

Why Upholding Humanitarian Principles Does Not Protect Aid Workers

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In many of today's armed conflicts, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, attacks against aid workers are a frequent, if still shocking, occurrence. While many in the international community condemn such violence, few can convincingly explain why it occurs against those carrying out humanitarian assistance (see Hammond 2008).

One explanation is that the distinction between combatants and aid workers has blurred as many soldiers are now charged with distributing relief supplies and undertaking reconstruction projects. Additionally, western powers are financing both military efforts and humanitarian assistance. Hence, aid workers are being perceived as agents of western imperialism instead of neutral humanitarians.

The solution, according to this logic, is to re-assert and clarify the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence in order to overcome this confusion, especially among those carrying out such attacks. But this Development Viewpoint argues that such an explanation misses the objective of such attacks.

The attackers are not confused. They are trying to demonstrate their own prowess, the weakness of their victims and the inability of the opposing military force to protect them. They also reject the notion that the aid workers are independent.

Aid workers have to also recognize that when they engage in relief and reconstruction, the nature of their work is inherently political. Helping rebuild a state is a highly political act. Hence, stressing their neutrality is not likely to reduce the grave risks that they face.

The Extent of the Attacks

Between 1997 and 2006, there were 408 incidents of violence against aid workers. And there were 941 victims and 434 deaths. The number of such incidents has been on the rise along with the number of aid workers operating in insecure environments. There has been a particularly sharp increase in the risk to national aid workers in comparison to their international colleagues.

What is noteworthy is that the number of politically motivated incidents has increased over 200 per cent. This has been due, in part, to a dangerous alignment (whether perceived or real) of the relief industry with western or northern political interests. 'Militarized humanitarianism', in which military forces often administer relief efforts (usually linked to counter-insurgency campaigns), is partly to blame.

Such relief initiatives are intended to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population as well as gain increased support back home for the military effort. Humanitarian agencies can often play an unwitting or unwilling role in such campaigns. In these contexts, humanitarianism can be used to mobilize popular support both in the conflict zone and in the global arena.



Why the Attacks?

Humanitarianism is being attacked, not because it is weak or ineffective, but precisely because it is regarded as an effective threat. The violence is a 'performative act' designed to be noticed widely and to carry a powerful message.

For example, in Iraq the murder of Margaret Hassan, the country director of CARE, and the bombing of the UN and ICRC headquarters garnered much more publicity for the perpetrators than attacking a convoy of soldiers or even a crowded market could have achieved.

Such attacks are meant to demonstrate that the opposition is more powerful than the western military machine portrays it. The attacks are also designed to attract those who are seeking a channel for their hatred against the 'western occupiers'.

In response to such attacks, some aid agencies have resorted to more 'low-profile' tactics. One such approach is to place greater reliance on local staff. But such staff members often face greater risks than their international counterparts. For instance, often they are not given security training and are not allowed to be evacuated if the security situation becomes precarious.

How to Respond

Aligning with local NGOs is another option that has more promise. For example, Islamist NGOs are often well received by the local population because they provide both material and spiritual support. Such an approach is likely to be more effective in bridging pervasive differences in cultures, lifestyles and beliefs between local communities and aid workers.

But the main criterion on which aid agencies are likely to be judged is whether they respond to the beneficiaries' perceptions of their most basic needs. This often centres on the reduced access of the local population to essential resources. Those agencies that respond to such needs are more likely to be accorded trust and some measure of protection at the local level.

Such local acceptance of humanitarian efforts is no guarantee against violence, however. Often the local population is in no position to provide protection. Hence, there is no straightforward relationship between being accountable to the local population and reducing the risk of attack.

What is essential for aid workers, however, is not to be lured into a false sense of security because they regard themselves as neutral actors, and to avoid, to the extent possible, being co-opted by more powerful forces with obvious political and military objectives.

Reference:

Hammond, Laura (2008). "The Power of Holding Humanitarianism Hostage and the Myth of Protective Principles." In Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, Editors, *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Cornell University Press, pp. 172-195.