normal and acceptable practice for such aid programs to be carried out under the direction of the politically legitimate and capable authority in charge, which is in turn supported by it. In these ideal circumstances, the need for, and relevance of, unconditional and immediate humanitarian action fades away. Yet, there is often much pressure for aid programs to fall “coherently” in line to support the emerging political order as soon as a diplomatic agreement has been reached or a peace process is under way. The way most integrated UN missions established to support transitions from war to “peace,” as in Afghanistan or Liberia, have made humanitarian assistance a pillar that directly reports to the political leadership from the outset is an example of this logic. This, however, often entails wishful or even delusional thinking, as conflict may continue in parts of the country, reconstruction assistance may be slow to arrive, and/or certain population groups may well be excluded or discriminated against in the course of the political rebuilding process. In those instances, there is no reason for humanitarian action, with its sole commitment to the people in need, to abdicate its responsibilities, and its ability to respond independently should be preserved and defended.

DENYING THE REALITY CONCERNING GOVERNMENTS’ RESPONSE TO CRISES

Consistently making aid a tool of conflict resolution does not only entail glossing over the impact of conditional and selective aid on the survival needs of populations caught up in crisis—it also requires presuming that the international response to crises is in fact “coherent” and that international political will is being mustered commensurate with the need of populations for protection and assistance. But it is evident that the foreign

policy objectives and actions of major powers rarely coincide with the interests of conflict-affected populations. Indeed, aid assessments and funding flows are massively skewed according to varying foreign policy objectives.¹² And while the few international military interventions receive great attention, the most common form of international response is in fact deliberate neglect.

This does not mean that a positive correlation between international political and military actions and humanitarian access and assistance cannot exist. Notwithstanding the efforts of humanitarian organizations, gaining access to people in need and ensuring that they receive assistance is extremely difficult in certain political and military environments, particularly ones that are marked by great physical insecurity. Since most conflicts are internal, belligerents are the key forces relevant to the delivery of aid to be reckoned with in this respect. However, international interventions in conflict can benefit the physical protection as well as the material assistance of populations in grave danger. For instance, the rescuing by U.K. troops of embattled UN peacekeepers in Sierra Leone in 2001 had the effect of improving overall security and opening up parts of the country for easier assistance.¹³ But it does not follow that recognizing this positive correlation in certain instances means that humanitarian action's operating principles should be set aside to proactively associate aid delivery with the international political response to crises in general, particularly considering the different forms these international responses can take in practice.

More frequently than carrying out military intervention, governments choose to respond through involvement, such as has been the case in the Sudan, Angola, and North Korea. In those crises, the international community has displayed a formal concern

about the massive humanitarian problem, while subjecting aid operations to a strong political agenda—whether it is the attempt to prop up a peace agreement or to contain possible international aggression.¹⁴ International engagement has essentially taken the form of a partisan political and diplomatic involvement with the objective of containing a crisis within certain limits that would not challenge the interests of the most powerful states. Involvement serves the purpose of visibly conveying the impression that the crisis is being addressed, when in fact it is being managed and contained. When aid becomes one of the principal forms of international political action in a given context, the stakes associated with the control, direction, and impact of aid programs are magnified, as was the case in Angola. The result is that, despite the availability of often-significant quantities of aid, deployment is not driven by the interests and needs of the victims.

With respect to conflicts associated with the greatest numbers of civilian casualties, the international reaction has been generally to refrain from intervention or to become involved in a marginal way.¹⁵ The displayed indifference to the extreme brutality of conflicts such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo stems from the fact that the violence and deprivation suffered by populations are not considered to be a sufficiently important objective by those international actors that are capable of addressing them. In

¹² See Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, "The Quality of Money: Donor Behavior in Humanitarian Financing," Humanitarianism and War Project, April 2003; James Darcy and Charles-Antoine Hoffman, "Humanitarian Needs Assessment and Decision-Making," Overseas Development Institute, September 2003; available at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgbrief3.pdf.

¹³ Bryer, "Politics and Humanitarianism," p. 13.

¹⁴ Bradol, "The Sacrificial International Order and Humanitarian Action," p. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

such circumstances, humanitarian action is left to deal with belligerents who have, in effect, been delivered a license to kill in a total war with few, if any, international restraints. Without international accountability for violations, and enforcement, of international humanitarian law, humanitarian aid is effectively deployed in a political vacuum. As a result, it is reduced far below actual requirements and subjected to intense pressure by the belligerents, resulting in increased predation, diversion, and hence violence. The situation in Chechnya and the neighboring republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan is a vivid example: international powers have only paid lip service to the devastating humanitarian legacy of a conflict characterized in particular by brutal Russian military operations, while at the same time aid workers are being kidnapped, intimidated, and harassed, and Chechens displaced in Ingushetia have been forcibly repatriated against their will.¹⁶

Whether it is intervention, involvement, or abstention, the international response to crises is driven primarily by political considerations, rather than the need of the affected population for protection or assistance. In these circumstances, the key question is why it would be justified, beneficial, or necessary to purposefully align aid delivery with such varying responses, particularly given the largely deleterious implications of each type of response on the ability to deploy assistance unconditionally to those in need.

FULFILLING POLITICAL AND HUMANITARIAN DUTIES

Governments have political responsibilities to address conflicts that generate massive human suffering through political engagement and, in extreme circumstances such as genocide, through more robust measures

that may include military intervention. And they also have political responsibilities and legal obligations with regard to humanitarian action itself. The legal obligations—which are the result of ever-fragile international political consensus that emerged in the wake of World War II that noncombatants should be spared from the excesses of war by placing limits on the means and methods of warfare and by ensuring the delivery of lifesaving assistance during wartime—are enshrined in the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols. Instead of undermining humanitarian action by enlisting it to the cause of peace and development, governments would much better serve people in crisis by actively promoting the respect of international humanitarian law and by mobilizing resources for meaningful assistance in a consistent and proportional manner. Insisting on adequate conditions for the deployment of humanitarian aid, such as access to victims, safety of aid workers, and appropriate monitoring, is a critical political responsibility—and, in fact, constitutes the polar opposite of making the allocation of humanitarian aid conditional on political objectives.

In the face of the growing practice of merging aid within a broader agenda, defending the merits of independent humanitarian action that is detached from the international politico-military response is often misunderstood as a nostalgic and naive call for political virginity.¹⁷ Humanitarian action has inherent limits. It has a modest, if critically important, aim of saving individual lives and

¹⁶ See, e.g., Médecins Sans Frontières, “Left Without a Choice—Chechens Forced to Return to Chechnya,” May 2003; available at www.doctorswithoutborders.org/pr/2003/05-06-2003.shtml.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Paul O’Brien, “Politicized Humanitarianism: A Response to Nicolas de Torrenté,” *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 17 (Spring 2004), pp. 31–41.

alleviating suffering in acute crisis situations—and not of reshaping societies. In order for humanitarian action to be effective, this humanitarian imperative must be politically recognized and supported. Vigorously defending the right of each and every victim to survive the excesses of war has always been a controversial and politically charged act. Its idealism, best embodied in the principle of impartiality, must be backed up by hard-nosed realism about political practices and interests if humanitarianism is to have a chance of prevailing against brutality, callousness, and neglect. As a concept and as a practice, humanitarian action must necessarily challenge governments to restrain their wartime behavior, to hold other belligerents to account, and to mobilize adequate resources for needs-based assistance.

In this connection, the pursuit of increased coherence between aid and the politico-military agenda of major powers raises fundamental questions about the nature of humanitarian organizations. Instead of external actors rooted within society that challenge political authority, they are promoted as partners working together with powerful governments for a common good. Proponents of integration have pointed that such association carries the benefits of greater funding for, and increased effectiveness of, delivering services to those (few) populations that receive political attention. But there are also significant costs. Among those is the ability of humanitarian organizations to hold states accountable for fulfilling their political and legal responsibilities when they become formal associates of governments. In addition to providing assistance, humanitarian organizations can contribute to the protection of noncombatants from undue violence through advocacy that calls attention to war crimes they witness, which all belligerents, including Western powers

that declare their benevolent intentions, commit. The public scrutiny of the torture of prisoners perpetrated by U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan in the wake of the publication of the Abu Ghraib photos indicates that there is a growing political space to recognize and debate this reality. It also underlines the imperative that humanitarian organizations clearly and unambiguously dissociate themselves from all warring parties, and in particular from powers who readily profess to be acting in the name of humanitarianism.

In contexts in which Western powers intervene militarily, the concept and practice of impartial humanitarian action has been undermined. It is true that the capacity of independent humanitarian organizations to influence this trend is limited. In Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, all aid organizations, whether independent or “embedded” with the coalition, are vulnerable to attack and constrained in their ability to act. Critics of the so-called classic humanitarianism have emphasized that in the context of highly politicized Western military interventions, radical opponents of the Western agenda have designated all aid organizations as targets for their murderous attacks—whether they are independent and strictly humanitarian, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, or politicized, such as the UN agencies—essentially because their origins, funding base, staffing, and value system are predominantly Western. They have stressed that since extremist forces do not accept restrictions on the means and methods of warfare inherent in international humanitarian law, it is an illusion to rely on humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality to ensure immunity from attack.

While delivering aid in war zones is always tenuous and dangerous, and while there is certainly no immediate solution to this quandary, this line of reasoning dismisses the

contribution that aid organizations themselves have made to the perception that their assistance is an extension of Western “hearts-and-minds” efforts by not clearly distancing themselves from the United States and its coalition partners. It also implies that by either retreating from the scene altogether or by clearly embracing a partisan role through the acceptance of funding, direction, and even armed protection from Western powers—the two most widely offered “solutions” to the security problem—humanitarian organizations essentially accept that victims “on the wrong side” in these contexts would be systematically denied assistance. Instead, a much more vigorous defense of the specificity and relevance of independent humanitarian action could, over time and with effort, counter the growing perception that humanitarian aid is part of Western political and military strategy.

Many aid agencies have opted to work with international intervention forces, particularly when they are sanctioned by the United Nations, while attempting to set some terms and limits to this cooperation.¹⁸ They argue that their organizations aim to do more than “merely” save lives, and that the politico-military engagement of Western powers (and their funding) is an opportunity to be seized.¹⁹ Perhaps a fruitful path is to recognize that a diversity of approaches may be useful. Agencies that decide to associate themselves with the promotion of the international—currently equivalent with the Western—agenda should openly acknowledge it, and articulate the principles that they are governed by in this “new humanitarianism,” or “politicized humanitarianism,” approach.

Currently, however, a certain hypocrisy prevails, as few organizations embracing cooperation under the integrated model would want to abandon the benefits of claim-

ing to be humanitarian—i.e., neutral and impartial—to gain access to populations, particularly in contexts where there is no international politico-military operation. It is difficult, however, to see how different approaches could be used in different instances—for example, aid organizations choosing to work alongside the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq, and to operate completely independently in the Congo. Adopting such a wide variation in operating principles assumes that conflicts are completely unconnected, and that an international humanitarian organization can insulate its reputation of being “integrated” and politicized in one context, and independent in another. This notion underestimates the role of increased information and growing transnational links between crisis situations.²⁰

There is no doubt that, however ill defined, peace, justice, and development are worthy aspirations. But until these elusive goals are achieved, the independent pursuit of the humanitarian imperative, however limited and difficult it may be, remains an essential and relevant endeavor for people trapped in conflict and crisis. To bring tangible benefits to people in urgent need of help, it is necessary to support and respect the independence of humanitarian action—instead of sacrificing or sidelining it through integration in politically driven responses.

¹⁸ On the approach of aid organizations, in particular U.S.-based NGOs, toward the U.S. government before and during the war in Iraq, see de Torrenté, “Humanitarian Action under Attack,” pp. 1–30.

¹⁹ See, e.g., O’Brien, “Politicized Humanitarianism.”

²⁰ For arguments in favor of a “variable” humanitarianism, see Hugo Slim, “A Call to Arms: Humanitarian Action and the Art of War” (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, February 2004).