

## **Humanitarianism Transformed**

Michael Barnett  
Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs  
University of Minnesota  
301 19th Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
mbarnett@hhh.umn.edu

The author is Harold Stassen Chair of International Affairs at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota. In 2004-05 he was a Visiting Associate at the Center on International Cooperation. I would like to thank Kevin Hartigan, Martha Finnemore, Abby Stoddard, Ron Kassimir, Craig Calhoun, Jack Snyder, Adele Harmer, the participants of the Minnesota International Relations Colloquium, and three reviewers from *Perspectives on Politics* for their comments and corrections. I am especially grateful to the participants of the SSRC series on "The Transformation of Humanitarian Action."

The global response to the devastation caused by the tsunami on December 26, 2004 was an extraordinary display of humanitarian action. Within hours scores of nongovernmental organizations were providing life-saving medical attention, shelter, and water. Soon thereafter states exhibited how compassion had become a status category. Bristling from accusations that they were not doing enough, they began to outbid one another in order to avoid censure and gain stature. In addition to an unprecedented outpouring of financial support, states temporarily gave their militaries humanitarian assignments. The United States dispatched the U.S.S. Lincoln to the coast of the Indonesian province of Aceh, performing search and rescue missions and delivering relief. Businesses gave in-kind and financial contributions, and established links on their web sites where customers could, with a click of a button, join the relief effort.

This global mobilization was made possible by the impressive expansion of the humanitarian system since the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Whereas once states barely considered their relationship to humanitarian action, many developed humanitarian units within their foreign and defense ministries and increasingly accepted the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention. Whereas once humanitarian assistance barely registered on most government budgets, official assistance skyrocketed from \$2 billion in 1990 to \$6 billion in 2000. Whereas once only a handful of international organizations presented themselves as members of the humanitarian community, a growing number, including the World Bank, now involve themselves in some form of assistance. There has been an explosion of nongovernmental organizations dedicated to some aspect of humanitarian action. Perhaps more impressive than their growing numbers is their growing sophistication. Whereas once they undertook their activities with a relatively slow-moving machinery staffed by individuals who were expected to learn on the job, now most of the prominent agencies have created a global positioning and delivery system that allows trained professionals to get assistance to where it is needed, when it is needed. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) grew from a two room office in the 1970s into an international network of 19 semi-independent branches with a combined annual budget of \$500

million that run programs in over seventy countries with 2000 international and 15,000 national staff. Finally, the very meaning of humanitarianism has expanded. Whereas once humanitarian action was recognized as a separate sphere of activity that was defined by the impartial relief to victims of man-made and natural disasters, it now includes human rights, access to medicines, development, democracy promotion, and even building responsible states.

This article reflects on two defining features of this transformation of humanitarianism: the purpose of humanitarianism is becoming politicized, and the organization of humanitarianism is becoming institutionalized. Once upon a time humanitarian agencies largely defined themselves in opposition to “politics.”<sup>ii</sup> Certainly they recognized that humanitarianism was the offspring of politics, that their activities have political consequences, and that they are inextricably part of the political world. Yet the widely accepted definition of humanitarianism - the impartial, independent, and neutral provision of relief to those who are in avoidable danger of harm - emerged in opposition to a particular meaning of politics and helped to depoliticize relief-oriented activities.<sup>iii</sup>

The foundational purpose of humanitarian action, the provision of assistance to those at immediate risk, removed it from politics. Many activities might alleviate suffering and improve life circumstances, including human rights and development; but these are political because they aspire to restructure underlying social relations. Humanitarianism provides relief, it offers to save individuals but not to eliminate the underlying causes that placed them at risk. Viewed in this way, humanitarianism plays a distinctive role in the international sacrificial order.<sup>iv</sup> All international orders have winners and losers and thus demand their quota of victims. Humanitarianism interrupts this selection process by saving lives, thus reducing the number of sacrifices. However, it does not aspire to alter that international sacrificial order; that is the job of politics.

Humanitarian’s original principles also were a reaction to politics and designed to obstruct this “moral pollutant.” The principle of humanity commands attention to all humankind and inspires a cosmopolitanism. The principle of impartiality demands that assistance be based on

need and not discriminate on the basis of nationality, race, religious belief, gender, political opinions, or other considerations.<sup>v</sup> The principles of neutrality and independence also helped inoculate humanitarianism from politics. Relief agencies are best able to perform their life-saving activities if, and only if, they are untouched by state interests and partisan agendas.<sup>vi</sup> Neutrality involves refraining from taking part in hostilities or from any action that either benefits or disadvantages the parties to the conflict. Neutrality is both an end and a means to an end because it helps relief agencies gain access to populations at risk. Independence demands that assistance should not be connected to any of the parties directly involved in the conflict or who have a stake in the outcome. Accordingly, many agencies either refused or limited their reliance on government funding if the donors have a stake in the outcome. The principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence served to depoliticize humanitarian action and create a “humanitarian space” - a space insulated from politics.

Yet the Maginot line defending humanitarianism from politics crumbled over the 1990s as humanitarianism’s agenda ventured beyond relief and into the political world and agencies began working alongside, and with, states. Whereas once humanitarian agencies stuck to a relief agenda and avoided broader ambitions that were over the line and clearly political, over the 1990s more accepted the idea of trying to eliminate the root causes of conflict that places individuals at risk; this move swept them up into a logic of transformation and the world of politics. They also became more involved in politics to the extent that they and states began to share the same agenda. States were more willing to act in the name of humanitarianism, to fund relief operations, to use their diplomatic and political power to advance humanitarian causes, to authorize military troops to help deliver relief, and to consider the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention and the protection of civilian populations at risk. Humanitarian organizations were torn by the growing presence of states, acknowledging their potential contribution but worrying about the costs to their principles. Because, in their view, there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian emergencies, many lobbied states to apply military and political muscle to stop the bloodletting. Relief agencies working in war zones had to

confront warlords and militias that demanded a king's ransom of the assistance that was made necessary by their conflict and their intentional targeting of civilians; so, they occasionally sought outside intervention to provide armed protection and to help deliver relief. Yet the growing willingness of humanitarian organizations to work alongside states potentially undermined their neutrality and independence. These principles were completely shattered in places like Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where many agencies were being funded by the very governments that were combatants and were partly responsible for the emergency. The ever-present fear that any fraternizing between politics and humanitarianism would corrupt this sacred idea and undermine the ability to provide relief to those in need was becoming a daily reality. Reflective of the anxieties unleashed by this mixing of politics and principle, commentators spoke of humanitarianism in "crisis" and warned of the dangers of "supping with the devil," "drinking from the poisoned chalice," and "sleeping with the enemy."<sup>vii</sup>

The other side of this transformation was the institutionalization of a field of humanitarianism. Humanitarianism certainly existed prior to the 1990s, but it was hardly institutionalized. There were a relatively limited number of agencies. They had few sustained interactions and rarely concerned the establishment, revision, or maintenance of principles of action, codes of conduct, or professional standards that would help to define the boundaries of the field. Those few agencies that presented themselves as humanitarian limited themselves to emergency relief. In the field they operated according to very few standard procedures or drew from scientific knowledge as they set up, often quite literally, soup kitchens. Their operations were frequently staffed by individuals with little or no experience, who jumped into the fray believing that all they needed was a can-do attitude and good intentions.

Yet over the 1990s humanitarianism became more of a recognized field as there were more donors, deliverers, and regulators of a growing sphere of humanitarian action. Various developments and pressures propelled this institutionalization. The influx of new agencies, marching to their own drum, created confusion on the ground. Donors were providing more funds and were expecting recipients to be accountable and demonstrate effectiveness. Rwanda

was a turning point: a flood of agencies, many there simply to fly the flag and impress prospective donors, were feeding the architects of the genocide in camps in Zaire, fueling their rearmament, and potentially causing more harm than good. Rwanda and other events caused the entire community to undergo a painful period of introspection and stock-taking that raised troubling questions regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of humanitarian action. States raised similar questions, leaving aid organizations worried about their funding base. In response to these developments, the field began to institutionalize. It became increasingly rationalized, standardizing basic codes of conduct for intervention, developing accountability mechanisms, and calculating the consequences of its action. It became bureaucratized, developing precise rules that ideally could be applied across different situations. It became professionalized, developing doctrines, specialized areas of training, and career paths.

The humanitarian sector welcomed various elements of this institutionalization because they helped to standardize expectations, ease coordination in the field, enhance efficiency, and improve the quality of care to more populations. Yet other features were distressing, potentially changing not simply the organization of humanitarian action but its very character. Although these are humanitarian organizations, many were becoming big-time organizations and demonstrating commonplace interests in self-preservation and survival, at times allowing these base interests to overshadow their principled commitments. The development of standardized templates and guidelines made them less able to recognize and respond to local needs. The growing concerns with how to be more efficient in getting “deliverables” to “clients” hinted of a growing corporate culture. Reflective of these developments, participants increasingly referred to the field as an “industry,” a “business,” a “sector,” and an “enterprise.” In response to these developments, there were palpable fears that material and discursive borders that distinguished humanitarian agencies from commercial firms and even military units were disintegrating. If commercial firms were really more efficient at saving lives, and if non-profits were acting like corporate entities, then exactly what distinguished the two? Politicization and institutionalization, each in its own way, were calling into question the very

marks of distinction of humanitarian action.

In this essay I explore the causes and consequences of the transformation of humanitarianism. Drawing from various strands of organizational theory, Section I considers the causes behind the expansion and politicization of the purpose of humanitarianism and the institutionalization of the field. Various global forces created new opportunity structures for humanitarian action: states gave more generously because it furthered their foreign policy interests; there was a surge of emergencies in the early 1990s; and a change in the sovereignty regime reduced the barriers to intervention. Yet humanitarian organizations did not respond uniformly to these opportunities. To understand this variation in response requires a consideration of, first, the organization's identity and its initial understanding of the relationship between humanitarianism and politics, and, second, its dependence on others for symbolic and material resources. Although there were pockets of resistance to this politicization, arguably most existing and newly established organizations accepted these changes because they operated with a definition of humanitarian action that interfaced easily with politics and were dependent on states for their financing. The field's institutionalization was largely triggered by challenges to its legitimacy and effectiveness, challenges from donors and participants, challenges that threatened its bottom line, and challenges that were addressed by making the field more rational, bureaucratic, and professional.

Section II examines some of the effects of this transformation on humanitarian action. Much of the discussion of the effects focuses on politicization, that is, how the growing involvement by states is potentially compromising or distorting the essence of humanitarian action, whether these changes have been generally desirable, pragmatic, or self-destructive, and whether it is possible or even desirable to put the political genie back in the bottle.<sup>viii</sup> But the possible effects extend beyond what humanitarian agencies do to include what they are. Any discussion of effects, of course, turns on some baseline understanding of humanitarian action. Such an analysis does not need to essentialize humanitarianism, to suggest that there was a settled or fixed meaning that existed for decades until disrupted by the post-cold war period. Nor does

such an analysis provide an evaluative judgement as to whether these changes are necessarily good, reasonable under the circumstances, or reckless. Instead, such an analysis merely needs to ask what was the general understanding of humanitarian action prior to the 1990s, consider how politicization and institutionalization has shaken that understanding, and, most importantly, explore whether such changes have potentially undermined the cornerstone principle of impartial relief.

Although humanitarianism is now firmly on the global agenda, the same cannot be said for academic research. Most research directly related to humanitarian action is produced by specialized agencies such as the Overseas Development Institute's Humanitarian Policy Group, and is almost always directed at the policy community. Pockets of social science research are related to humanitarian action, including the literatures on humanitarian intervention, civil wars, democracy building, refugee studies, and peacekeeping. However, there has been remarkably little consideration of humanitarianism as an object of research. Although the body of the essay is suggestive of various lines of inquiry, by way of conclusion I consider how this account of transformation of humanitarianism links to several issues regarding the relationship between international nongovernmental organizations and world order, including the purpose of humanitarian action and its distinctive function in global politics.

#### Section I:

#### Causes of Transformation

I locate the causes of the transformation of humanitarianism in environmental forces. The expansion of humanitarian action owes to several important developments that encouraged humanitarian agencies to move from relief and toward the transformation of local structures, and to become more willing to work alongside and with states. Such developments led not only to the expansion of humanitarian action but also to its politicization. Yet not all agencies responded uniformly to these opportunities; consequently, I examine features of the

organization and its relationship to the environment to help to explain this variation.

Environmental developments also played an important role in shaping the institutionalization of humanitarianism. Although those in the sector had their own reasons for rationalizing, bureaucratizing, and professionalizing their organizations, pressures from donors and new international standards of legitimacy also played a critical role.

### Expansion and Politicization

The expansion and politicization of the purpose of humanitarianism owes largely to four global processes that created new opportunity structures that foregrounded the “civilian” as an object of concern.<sup>ix</sup> Geopolitical shifts associated with the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union increased the demand for humanitarian action in several ways.<sup>x</sup> There appeared to be more humanitarian crises than ever before.<sup>xi</sup> Although there is considerable debate regarding whether, in fact, there were more crises or whether Great Powers were now willing to recognize populations at risk because their policies were no longer the immediate cause, the emergencies now were on the international agenda.<sup>xii</sup> As states paid more attention to them, they linked these populations at risk to an expanding discourse of security. One reason for their visibility was because they now were viewed as a security issue. During the Cold War the UN Security Council defined threats to peace and security as disputes between states that might or had become militarized, conflicts involving the Great Powers, and general threats to global stability.<sup>xiii</sup> After the Cold War, and in reaction to the growing perception that domestic conflict and civil wars were leaving hundreds of thousands of populations at risk, creating mass flight, and destabilizing entire regions, the Security Council authorized interventions on the grounds that they challenged regional and international security. Responding to both the post-Cold War humanitarian emergencies and the growing prominence of the Security Council in this domain, the General Assembly passed a watershed resolution that coronated the UN as the new coordinating body for governing the response to humanitarian action.<sup>xiv</sup>

States also warmed to the idea of humanitarian action. Immediate evidence of their support was their growing financial generosity (more below). Even more impressive was their growing

willingness to support operations whose stated function was to protect civilians at risk, and even to consider the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention.<sup>xv</sup> States also began to treat humanitarian action as an instrument of their strategic and foreign policy goals. Since September 11th many states, including the United States, have viewed counterterrorism and humanitarianism as crime-fighting partners. In his now infamous words, in 2001 former Secretary of State Colin Powell told a gathering of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that “just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there [in Afghanistan] serving and sacrificing on the frontlines of freedom. NGOs are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team.”<sup>xvi</sup> States also discovered that humanitarian action was functional for avoiding more costly interventions. For instance, the major powers authorized UNHCR to deliver humanitarian relief in Bosnia in part because they wanted to relieve the growing pressure for a military intervention. Sometimes states will label their activities humanitarian because they want to do something; sometimes it is because they do not. Regardless of whether or not states had the right motives, they were providing new opportunities for humanitarian action.

The second development that propelled the encounter between politics and humanitarianism was the emergence of the category of “complex humanitarian emergencies.” A complex humanitarian emergency is a “conflict-related humanitarian disaster involving a high degree of breakdown and social dislocation and, reflecting this condition, requiring a system-wide aid response from the international community.”<sup>xvii</sup> These emergencies are characterized by a combustible mixture of state failure, refugee flight, militias, warrior refugees, and populations at risk from violence, disease, and hunger, and they seemed to proliferating across the world. These emergencies had several effects. They created a demand for new sorts of interventions and conflict management tools. Relief agencies were attempting to distribute food, water, and medicine in war zones, frequently being forced to bargain with militias, warlords, and hoodlums for access to populations in need. In situations of extreme violence and lawlessness they frequently lobbied foreign governments and the United Nations to

consider authorizing a protection force that could double as bodyguard and relief distributor. These emergencies also attracted a range of nongovernmental organizations to become more involved in the same space.<sup>xviii</sup> Relief agencies that were delivering emergency assistance, human rights organizations aspiring to protect human rights and create a rule of law, and development organizations keen to sponsor sustainable growth began to interact and to take responsibility for the same populations. The growing interaction between different fields in turn, encouraged them to articulate a relief-rights-development linkage within a humanitarian discourse that became tied to the construction of modern, legitimate, democratic states.<sup>xix</sup> As various international actors began to think about the causes of and solutions to these humanitarian emergencies, they situated their arguments under a humanitarian rubric that became tied to a wider range of practices and goals.

A third factor contributing to this politicization was the political economy of funding. Although private contributions increased, they paled in comparison to official assistance. Between 1990 and 2000 aid levels rose from \$2.1 billion to 5.9 billion, a nearly threefold increase. Moreover, as a percentage of official development assistance, humanitarian aid rose from an average of 5.83% between 1989 and 1993 to 10.5% in 2000.<sup>xx</sup> A few donors were responsible for much of this increase, and they also now comprise an oligopoly. The United States is the lead donor by a factor of three; in 1999, for instance, its outlays exceeded the total assistance of twelve large Western donors. Between 1995 and 1997 it provided 20% of total assistance, and then in the following three years its contribution rose to 30%. The second largest donor is the European Community Humanitarian Organization (ECHO), followed by the United Kingdom, several European countries, Canada, and Japan. Although various motives fueled this increase in giving, many states expected either something in return or evidence that their money was being well spent.

Finally, a change in the normative and legal environment also created new opportunities for humanitarian action that coaxed humanitarianism into the political world. There was a shift from negative to positive sovereignty.<sup>xxi</sup> Whereas once state sovereignty was sacrosanct, now it

was conditional on states honoring a “responsibility to protect” their societies.<sup>xxii</sup> Whereas once their legitimacy appeared to have nearly divine origins, now it was dependent on them possessing certain characteristics, such as the rule of law, markets, and democratic principles. These developments created a normative space for external intervention and encouraged a growing range of actors to expand their assistance activities; in some cases they were intended to provide immediate relief during conflict situations, in others to eliminate the root causes of conflict and create legitimate states. Regardless of the pretext, the new normative environment greased the tracks for more wide-ranging interventions.<sup>xxiii</sup>

A flourishing human rights agenda also left its mark. The logic of relief and the logic of rights share some important elements: they place front and center the human citizen and humanity; they contain the language of empowerment as they attempt to help the victims, the weak, and the powerless; and they favor a human-centered approach that rejects power.<sup>xxiv</sup> That said, they also demonstrate some serious divisions because the relief community will nearly always privilege survival over freedom, while the rights community is willing, at times, to use relief as an instrument of rights. This difference in priorities is most evident when rights-oriented agencies are willing to make relief conditional on the observance of human rights, a move many relief agencies view as nearly incomprehensible.<sup>xxv</sup> In any event, the fast-growing human rights agenda pulled humanitarianism from the margins toward the center of the international policy agenda, and many relief agencies, increasingly adopting the language of rights, were glad to ride its coattails.<sup>xxvi</sup>

There also was a growing cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism concerns the central idea that each person is of equal moral worth and a subject of moral concern, and that in the “justification of choices one’s choices one must take the prospects of everyone affected equally into account.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Cosmopolitanism underpins humanitarianism. The very principle of impartiality presumes that all those at risk, regardless of their identity, deserve equal attention and consideration. The desire to help those who are suffering regardless of place means that borders do not define the limits of obligations. This commitment to cosmopolitanism and the

very desire to reduce suffering, however, creates a tension within humanitarianism.<sup>xxviii</sup> One branch restricts it to the provision of assistance to victims of conflict; this is the version that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and is most closely associated with the ICRC. Another branch extends assistance to all those at risk and imagines eliminating the conditions that are hypothesized to render populations vulnerable.<sup>xxix</sup> As one aid worker wrote, “in terms of the destruction of human life, what difference is there between the wartime bombing of a civilian population and the distribution of ineffective medicines during a pandemic that is killing millions of people?”<sup>xxx</sup> If individuals are at risk because of authoritarian and repressive policies, then humanitarian organizations must be prepared to fight for human rights and democratic reforms. If individuals are at risk because of poverty and deprivation, then humanitarian organizations must be prepared to promote development. If regional and domestic conflicts are the source of violence against individuals, then humanitarian organizations must try their hand at conflict resolution and attempt to eliminate the underlying causes of conflict.

Variation in Response. Although these changes in global politics created new openings for an expanded meaning of humanitarianism, humanitarian agencies were not uniformly receptive. Many humanitarian organizations, including the IRC and Oxfam, were ready, willing and able to capitalize on these openings. There was virtue in expanding their operations to help the powerless, the weak, and the vulnerable. Instead of being satisfied by helping the “well-fed dead” they could eliminate the root causes of conflict. Others made a pragmatic decision to become more political, though cautious about every step and mindful of every possible consequence. Still others clung to their principles and resisted what they viewed as the siren of politics. ICRC and MSF worked against the international currents and stuck to “first principles.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

Two factors arguably account for much of this variance. One was the congruence between the organizational culture and these new openings. Humanitarian organizations can be differentiated according to their understanding of the relationship between politics and

humanitarianism.<sup>xxxii</sup> On this basis, there exist three principal camps.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Perhaps best known are Dunantist organizations, which define humanitarianism as the neutral, independent, and impartial provision of relief to victims of conflict, and which believe that humanitarianism and politics must be segregated. This branch is named after the patriarch of modern humanitarianism, Henry Dunant. Appalled by the carnage wrought by a fierce battle between French and Austrian forces in Solferino, Italy, in June 1859, Henry Dunant, a Swiss citizen, appealed to the local population to tend to the thousands of suffering soldiers. Based on his personal experiences, Dunant wrote an account that became a bestseller in Europe and stirred European elites to consider his proposals for regulating war and administering to the wounded. These discussions produced both the Geneva Conventions, which established international humanitarian law, and the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), which was to be an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusive humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war. In general, Dunantist organizations, which are often accused of seeing themselves as the “high priests” of humanitarianism, fear that the relaxation of its founding principles or expansion of its mandate will open the floodgates to politics and endanger humanitarianism.

Wilsonian organizations attempt to ameliorate or transform the political, economic or cultural structures that leave populations at risk. Although many of the most famous members of this camp, including Save the Children, Oxfam, and the International Rescue Committee, originated in wartime and thus concentrated on rescuing populations at risk, after war’s end they expanded into development and other activities that were designed to assist marginalized populations. Over time they expanded into advocacy, an activity they shared with a growing number of human rights organizations that also belong to this camp. Agencies involved in restoring and fostering economic livelihoods also expressed a Wilsonian orientation. Wilsonian organizations are certainly political, at least as defined by Dunantist organizations. However, even those who subscribed to a transformational agenda present themselves as apolitical to the extent that they claim to act according to universal values and avoid partisan

politics.

Statist humanitarian organizations are international organizations created by states to help them carry out their humanitarian obligations. State sovereignty significantly shapes their definition of humanitarianism and its relationship to politics. At the beginning of the last century states cautiously evoked the language of humanitarianism for fear that such transcendental concerns might swamp their core interests and undermine their sovereignty. As a consequence, when states created international organizations to govern humanitarian issues they gave them highly circumscribed mandates that were highly mindful of sovereignty. In order to signal to states that they had no intention of encroaching on their space, humanitarian organizations adopted the principles of consent, neutrality, and impartiality. Consider the UNHCR. States established this international refugee agency to help them carry out their responsibilities to refugees, but defined the mandate and its operational vocabulary in terms that ensured that organization did not violate the state's authority; toward that end, UNHCR routinely presented itself as "apolitical" and "humanitarian" as a signal to states that they understood their place.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Because humanitarian organizations have different understandings of the relationship between humanitarianism and politics, their organizational identity helps to explain their response to the global changes in the 1990s. Simply stated, the greater the discrepancy between the organizational culture and environmental pressures the more the staff will resist because of a fear of politics; the greater the congruence the more it will conform because such conformity will not be viewed as a threat to the organization's identity. MSF and ICRC, the two best known Dunantist organizations, spent much of the 1990s unsuccessfully attempting to police the borders between humanitarianism and politics. Wilsonian organizations not only capitalized on these openings, they frequently lobbied for them. Statist humanitarian organizations exploited these changes in sovereignty to venture carefully into domestic space while claiming that they were not being political because they shunned any involvement in partisan politics. Similar to Dunantists, Statist organizations were not passive beneficiaries of

these changes, they actively lobbied for them by encouraging states to embrace the humanitarian agenda on the grounds that this principled position would further international peace and security.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Another dimension of the organizational culture that conceivably contributed to the expanding purpose of humanitarian action was the gap between the moral and organizational mandate. Organizations may feel the need to expand in order to resolve the contradiction between their broad aspirational goals and the more narrowly circumscribed rules that limit organizational action.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Humanitarian organizations are empowered by moral or aspirational claims that can be much broader than their specific mandates or capacities. After all, while they act in the name of humanity and attempted to reduce suffering, their mandates might not necessarily extend to cover all that are at risk. Over time, the former can exert pressure on the latter: limited organizational structures make it impossible to fulfill broad mandates creating reasons for organizational expansion into new areas. If the goal is to relieve suffering, then it is difficult to feel gratified by providing temporary relief; instead, they will desire to eliminate the very conditions that produce a demand for their services.<sup>xxxvii</sup> For instance, before the 1980s UNHCR leaped into action only after populations crossed an international border. Yet many UNHCR staff bristled at these restrictions, wanting to take on a preventive role. Their wish came true in the 1980s, as UNHCR began trying to prevent refugee flows, to get at their “root causes,” and to lobby for “State responsibility.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> From there it was a small step for UNHCR to become involved in eliminating the causes of flight and ensuring that repatriated refugees stayed at home; toward that end it began promoting human rights, the rule of law, and development.

Resource dependence is the other variable that helps explain the variation in response by organizations to a broader definition of humanitarian action.<sup>xxxix</sup> Humanitarian organizations do not survive by good intentions alone. They also need resources to fund their staff and programs, resources that are controlled by others. The willingness of others to fund their activities is contingent, in part, on their perceived legitimacy and whether they are viewed as

acting according to the community's values. If they are out of synch with their environment, then they are likely to have their legitimacy questioned, which, in turn, will threaten their resource base.<sup>xl</sup> Existing organizations, especially those that were culturally-inclined to expand, had every incentive to move in directions that were directly rewarded by states. Development organizations are exemplary here. By the end of the 1980s development as a project had become increasingly delegitimated because of the failure to produce either transformation or development. Humanitarianism handed development agencies a new function and sense of purpose; they became necessary for postconflict reconstruction and structural prevention, central to humanitarian action and international and human security.<sup>xli</sup> Newly established organizations, some humanitarian and some less so, found it advantageous to present themselves and their activities as quintessentially humanitarian. Existing humanitarian agencies also were rewarded by expanding their activities. For instance, by becoming the lead humanitarian agency, UNHCR was in a position not only to expand its responsibilities but also to demonstrate its relevance to the very states who paid the bills.<sup>xlii</sup>

The scope, scale, and size of humanitarian action increased dramatically over the 1990s. This phenomenal development was made possible by both global developments and organizational logics. The early 1990s created a growing demand for humanitarian action. States were quite willing to fund these activities for a mixture of motives. The growing number of humanitarian emergencies, and their construction as a security issue, meant that there were growing pressures and reasons to act. The normative constraints loosened, enabling humanitarian organizations to extend their assistance activities. Most humanitarian organizations treated these growing opportunity structures as just that, opportunities. There were moral imperatives that could not be denied. For existing Wilsonian organizations whose identity and interests were consistent with these new imperatives, for Statist organizations that found sovereignty and the principle of non-interference an unwarranted restriction on their duties, and for other organizations new to the cause, this expansion of humanitarianism did not trigger the same fears as it did for Dunantist organizations. The incentive structure also

rewarded those who went along with these developments and threatened to reduce the market share of those who resisted. Although there was resistance by such venerated agencies as ICRC and MSF, the secular trend was toward expansion, extending the touchpoints between humanitarianism and politics.<sup>xliii</sup>

### Expansion and Institutionalization

Until the 1990s humanitarianism barely existed as a field. Relatively few agencies presented themselves as part of a humanitarian system. There were only handful of major relief agencies, including ICRC, International Federation of the Red Cross, MSF, and various organizations such as Save the Children and Oxfam that began as relief agencies, moved into development, and then developed an emergency response capacity (though generally not adopting the discourse of humanitarianism). Although these agencies shared broad principles such as humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, there was no system-wide effort to establish codes of conduct and other standards of behavior that would regulate the field and define membership. Those who participated in relief work treated it more as a craft than as a profession because, in the main, they did not claim that their qualifications derived from specialized knowledge, doctrine, or training, and did not generally see this as their life's work.

Yet over the 1990s humanitarianism became institutionalized. It was becoming a field, developing: regular interactions among the members, an increase in the information and knowledge that members had to consider, a greater reliance on specialized knowledge, and a collective awareness that they are involved in a common enterprise. It was becoming rationalized, aspiring to develop: methodologies for calculating results, abstract rules to guide standardized responses, and procedures to improve efficiency and identify the best means to achieve specified ends. Humanitarian organizations were becoming bureaucratized, developing: specialized knowledge, spheres of competence, and rules to standardize responses and to drive means-ends calculations. They were becoming professionalized, developing: specific knowledge, fixed doctrine, and vocational qualifications that derive from specialized training.<sup>xliv</sup>

Sociological institutionalism helps to explain why humanitarianism began to institutionalize after the 1980s. This branch of organizational theory emphasizes the “socially constructed normative worlds in which organizations exist and how the social rules, standards of appropriateness, and models of legitimacy will constitute the organization.”<sup>xlv</sup> The environment in which an organization is embedded is defined by a culture that contains acceptable models, standards of action, goals, and logics of appropriateness. Organizations are constituted by, and will be compelled to adopt, this culture for a variety of reasons - though resource requirements figure centrally. Organizations depend on others for the resources they require to do their work. The willingness of others to fund their activities is contingent, in part, on their perceived legitimacy. As Scott and Meyer observe, this normative environment contains the “rules and requirements to which individual organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy from the environment.”<sup>xlvi</sup> In short, because organizations are rewarded for conforming to rules and legitimation principles, and punished if they do not, they will tend to model themselves after those organizational forms that have legitimacy.

The environment also helps to explain institutional isomorphism, that is, why particular models spread across the population.<sup>xlvii</sup> There are three mechanisms of isomorphism, though the first two are most relevant for our purposes here. Coercive isomorphism occurs when powerful organizations, such as states, impose rules and standards on other organizations. Mimetic isomorphism largely occurs in situations of uncertainty, encouraging organizations to model themselves after others that they believe are successful. Normative isomorphism largely originates from professionalization, the attempt by members of an occupation “to define the conditions and methods of their work, to control the production of producers,”<sup>xlviii</sup> and to establish the epistemic basis for their authority and the claim to occupational autonomy. In general, sociological institutionalism emphasizes how organizations, desirous of symbolic and material resources and exposed to the same environment, will tend to adopt the same organizational forms.

Humanitarianism’s institutionalization was largely driven by challenges to the emerging

field's legitimacy and effectiveness, challenges that were emanating both from donors that paid the bills and from members who were experiencing a crisis of confidence in reaction to new circumstances and shortcomings, and challenges that were answered by rationalizing, bureaucratizing, and professionalizing. Below I briefly consider how these pressures led to specific initiatives in each of these domains.

A major feature of the field's rationalization was the attempt to standardize relief activities.<sup>xlix</sup> In response to the influx of more relief agencies that were operating according to varying standards, a situation made doubly dangerous in the context of providing relief during conflict, and the growing evidence that different populations were being differentially treated, humanitarian organizations attempted to establish professional standards and codes of conduct. Several such initiatives stand out. In 1992 ICRC, the International Federation of the Red Cross, and the Red Crescent Society (in consultation with the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response) began work on a ten-point code of conduct. Originally conceived as providing guidance during natural disasters, it was extended to conflict situations. The first four articles re-affirm the basic principles of the ICRC, and the last six identify "good practices" and methodology for relief operations. This document now is used for criteria for planning and evaluating how NGOs should operate in war zones.<sup>l</sup> Various NGOs also assembled what came to be known as the Providence Principles, which also intended to introduce standardized rules for delivering relief. The desire to standardize relief practices led various NGOs to launch the SPHERE project to establish minimal standards in the areas of water, sanitation, nutrition, shelter, site planning, and health.<sup>li</sup> This development, in turn, led to the Humanitarian Charter, which endeavors to "...achieve defined levels of service for people affected by calamity or armed conflict, and to promote the observance of Dunantist humanitarian principles." The sheer proliferation of principles and exercises to establish codes of conduct represented an attempt to standardize the rules governing humanitarian action.<sup>lii</sup>

Another feature of rationalization was the introduction of systems of accountability.<sup>liii</sup> This development was pushed by donors, who began to apply "new public management" principles

as they expected humanitarian organizations to provide evidence that their money was being well spent. These principles originated with the neoliberal orthodoxy of the 1980s. One of neoliberalism's goals was to reduce the state's role in the delivery of public services and, instead, rely on commercial and voluntary organizations that were viewed as more efficient. Because government agencies justified the shift from the public to the private and voluntary sectors on the grounds that the latter were more efficient, they introduced monitoring mechanisms to reduce the possibility of either slack or shirking.<sup>liv</sup> Until the 1990s humanitarian organizations largely escaped this public management ideology; because humanitarian assistance was a minor part of the foreign aid budget, states did not view humanitarianism as central to their foreign policy goals, and states trusted that humanitarian agencies were efficient and effective, there was little reason to absorb the monitoring costs. However, once humanitarian funding increased, humanitarianism became more central to security goals, and states began to question the effectiveness of humanitarian organizations, they were willing to do so.<sup>lv</sup> Toward that end, states introduced new reporting requirements, develop new kinds of contracts, and demanded greater evidence of results.

The drive toward accountability was not completely donor-driven, for those within the sector increasingly sought greater accountability - to recipients. It was not enough to be accountable to donors for how their money was being spent but also to be accountable to the recipients who were supposed to be the beneficiaries of their activities. Accountability, therefore, meant not only being held to account when their policies went awry but also identifying ways to improve their policies. These developments led to various system-wide initiatives. One prominent creation was ALNAP, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action.<sup>lvi</sup> In 1999 various NGOs initiated the Ombudsman for Humanitarian Assistance to address their accountability to their "clients." As it stated, "while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have to respond to a wide range of interested bodies to whom they are accountable in some way, the current system is in no way accountable directly to beneficiaries or 'claimants' - the very people it purports to assist." In

general, the move toward the development of codes of conduct, accountability, and standardization was a response to the need for greater regulation, regulations that were demanded by both states and those in the sector.

Emblematic of bureaucratization was the effort by humanitarian organization to develop technologies and methodologies to calculate the impact of their policies in order to demonstrate effectiveness and identify the optimal strategies. Prior to the 1990s few humanitarian organizations even thought to measure the consequences of their actions, assuming that the mere provision of their assistance activities was evidence of their good results. This blissful assumption was shattered by two developments. The first was mounting evidence that their interventions might be causing more harm than good or prolonging the suffering of others. Rwanda, in particular, burst the confidence of the humanitarian community.<sup>lvii</sup> In addition, donors began demanding results-based evaluations. Whereas once aid agencies could rely on inputs, now they were being asked to report on outputs.

Measuring impact and demonstrating that humanitarian organizations are responsible for success (or failure) is a demanding methodological task. Humanitarian organizations must define “impact,” specify their goals and translate them into measurable indicators, gather data in highly fluid emergency settings, establish baseline data in order to generate a “before and after” snapshot, control for alternative explanations and variables, and construct reasonable counterfactual scenarios.<sup>lviii</sup> Nevertheless, humanitarian organizations began to draw from the health sciences field and its epidemiological models, and from the development field and its program evaluation tools in order to develop the methodologies required to measure impact and effectiveness. One prominent initiative is SMART - Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Nutrition, which got its start from a hard nudge by the United States. Another is Care International’s Benefits-Harms analysis, which borrows from human rights field, as it aspires to help relief and development organizations measure the impact of their programs on people’s human rights.<sup>lix</sup>

Humanitarian organizations also attempted to professionalize. Although relief workers still

learn on the job, they increasingly draw from other disciplines such as health sciences and engineering, from established manuals, and from specialized training programs run by private firms, nongovernmental organizations, states, and academic institutions. Although many relief workers are still hired absent any specialized skills, increasingly agencies recruit those who have advanced knowledge. Although relief workers still have a high burn out rate and most organizations have impressive degree of staff turnover, many agencies now have full-time staff who draw salaries with benefits packages, and treat the field as a career. In addition to the development of specialized training and new recruitment and occupational patterns, many of the premier agencies underwent a major change in their bureaucratic structure. Although operational divisions still carry tremendous bureaucratic weight, prestige, and influence, they increasingly compete with newly established offices dedicated to fund-raising and donor relations, staffed by those whose primary field experience derives not from the refugee camps but instead from marketing campaigns and pledge drives.

Over the course of the 1990s humanitarianism began to institutionalize. Driven by demands from donors and self-critical members of the sector that were increasingly questioning their effectiveness and legitimacy, humanitarian agencies began to rationalize, bureaucratize, and professionalize. By no means, though, did humanitarianism become institutionalized. In many respects it remains weakly institutionalized. A principal reason why is because these are independently-minded NGOs that view institutionalization not as a value-free, technical exercise but instead as a deeply political process that potentially relocates them in new networks and potentially subordinates them to new authority structures. For these and other reasons humanitarian organizations have been slow to institutionalize or have been content to adopt the formal traits while continuing business-as-usual. That said, beginning in the 1990s there has been a slow and stuttered development of an institutionalized field, producing greater regulation of humanitarian organizations and bringing them into greater conformity with the environment.

### Section III

## Consequences of Transformation

The transformation of humanitarianism has left its mark, and humanitarian organizations are in a heated debate whether it is a mark of Cain. At times this debate appears to devolve into two, equally stylized camps: one waxing sentimental about some quasi-mythical golden age of humanitarian action in which relief agencies enjoyed a humanitarian space of infinite expanse, and another suggesting that the golden age is around the corner because humanitarian agencies have never been better funded or better positioned to help more people at risk. Without getting pulled into this debate's undertow, I do want to explore how the politicization and institutionalization of humanitarianism has left humanitarian organizations more vulnerable to external control. Elements of this control include the ability of states to use direct and indirect means to constrain and guide the actions of humanitarian agencies in ways that agencies believe potentially violate their principles. Other dimensions of external control concern the impact of the environment on the organizational culture of humanitarian agencies, their identity, internal organization, practices, and ethical commitments and calculations. The discussion of the transformation of humanitarianism, in other words, forces us to consider the effects of power in terms of what humanitarian organizations do and what they are.

### Power over Humanitarian Action

The politicization and institutionalization of humanitarian action has handed states and international institutions greater control over humanitarian organizations, control that can be used to compel humanitarian agencies to act in ways that are counter to their interests and that violate their principles. Although states have historically vacillated in their desire to use humanitarian action to serve their interests, the 1990s were unprecedented to the extent that states attempted to impose their agendas on agencies.<sup>lx</sup> Toward that end, states began introducing mechanisms that were intended to control their "implementing partners." Although such control mechanisms did not necessarily compel agencies to act in ways that they believed were antagonistic to their interests or principles, frequently they did.<sup>lxi</sup>

Arguably the most important control mechanism came from the power of the purse. Most humanitarian organizations are highly dependent on state funding, and states can use this resource dependence to their advantage. Sometimes donors make transparent threats. In 2003 U.S. AID administrator, Andrew Natsios, told humanitarian organizations operating in Iraq that they were obligated to show the American flag if they took U.S. funding. If not, he warned that they could be replaced.<sup>lxii</sup> One NGO official captured the U.S.'s message in the following terms: "play the tune or they'll take you out of the band."<sup>lxiii</sup>

Sometimes donors use more subtle, indirect, methods. Donors are increasingly insisting that agencies submit themselves to coordination mechanisms. Coordination can appear to be a technical exercise whose sole function is to improve the division of labor, increase specialization, and heighten efficiencies. Yet this coordination, like all governance activities, is a highly political exercise that is defined by power. The power behind coordination has not been lost on humanitarian organizations, especially when the donors are either parties to the conflict or have a vested interest in the outcome.<sup>lxiv</sup> Most famously, NATO in Kosovo and the United States in Afghanistan insisted on coordinating humanitarian action.<sup>lxv</sup> Although they justified their coordination role on the grounds that it would improve the relief effort, they had more self-interested reasons. In order to sell the war at home, the combatants wanted the favorable publicity that came with being televised delivering food to, and building shelters for, displaced populations. It also would help them win the "hearts and minds" campaign, integral to the war effort.<sup>lxvi</sup> Humanitarian organizations, though, were now being coordinated by one of the parties to the conflict, compromising their neutrality and independence.<sup>lxvii</sup>

The bilateralization of aid and the earmarking of funds also potentially steered both individual agencies and produced some general trends in the allocation of aid. Multilateral aid is technically defined as aid that is given to multilateral organizations and is not earmarked; these organizations, therefore, have complete discretion over how the money is spent. Bilateral aid can mean the state dictates either to the multilateral organization how the money is spent or gives the money to a nonmultilateral organization such as an NGO. Earmarking is when the

donor dictates where and how the assistance will be used, frequently identifying regions, countries, operations, or even projects; this is especially useful if governments have geopolitical interests or pet projects. Since the 1980s there has been a dramatic shift away from multilateral aid and toward bilateral aid and earmarking. In 1988 states directed roughly 45% of humanitarian assistance to UN agencies in the form of multilateral assistance. After 1994, however, the average dropped to 25% (and even lower in 1999 because of Kosovo).<sup>lxviii</sup> Although one reason for this shift is the desire by states to reduce shirking behavior by UN and other multilateral agencies, they also want to earmark to ensure that aid follows from their priorities. Accordingly, states interests, rather than the humanitarian principle of relief based on need, increasingly drives funding decisions. For instance, of the top 50 recipients of bilateral assistance between 1996 and 1999, the states of the former Yugoslavia, Israel/Palestine, and Iraq received 50% of the available assistance.<sup>lxix</sup> In 2002 nearly half of all funds given by donor governments to the UN's twenty-five appeals for assistance went to Afghanistan.<sup>lxx</sup> If funding decisions were based solely on need then places like Sudan, Congo, northern Uganda, and Angola would leapfrog toward the top of the list rather than remain neglected at the bottom.<sup>lxxi</sup> In general, while there was more aid than ever before, it is controlled by fewer donors who are more inclined to impose conditions and direct aid toward their priorities, undermining the principle of impartiality. It is now a several-tiered system, with the least fortunate getting the least attention.<sup>lxxii</sup>

Humanitarian organizations bristled at these control mechanisms. Certainly any organization, humanitarian or otherwise, will object to a reduction in its autonomy. Yet humanitarian organizations feared not only a reduction of discretion but a compromise of their humanitarian principles. The language of principal-agent theory helps to see why. States see themselves as principals that are providing a temporary transfer of authority to their agents, humanitarian organizations. Yet humanitarian organizations do not see themselves as agents of states or operating with delegated authority; instead they see themselves as agents of humanity and operating with moral authority. The very association with states and its presumption of

delegated authority, then, potentially undermines the moral authority cherished by most humanitarian organization. Indeed, if states are funding humanitarian organizations in order to further their foreign policy goals, then humanitarian organizations are justifiably paranoid. The very move by states to try and monitor and regulate humanitarian organizations almost, by definition, compromises these principles.

### Humanitarian Action Redefined

The new environment and the transformation of humanitarianism is also leaving its imprint on the organizational culture of humanitarian agencies, producing changes that potentially undermine the core principle of impartial relief. The transformation of humanitarianism, as already noted, includes an expansion of the practices and goals associated with humanitarian action. This logically means that many humanitarian organizations are articulating a growing set of goals. Goal expansion has several possible consequences. It can lead to goal displacement. Whereas once relief was in a category by itself, agencies increasingly consider its relationship to other goals - and it is not always clear that relief comes out ahead. For instance, rights-based agencies have demonstrated a greater willingness to use relief in order to promote basic human rights. Not only does need cease to be unconditional, but aid organizations might now be attempting to determine who is worthy of aid, thus acting much like religiously-minded relief workers in the nineteenth century who were interested in helping the “deserving poor.”<sup>lxxiii</sup> There is growing anecdotal evidence, moreover, that as many agencies have increasingly emphasized advocacy, rights, and peacebuilding, they have not maintained their capacity for emergency relief, harming their response capacity to situations like Darfur.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Bureaucratization is associated with the growing priority of base organizational interests such as survival and funding.<sup>lxxv</sup> Reflecting on the emergence of the “Humanitarian International,” Alex de Waal argues that in the competition between “soft interests” such as performing relief well and “hard interests” such as organizational survival and prosperity, increasingly noble ideals lose.<sup>lxxvi</sup> This possibility is noted when the need of agencies to fund their activities interacts with a new donor environment. Certainly one reason why states

introduced competition between agencies is because they want to use the discipline of the market to encourage accountability and increase efficiency, there is evidence that their favored contract mechanisms, including short term contracts, competitive bidding, and reporting rules, has introduced perverse incentives for agencies that care about funding as much as they do protecting populations at risk. Humanitarian organizations are organizations, and as organizations they want to demonstrate success and continued necessity - their funding depends on it. Consequently, they might doctor their performance indicators in order to transform failure into success, compete in areas in which they do not have a comparative advantage in order to secure funding, or fail to report shortcomings or the misuse of funds by subcontractors in order to avoid jeopardizing their contracts.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Furthermore, because being seen can be a prerequisite for getting funding, many organizations are more desirous of being photographed than doing critical but very unglamorous work.<sup>lxxviii</sup> In the camps in Zaire following the Rwandan genocide many humanitarian organizations rushed to the scene in order to show the flag and impress funders back home. Working in a children's orphanage photographs well and brings in revenue, but building clean latrines and sanitation systems does not - even though it is equally if not more essential for saving lives. This system might create market failures. de Waal posits a Gresham's Law for humanitarianism: bad humanitarian action can crowd out good action because humanitarian organizations are rewarded for being seen rather than for saving lives.<sup>lxxix</sup>

There also is evidence that the environment is causing agencies to shift their logics of appropriateness in ways that affect principles and practices. The gradual relaxation or redefinition of neutrality and independence can introduce new rule-governed behavior that can compromise principles such as impartiality. One former Oxfam official reflected that his organization had become so supportive of NATO intervention in Kosovo that it forgot that genuine impartiality demanded that Oxfam and other relief organizations should have been on both sides of the border - helping Kosovar refugees *and* Serbian victims of NATO bombing.<sup>lxxx</sup> Humanitarian organizations also might develop new rules that potentially undermine the

safety of populations. UNHCR, as it attempted to navigate state pressures while maintaining its principles, altered its underlying rules and principles of action that increased its propensity to put the lives of refugees at risk.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

This transformation also can subtly alter the ethical principles and calculations used by agencies to guide their policies. Humanitarian agencies are demonstrating a shift from deontological or duty-based ethics to consequentialist ethics. This development is driven partly by a growing concern with the negative consequences of humanitarian action and the related desire to measure effectiveness and impact.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Previously humanitarian organizations instinctively used deontological or duty-based ethics to guide their practices. Some actions are simply good in and of themselves regardless of their consequences. Ethical action consists of identifying these intrinsically good actions and then performing one's moral duty. For humanitarian actors, there is a duty to heal the wounds and reduce the suffering of distant strangers. The growing concern with unintended consequences, however, has fed into an ethic of consequentialism. In this view, whether or not an action is ethical depends on the outcome. The issue for humanitarian organizations is not whether aid has negative and unintended consequences, for it almost always does, but whether, on balance, it does more harm than good.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Knowing the consequences enables aid agencies to determine whether the proposed action is ethical, and a consequentialist ethic demands that before saviors rush to the rescue they consider the unintended consequences of their well meaning acts.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Yet such consequential reasoning requires that agencies identify the outcomes of concern - and as their goals expand the different outcome variables that must be considered expand, too. Accordingly, agencies are encouraged to consider how relief might affect development, human rights, and peacebuilding - potentially eroding the idea that agencies should give on the basis of need and not on the basis of other goals.

The desire to measure impact and effectiveness also can abrade a central element of the humanitarian ethic: a desire to demonstrate solidarity with victims and to restore their dignity. Relief workers, in Rony Brauman's words, aspire to "remain close to people in distress and to

try and relieve their suffering.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> They do so by providing not only relief but also compassion and caring. The ethic of humanitarianism, in this respect, includes both consequentialist and duty-based ethics - it desires to provide life-saving relief and holds that the motives matter for assuring benevolence. Yet can such nonquantifiable values be operationalized when attempting to determine the effectiveness and impact of humanitarian action? If not, are they left outside of the model? Is it possible to quantify, for instance, the re-uniting of families, the provision of burial shrouds, or simply reducing the fear and anxiety of individuals who are in desperate situations?<sup>lxxxvi</sup> If they are omitted from the model, will the model redefine how humanitarian agencies think about impact, downgrading basic ethical motives in favor of measurable outcomes? If the measurable variables are no longer dependent on the subjective needs of the “beneficiaries,” will they even be consulted?

An implication is that these measures of effectiveness, and the growing reliance of agencies on rational-legal principles to generate their legitimacy, might undermine their moral authority. As already discussed, humanitarian organizations are striving to develop the features of a “modern” organization, in part because they want to increase their legitimacy with their donors. This suggests that their legitimacy is dependent on deliverables and producing measurable outcomes. If the legitimacy and value of humanitarian action is based strictly on saving lives at the cheapest price, then, if available, why not hire a private agency or even a Walmart?<sup>lxxxvii</sup> After all, does the victim care if the blankets are delivered by a commercial firm or a non-profit agency? If aid agencies are increasingly drifting toward rational-legal principles as a way of defending their legitimacy, they might not only have difficulty competing with commercial firms but also might undermine their moral authority. The presumed difference between the Walmarts and the Worldvisions is that the former does not have moral authority while the latter does, but this moral authority is premised not only consequences but instead on motives, on a particular ethic of action. What happens, though, when humanitarian agencies increasingly base their legitimacy on their ability to measure up to standards set by modern, for-profit, firms? Will such a development undermine what makes humanitarian action

distinctive?

Conclusion:

### Humanitarianism and World Order

Humanitarianism can only be understood in relationship to the world order that constitutes it. Although much scholarship has focused on how principled actors have changed world politics by pressuring states to take the high road and redefine their interests, this essay has inverted this claim as it has examined how global politics has reshaped the nature of humanitarian action. The environment that surrounded humanitarianism changed in profound ways over the 1990s. The expanding scope and scale of humanitarian action created new opportunities for agencies to help more people than ever before. A practice that once was restricted to relief and emergency assistance has become - like communism, nationalism, liberalism - an *ism*, not part of this world but a project designed to transform it.

These changes in humanitarian action suggest that it has a new function in international politics. Earlier I argued that, originally, humanitarianism's distinctive function in the international sacrificial order was to interrupt the selection process by saving those at immediate risk. In other words, it did not pretend to be anything but palliative. Yet this temperance movement also served an ideological function, helping to reproduce the geopolitical order because it reduced pressures that might have demanded its transformation. Consider modern humanitarianism's very origins. By the mid-19th century changes in military technology were making war more brutal, there was no tradition of medical relief, and the emerging profession of war reporting was transmitting gruesome pictures and accounts of soldiers left to languish and die on the battlefield. Publics were beginning to rebel at these sights and to express pacifist sentiments. In response, state and military elites coopted Dunant's platform, removed its more radical proposals, accepted new rules governing how to tend to wounded soldiers on the battlefield, and thus demonstrated to their publics their commitment to humanize war. Humanitarianism, in other words, helped to rescue those on the battlefield -

as well as the system of war. In fact, decades after founding ICRC, Dunant concluded that humanitarianism had been coopted by the states-system, walked away from reformism, and embraced pacifism.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Later developments in international humanitarian law can be interpreted as serving a similar function as they lessened the demand for more radical change in the global-military order.

The drift of humanitarian action from relief to root causes suggests a shift in its role in the international sacrificial order. No longer satisfied saving individuals today so that they can be at risk tomorrow, humanitarianism now aspires to transform the structural conditions that make vulnerable populations. Toward that end, aid agencies desire to spread development, democracy, and human rights, and to join up with a peacebuilding agenda that aspires to create stable, effective, and legitimate states. In this way, they are carriers of liberal values as they help spin into existence a global liberal order.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Although their transcendental, universal, and cosmopolitan commitments might appear to threaten an international society organized around the nation-state, in fact most of their activities do not challenge the states-system but instead are designed to create a more stable, legitimate state organized around these supposedly universal principles.<sup>xc</sup> Humanitarian organizations may or may not be part of a neoliberal agenda, and they may or may not resemble the missionaries of the nineteenth century. But by their own admission, they view their social purpose as promoting liberal values in order to make the world safer, more humane, and more just.<sup>xci</sup>

Humanitarianism is now more firmly part of politics. Certainly it always was part of politics to the extent that its actions had political effects and relief workers saw themselves as standing with the weak and against the mighty. Yet humanitarian agencies once saw themselves as standing outside of politics to the extent that their ambition was to save lives at immediate risk and to keep states at bay for the principal reason that it might entangle them with political agendas and thus compromise their goal of relief. Yet many agencies no longer stand outside of politics, it is now firmly, and in many ways self-consciously, part of politics. It is increasingly an *ism* that is no longer satisfied with reforming the world, but now has

ambitions about its very transformation. It no longer clings to principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality as method of depoliticization but increasingly views the former two principles as a (unnecessary) luxury. Humanitarianism and politics are no longer discursively constructed in binary, oppositional terms; instead, their points of intersection are many and humanitarianism's meanings increasingly are defined by the sort of politics once viewed as humanitarianism's *bete noire*.

This transformation is beginning to force, as it must, humanitarian agencies to critically re-examine two defining self-images. One is the belief that they operate strictly on behalf of others and are devoid of power. Traditionally nongovernmental organizations, and especially humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, have seen themselves as *not* exercising power, but instead, as serving others.<sup>xcii</sup> They were as weak as the individuals they were trying to save from sacrifice. Yet many humanitarian organizations now have annual budgets that rival those of the states that are the objects of their intervention, and they are no longer content in standing outside of politics as they save those at immediate risk but are increasingly part of governance structures that are intended to transform states and societies. Humanitarian organizations can no longer pretend that they lack or exercise power - including power over those with whom they stand in solidarity.<sup>xciii</sup>

These developments also challenge their self-image as representatives of humanity. As a recent report regarding the current and future challenges to humanitarianism succinctly puts it, "Many in the South do not recognize what the international community calls the universality of humanitarian values as such....Humanitarian action is viewed as the latest in a series of imposition of alien values, practices, and lifestyles. Northern incursions into the South - from the Crusades to colonialism and beyond - have historically been perceived very differently depending on the vantage point."<sup>xciv</sup> Indeed, if humanitarianism is increasingly reflective of globalization and westernization, then there are good reasons why those in the South view these agencies as the "mendicant orders of Empire."<sup>xcv</sup> Although such observations are nearly as speculative as the claims to universality they are meant to replace, there has been amazingly

little research into how the recipients view Western alms and whether other traditions of relief and charity also share values associated with the Western tradition of humanitarian action.

Humanitarianism is now balanced on the knife's edge of various tensions, tensions that have become more pronounced as it has become (more self-consciously) part of politics. Humanitarianism is now precariously situated between the politics of solidarity and the politics of governance. Humanitarian workers traditionally saw themselves as political as they defied systems of power and were in solidarity with the victims of a sacrificial order. As they become increasingly implicated in governance structures they find themselves in growing collaboration with those whose they once resisted. Such developments subtly shift humanitarian agencies into new networks of association and generate new functions for humanitarianism in the international sacrificial order. Humanitarianism was once content to try and rescue victims from the international sacrificial order, not to transform it. Whether they will be successful at this more ambitious agenda remains to be seen. Whether they are or not, though, humanitarian action might very well be an effect of the very circuits of power that they once viewed as part of the international sacrificial order.

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<sup>i</sup> For an overview of the recent expansion of the humanitarian system Blondel 2000; de Waal 1997, 68-72; Minear 2002, chap. 1. For an account of the growth of humanitarian organizations that focuses on external forces, see Lindenberg and Bryant 2001. For recent trends in the humanitarian system, see Macrae 2002; Roberts 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> In this way, humanitarianism has a logocentric quality, which Jacques Derrida observes is in play whenever "one privileged term (logos) provides the orientation for interpreting the meaning of the subordinate term." Nyers 1999, 21. For discussion of this discursive and binary relationship, see Nyers 1999, 21; Cutts 1998, 3; Mallki 1995; Minear 2001, 76.

<sup>iii</sup> This definition draws from Stockton 2004, 15.

<sup>iv</sup> Bradol 2004.

<sup>v</sup> Pictet 1979.

<sup>vi</sup> The ICRC's principles are largely the industry standard, though there are debates about the prioritization of these principles, their operational meaning, and even their relevance. For discussions see Forsythe 2002, Terry 2002, Weiss 1999b, Duffield 2002, Minear 2002, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1996, 14-18.

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<sup>vii</sup> For various statements, see Rieff 2002; Minear 2002; Donini 2004; Smilie 2002; Duffield 2001; Slim 2004.

<sup>viii</sup> de Torrente 2004, Anderson 2004.

<sup>ix</sup> For this claim, see Slim 2004.

<sup>x</sup> de Waal 1997, 133-34.

<sup>xi</sup> For an interesting discussion concerning the epistemology of “humanitarian crisis,” see Stockton 2004.

<sup>xii</sup> Slim 2004, 155-56.

<sup>xiii</sup> White 1993, 34-38; Howard 1993, 69-70.

<sup>xiv</sup> General Assembly Resolution A/RES/46/182, 19 December 1991, Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations.

<sup>xv</sup> See Lang 2003; International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001; Holzgrefe and Keohane 2004; Wheeler, 2000; Slim 2002.

<sup>xvi</sup> Secretary of State Colin Powell. Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations, October 26, 2001.

<sup>xvii</sup> Duffield 2001, 12; also see Edkins 1996; Weiss 1999a, 20; White 2000.

<sup>xviii</sup> Kelly 1998, 174-75.

<sup>xix</sup> Duffield 2001.

<sup>xx</sup> Macrae, et al. 2002, 15. For a good overview, see Randel and German 2002.

<sup>xxi</sup> Jackson 1990.

<sup>xxii</sup> International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty 2001.

<sup>xxiii</sup> MacRae 1999, 6-7.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Chandler 2002, chapter 1.

<sup>xxv</sup> For a succinct statement regarding the competing logics of relief and rights, see Bouchet-Saulnier 2001. Also see Macrae, and Leader 2000; Chandler 2001; Minear 2001, chapter 3.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Chandler 2002, 21.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Beitz 1994, 124. Also see Linklater 1998, chapter 2.

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<sup>xxviii</sup> Calhoun 2004.

<sup>xxix</sup> Cosmopolitanism and the discourse of humanity has not always led to impartiality as understood today, because those who claimed to be “humanitarian” and act in the name of humanity also could reflect a discourse in which some peoples were more human than others and thus more deserving of assistance. See Finnemore 1996.

<sup>xxx</sup> Bradol 2004, 9.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Sommaruga 1999, Tanguy and Terry 1999, Rieff 1999.

<sup>xxxii</sup> This classification derives from other taxonomies, including Minear 2001, 78, Stoddard 2001; Weiss 1999, Donini, 2005. Feinstein 2004, 54 argues that how agencies position themselves around these categories is shaped by various factors, including management and leadership, institutional culture, networks, and geographical and programmatic scope.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Solidarist organizations are another branch, and they openly identify with one party to a conflict and thus do not care one whit about neutrality.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Barnett 2001.

<sup>xxxv</sup> For an early statement by UNHCR on the relationship, see “Note on International Protection.” 27, August 1990, p. 7.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Barnett and Finnemore 2004, chapter 6.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Another factor potentially influencing this expansion is psychological, deriving from personal strain of relief work. Relief workers migrate from one nightmare to another, comforted only by the fact that, at best, they provide temporary relief. This sort of existence takes a very high emotional toll. Relief workers live in a twilight of hopelessness, believing that their just acts cannot begin to change the circumstances that give cause for their services. Wanting to believe that they are helping to build a better world, they began to treat human rights, conflict resolution, and nation-building as extensions of humanitarianism. Rieff 2002.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Chimni 1993, 444; Coles 1989, 203.

<sup>xxxix</sup> The heart of the resource dependence approach is that “organizations survive to the extent that they are effective. Their effectiveness derives from the management of demands, particularly demands of interest groups upon which the organizations depend for resources and support....There are a variety of ways of managing demands, including the obvious one of giving in to them” Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, 2.

<sup>xl</sup> Meyer and Scott 1983, 140.

<sup>xli</sup> Duffield 2001, Donini 2004, McRae 2001.

<sup>xlii</sup> Loescher 2001.

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<sup>xliii</sup> Minear 2001, 97.

<sup>xliv</sup> For definitions of rationalization, see Weber 1947, 1987; for bureaucratization, see Beetham 1985, 69; for professionalization, see Kertzer 1975.

<sup>xlv</sup> Orru, Biggart and Hamilton 1991, 361. Also see Scott 1987; Scott 1995; DiMaggio and Powell 1991.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Dimaggio and Powell 1983, 140

<sup>xlvii</sup> 1983, 150-154.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Larson 1977, 49-52; cited from Dimaggio and Powell 1983, 152.

<sup>xlix</sup> Leader 1999.

<sup>1</sup> The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. Adopted at the 26th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, Switzerland, 3-7 December 1995.

<sup>li</sup> Gostelow 1999.

<sup>lii</sup> Another innovation was the Consolidated Appeals Process, established in 1991 by the UN General Assembly in response to the growing perception that there were too many agencies appealing to too many donors for too many different sectors in too many situations. In order to improve joint planning and quickly mobilize funds and target them for high priority areas, the UN decided to act as a coordinating mechanism. By 2002 there had been 165 different appeals. See Porter 2002 for a review.

<sup>liii</sup> Minear and Smilie 2004, 215-224, Slim 2002.

<sup>liv</sup> Macrae, et al. 2002, 18-21.

<sup>lv</sup> de Waal 1997, 78-79.

<sup>lvi</sup> Slim 2002.

<sup>lvii</sup> For important statements on the negative consequences of aid, see Anderson 1996; Terry 2002; Slim 1997; Vaux 2001, chapter 3.

<sup>lviii</sup> Humanitarian Policy Group 2004; Fearon 2004; Darcy 2005.

<sup>lix</sup> O'Brien 2002.

<sup>lx</sup> Feinstein Center 2004; Donini 2005.

<sup>lxi</sup> Minear and Smilie 2004, chapter 9. These claims are consistent with principal-agent analysis. For applications to international relations, see Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002; Nielson and

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Tierney 2003; Hawkins, Lake, Nielson and Tierney 2005.

<sup>lxii</sup> Andrew Natsios, “NGOs Must Shows Results; Promote U.S. or We Will “Find New Partners.” [www.interaction.org/forum2003/panels.html#Natsios](http://www.interaction.org/forum2003/panels.html#Natsios)

<sup>lxiii</sup> Quoted in Minear and Smilie 2004, 143.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Minear 2001, chap. 2, Macrae, et al. 2002, chapter 3; Donini 2004.

<sup>lxv</sup> Rieff 2002, chapter 6.

<sup>lxvi</sup> States also became more desirous of seeing for themselves what was occurring in the field. Toward that end, they began sending representatives directly into the field to provide first-hand accounts of assistance activities, and began developing the capacity for independent needs assessments and strategic analyses. An immediate consequence was that humanitarian organizations no longer benefitted from having privileged and highly authoritative information. Said otherwise, whereas once humanitarian organizations possessed private information and were the experts because of their first-hand knowledge and practical experience, the growing presence of state officials meant that humanitarian organizations lost that monopoly position, their informational advantages, and their discretion. Because the authority of NGOs comes from their practical experience from “the field” (Slim, 2000, 4), this development might undermine their discretion.

<sup>lxvii</sup> A major controversy in this regard concerns whether the willingness of aid agencies to align themselves with the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq is one of the causes behind the growing perception that aid workers are no longer given immunity during war.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Randel and German 2002, 21.

<sup>lxix</sup> Randel and German 2002, 27.

<sup>lxx</sup> Minear and Smilie 2004, 145. Also see Macrae, et al. 2002, Jeffrey 2002, Porter 2002.

<sup>lxxi</sup> There was widespread agreement among many in the humanitarian sector that while the global response to the Tsunami was impressive, it was completely disproportionate in relationship to need. In fact, because MSF believed that it had more than enough, it asked donors to unrestrict the funds so that they could be channeled to another region in greater need; if they refused, then MSF returned the donations.

<sup>lxxii</sup> In response to the politicization of priorities, humanitarian organizations entered into a dialogue with the principal donors to try and establish more impartial standards. The result was the Good Donorship Initiative. See Harmer, Cotterrell, Stoddard 2004.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Rieff 2002.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Interview with official from the UN Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance, New York, March 8, 2005.

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<sup>lxxv</sup> Harrell-Bond 2002; Barnett and Finnemore 2004.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> 1997, 65-66.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Cooley and Ron 2002; Darcy 2005.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Minear and Smilie 2004, 143.

<sup>lxxix</sup> 1997, 138-39.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Vaux 2001.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> Barnett and Finnemore 2004, chap 4.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> There also were growing calls to measure “need,” to replace subjective and emotional assessments with more cool, objective criteria as a way to reinforce the impartiality principle and bring more attention to the forgotten emergencies. In short, objective indicators are the best way to re-establish values and principles. Oxley 2001.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Slim 1997; Duffield 2001, 90-95; Gasper 1999.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Because it is nearly impossible, if not slightly macabre, to try and calculate whether aid saves more lives than kills, some organizations have re-asserted the importance of the principles of independence, neutrality, and impartiality for determining whether they should provide aid. For a collection of statements that reflects this move, see Weissman 2004.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Brauman 2004, 400.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Darcy 2005, p. 8.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> Hopgood 2005.

<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Hutchinson 1996.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> For a general argument regarding how NGOs are constituted by a global rationalization processes, and are carriers of rational-legal values, see Boli and Thomas 1999.

<sup>xc</sup> Duffield 2001.

<sup>xci</sup> Fox 2001.

<sup>xcii</sup> Fisher 1997.

<sup>xciii</sup> Kennedy 2004; Duffield 2001.

<sup>xciv</sup> Feinstein 2004, 55.

<sup>xcv</sup> Hardt and Negri 2001. Cited in Donini 2005, 2.