

Is aid all that matters? Demands on Professionalism in Humanitarian Work (Jürgen Lieser)

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*The people of a country soon discover
whether their new helpers are motivated by good will or not,
whether they want to enhance human dignity
or merely try out their special techniques
(Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the development of peoples)*

Introduction

Helping people in need is a universal, ethical imperative beyond religious borders and philosophies which is anchored in the humanitarian Code of Conduct.ⁱ The international system of humanitarian work, as it has developed since the founding of the Red Cross in the mid 19th century, is the institutional expression of this ethical commitment.

This article will show that for the concrete embodiment of this basic imperative of humanitarian work, professionalism is an indispensable prerequisite if aid should be effective, efficient and not counterproductive. Good will alone, regardless whether motivated by religious or humanitarian reasons, is not enough. With regard to changes in overall political conditions, the structure of international aid and global development and challenges, it must be presumed that the requirements for solid professionalism in humanitarian work will continue to grow.

But how can we define professionalism within the context of humanitarian aid? There is no common understanding among humanitarian aid organizations and even the scientific debate has not yet defined professionalism and its demands on humanitarian aid. The reason might be that humanitarian aid itself is not clearly defined. While some consider it aid for short-term survival, others extend the definition to include protection, long term interventions such as rehabilitation and reconstruction and peace building, advocacy and human rights. According to Henschel, a modern understanding of humanitarian work does indeed include further measures and he recommends the following definition as a working basis: „International humanitarian work includes all activities which aim to preserve life with respect to human dignity and to re-enable people in humanitarian emergency situations to act independently and

make decisions autonomously. Humanitarian work may not pursue any other interests or have any other mandate than helping people in need. (Henzschel 2006:14). The following deliberations on professionalism presume an understanding of humanitarian work which includes emergency and survival aid as well as the protection of basic human rights.

The main hypothesis of my paper is that the discussion on professional demands in the field of humanitarian work is dominated by a rather technocratic view based on quality standards. Humanitarian aid organizations are regularly confronted with higher demands on their operational and administrative capabilities for the planning and implementation of humanitarian aid programs. Institutional donors continually set new norms and standards for project management and coordination within the international network. The risk is that these skills and quality standards are the sole criteria for measuring professionalism. And the result? In the future, the dominating force in the field of humanitarian work will be players who can guarantee high technical implementation standards but to whom the ethical and political dimensions of humanitarian work are virtually alien because they do not correspond to the scope of their institutional self-image. Eberwein characterizes this scenario as the “competency trap”: *“Professionalization of humanitarian work is of central concern, in particular to the donors. The problem seems to be that humanitarian organizations are more and more burdened with roles and functions that overlook the reality of the humanitarian community at large, even though they may make sense in a blueprint for optimal organizational design. These burdens could force at least some of them into what colleagues of mine have characterized as the competency trap: becoming more and more technically perfect in their performance yet losing sight of the core objective: to save lives while integrating humanitarian principles.”* (Eberwein 2008:2)

Technical perfection – so the assumption – could lead to losing sight of the ethical and political scope of professionalism in humanitarian aid. But both these dimensions are elementary and indispensable for professionalism in humanitarian work as shall be shown below.

Is aid all that matters?

The fundamental idea of humanitarian action is, as we have seen, to save lives, secure immediate survival and alleviate the humanitarian consequences of crisis and catastrophes. At first glance this seems like an easy task and includes in its elementary assertion a basic rule of hu-

man cohabitation probably found in different forms among all cultures and religions: the ethical commitment to immediately help people in existential distress without asking how their plight occurred and whether or not the victim himself has caused his own distress. The Good Samaritan from the biblical parable of the same name found in the New Testament (Luke 10: 25-37) can be considered the prototype of the humanitarian helper. Even secular aid organizations have been inspired by this parable as can be seen in their name, for example the German aid organization “Workers' Samaritan Federation Germany”. That this pure charitable or humanitarian approach merely combats the symptoms of distress but does not attempt to alleviate its structural causes shall not be expanded upon here – Bertolt Brecht broached just this issue in his poem “Die Nachtlager” (“A Bed for the Night”).

Whoever provides humanitarian aid out of ethical, religious or humanitarian commitments quickly reaches the limits of his knowledge and capabilities. When faced with an emergency situation it is difficult to do the right thing and to avoid harm. Candidates for a German driver's license must take a course in first aid. But the initial care of accident victims is still the duty of professional paramedics and emergency physicians. Until they arrive at the scene, medical laymen must be able to begin first aid measures. The same hold true with regard to fire-fighting: the volunteer village fire department, which is on site faster, begins fire-fighting measures but allows the professionals to take over leadership and coordination efforts when they arrive at the scene. Well intentioned but not professionally administrated aid can quickly do more harm than good. Making the right decisions about which victims of a catastrophe need help most urgently and what kind of help this should be confronts aid workers with a serious dilemma. Emergency physicians call this “triage”: When resources are insufficient, less severely injured victims are left unattended in order to first deal with acute life-threatening injuries. This concerns an additional basic principle of humanitarian aid ranked second in the Code of Conduct mentioned on page one: “Thus, our provision of aid will reflect the degree of suffering it seeks to alleviate”. A basic duty to help holds true for everyone. But due to the varying scope of emergency situations and their aid requirements as well as usually limited resources, a choice must be made. This is a task which requires specialized know-how and experience if aid should be effective especially for more complex emergency situations affecting a large number of victims.

The fact that well-educated, medical personnel can better care for and treat the severely injured is an indisputable fact in medicine but does not seem to hold true for humanitarian aid.

Especially in the case of large catastrophes which attract a lot of media attention, it can be observed that many non-professional players are busy distributing relief supplies or preparing accommodations, water or medical measures without the slightest professional know-how or familiarity with local conditions. But at the same time they claim that neediness is great and aid in any form is necessary. In his book published in 2007, Richard Munz lists many examples of mistakes made in a hasty and amateur way because of such ignorance (Munz 2007).

Spontaneous helpfulness and professional "aid business" must complement each other in a meaningful way. First, spontaneous helpfulness is a virtue which must be nurtured and which is very welcome when expressed in terms of a willingness to donate money to humanitarian aid organizations. Secondly, professional aid organizations must admit from time to time that in the case of sudden, large catastrophes even with the best organization and coordination, not all necessary aid is on location and able to be executed to the extent necessary. "Good humanitarian practice is based on the understanding that not everything can be foreseen, not every problem can be solved, and not everything can be controlled. But one helps anyway – simply because it is the right thing to do" (Bryans, Jones, Gross Stein 1999:4).

The question of how quickly and efficiently aid reaches the victims of a sudden catastrophe depends on a number of external factors and general conditions such as the location of the catastrophe, infrastructure and access to the victims, readiness of the government and other authorities to allow international aid, political conflicts, etc. Experience shows that especially during the initial phase of large catastrophes, when there is an obvious gap between the acute distress of thousands of people and the slow-moving start of aid measures, politicians and the media build up enormous pressure to act together with the accusation that professional aid organizations act too sluggishly and their aid measures are not coordinated with each other. The result is that non-professional helpers as well as groups and organizations not in tune with local conditions see themselves in a position to act. This also includes the media which often initiates its own aid endeavors "simply because helping is the right thing to do".

The three dimensions of professionalism in humanitarian aid

Today humanitarian aid takes place within a complicated environment of states of emergency, violent conflicts, competing aid offers, donor interests, political calculations etc. The urge to help, the readiness to act, and the willingness not to sit back and do nothing for the distress of

others is without a doubt an important and necessary prerequisite for organized aid to take place at all. But organized aid must still fulfill the minimum requirements of professionalism with regard to operational activities, ethics and politics. “Charity needs quality” is the title of a paper published by Caritas Germany about the opportunities and limits of humanitarian aid (Caritas international 2006). Quality in this field does not mean minimal technical-operational requirements but the political challenges and tensions which humanitarian organizations are confronted with. “Quality” and “professionalism” are often used synonymously in this discussion and are not easily distinguished. VENRO (The Association of German Development NGOs) also understands quality in a broader sense as presented in a paper published in 2005 entitled “Humanitarian work put to test – principles, criteria and indicators for safe-guarding and inspecting the quality of humanitarian work”. This paper – which shall also be presented to this panel – defines eleven principles as the basis for judging quality including principles which target ethical and political aspects of quality or professionalism (VENRO 2005:3).

Similar criteria are also valid for existing codes and minimum standards like the Code of Conduct, the SPHERE Project or the “Twelve basic rules for humanitarian work” from the German Coordinating Committee on Humanitarian Aid. Each embodies a mixture of ethical and political principles as well as operational standards. For a theoretical understanding of professionalism in humanitarian work and its pitfalls, it is helpful to divide professionalism into its operational, ethical and political dimensions. In other words, professionalism has technical, moral, empathetic and strategic-political characteristics.

The operational dimension

The operational dimension of professionalism in humanitarian work refers to the potential of humanitarian organizations to offer fast, need-oriented and effective aid in emergency situations with regard to their structure, methods, personnel, technical equipment and technical standards. The prerequisite for this emergency response capacity is appropriate organizational structures. As a rule these include central administration, decentralized local structures and a mobile operational task force. Professional competency must not always correspond to the size of the organization: even small NGOs can organize aid efficiently if they have enough experience, specific knowledge of local conditions and good local partners. The assumption that large organizations are generally more bureaucratic, sluggish and expensive is a part of an ineradicable myth in humanitarian work like the wide-spread belief that “small is beautiful”.

It is not the size of the organization that matters but its experience, competence and ability to react – whereas it is certainly easier for large organizations to provide the necessary structures and qualified personnel to ensure the high-quality. International networks are also increasingly important. The integration of national aid organizations within an active international network increases the speed and effectiveness of aid.

Organizationally, the humanitarian system rests on three pillars: the humanitarian NGO, the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and the humanitarian UN organizations. This pluralistic, subsidiary humanitarian system has preserved the complementary roles and tasks of the various players and achieved public recognition because of its equilibrium. Today world-wide networking as well as the internal coordination of these networks is a self-evident prerequisite in all three pillars and also among large NGO families such as Oxfam, MSF, Save the Children, World Vision, Care, Caritas etc. NGOs observe with concern, however, the increasing centralization and exclusion tendencies e.g. as they appear within the UN's reform efforts (VENRO 2007) or by the funding conditions employed by public donors. The European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid, approved in 2008 as a co-operational declaration of the EU Council, the EU Parliament and the EU Commission, affirmed the principle of plurality among humanitarian actors.

Qualified personnel are a prerequisite for operational skill and professionalism. Professional human resources management is a necessary but difficult task. Since the founding of People in Aidⁱⁱ humanitarian organizations have become aware of the fact that through good personnel management the quality of their work can be clearly improved. On the one hand the profile of the humanitarian worker has changed: While personal motivation and identification with the organization were formerly a top priority in personnel management, today specialist qualifications and career aspects play a more important role. But on the other hand it has gotten more difficult to maintain well-educated specialists who have grown up with the organization. Almost all organizations struggle with high personnel fluctuationⁱⁱⁱ.

Further elements of operational professionalism are technical equipment (vehicles, communication devices, logistic), information and communication structures (quick access to data and facts for situation assessment, networking with international data bases – Reliefweb etc. and financial resources; that is especially the short-term availability of funds to finance immediate life-saving measures.

Observing international quality standards as formulated in the Code of Conduct or the SPHERE project should be mentioned in this context as well as two opposing key concepts in the discussion on humanitarian aid: speed and quality. Speed usually negatively influences quality while good quality needs time and contradicts the speed necessary in emergency situations. The professional challenge often consists of having to make the right decisions based on insufficient information.

Coordination, impact and needs assessment etc. of humanitarian aid must also be included in the operational dimension of professionalism in humanitarian work. In 2003 the most important donors agreed upon basic principles within the framework of international cooperation in humanitarian work ("*Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative*") to guarantee a joint high standard.^{iv}

The ethical dimension

As discussed previously, humanitarian aid is universally valid as a moral imperative and an expression of interpersonal solidarity. It has committed itself to ethical principles which determine humanitarian actions. Initially these are saving lives and alleviating distress, impartiality (aid measures are oriented solely to humanitarian need without differentiating between or within population groups), neutrality (in cases of armed conflict or other conflicts one party may not be favored over another) and independence (humanitarian goals shall be followed independently of any political, military or other goals which the donors may have on site). These principles have found a place within the international humanitarian law. They can also be found in universally approved codes such as the Code of Conduct or the "Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship".

Ethic professionalism in humanitarian work must be gauged to these minimal standards. Especially those players providing aid without humanitarian aims but with political or military mandates will have their hands full concerning the principle of independence. In the strictest sense of the word, what they are doing is not humanitarian aid.

An ethic principle of humanitarian aid includes more than just an individual or collective commitment to provide aid and comply with the basic principles. The ethic of aid turns its at-

tention to the relationship between the helpers and the victims of a catastrophe. Which understanding of the victim's needs is recognizable through the helper's actions? A joint declaration by Caritas Germany and Diakonie Emergency Aid published in 2004 states that people in distress are subjects of their own actions with their own dignity and the ability to shape their own lives: "To help preserve or restore the dignity of each person is our highest mandate especially in emergency situations. The type and method of aid must be geared towards this ... We do not only see the neediness of the victims but take their dignity, their responsibility for themselves, their community and their hopes seriously. (Caritas international / Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe 2004)

Humanitarian aid organizations like to cultivate the image of the white, omnipotent aid workers who flies in and takes control while the helpless, indigenous victims despairingly wait for help to arrive. But experienced humanitarian aid workers know that the victims themselves and local authorities introduce initial aid measures and that it often takes days until international aid workers arrive. Ethical professionalism also means that we recognize our own limits and possibilities and do not cultivate false images of the victims or exaggerated hero worship.

The lack of ethical professionalism is also expressed when aid organizations – often driven by greedy media interests or in competition with other organizations which rely on charitable donations - compete with each other to advance their own image with regard to quick success, showcase projects and media attention. Especially during large scale emergency situations, hysteria can often be observed coupled with well-meaning but at the same time blind, counterproductive knee-jerking fuelled by sensationalism in the media intent on reporting quick and visible results. These outgrowths nourish the surely valid criticism of short-term, spectacular emergency aid which destroys long-term development efforts, overruns established partnership structures and is not sustainable in the long term.

Truthfulness towards donors and beneficiaries, the careful handling of entrusted funds – which also includes the fight against corruption - transparency and reporting are also important aspects of ethical professionalism. These are high demands on the organizational culture of aid organizations. In 2008, VENRO, the German umbrella organization of independent and church related NGOs, approved a behavioral code on transparency, good governance, and control in which members pledged to adhere to mandatory principles and standards in good governance, communications, operational management and the observation of the effects of

aid. Such ethical principles have been in effect for years in the areas of fundraising and public relations.

The political dimension

The basic principles of neutrality and impartiality to which humanitarian work is bound, are sometimes interpreted in such a way that humanitarian work must be strictly non-political. But this only partly holds true as Eberwein/Runge (2002:26f) state: *“If humanitarian aid is merely reduced to its operational level, the postulate of non-political could be used one dimensionally. But this is not possible. Un-political concerns the performance of operations while the actions themselves are an expression of the political will of nation states – but also, nota bene, of society – and must be considered highly political”*.

Professional humanitarian work is also characterized by the fact that it is in a position to recognize the political dimension of its actions and counteract tendencies of political appropriation and exploitation at different levels. This underlies the assumption that humanitarian work must be independent of political interests but also never takes place in a political vacuum. Increasing politicization of humanitarian work has been found throughout the last two decades. This suggests the problematical linking of military intervention and humanitarian aid in the concept of “humanitarian intervention”.

The basic principles of humanitarian action as mentioned at the beginning – especially the principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality – become increasingly mitigated by efforts to consider humanitarian work as an instrument of foreign and national security policy. Even when these developments are called by different names – for example “integrated missions”^v within the UN-context or the “concept of networked security” at NATO– they always mean the same thing: that in addition to the political and military methods of crisis management, humanitarian aid, reconstruction measures and development should be included and used to fulfill certain political mandates. The intensified deployment of state supported implementation organizations in humanitarian work for example civil defense and the military is also a trend in this direction. The worst sin is the deployment of armed forces with an additional humanitarian mandate while at the same time fulfilling a political directive and a military task – even if it “only” concerns a peacekeeping mission. This action obviously infringes upon the neutrality of humanitarian aid.

The position of the NGO – in any case the independent NGO – in this issue is clear: humanitarian aid is not an instrument of crisis management. The EU avowed itself to this in its European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid.^{vi} Cooperation with the military contradicts the professional self-image of humanitarian aid organizations. “This “humanitarian space” – according to a statement by VENRO concerning a project to reform humanitarian systems of the UN – “must not be forfeited to the benefit of what might appear to be efficiency-enhancing, politically oriented coherence and co-ordination that makes humanitarian aid dependent on the success or acceptance of the UN’s political and military efforts”(VENRO 2007:6)

Professionally operating aid organizations must be in a position to recognize and ward off subtle forms of political exploitation in addition to course and direct attempts at embracement. Humanitarian aid takes place in increasingly complex situations marked by weak or absent governments, ambiguous and changing conflicts and the growing insecurity of the aid workers themselves (assaults, kidnappings). Therefore a thorough political analysis is necessary in order to recognize possible traps: What interests motivate the donor organizations? Do they really follow the humanitarian imperative or do they nurture good political conduct by intentionally selecting beneficiaries or regions? Who influences the distribution of relief items in the recipient country? Will the aid be used to follow political aims (election campaigns)? Put bluntly: Does humanitarian aid prolong war? (Cremer:1998) Through their projects, humanitarian aid organizations can unwillingly become participants in prolonging conflicts. *“Humanitarian aid organizations working in conflict zones are susceptible to attempts at blackmail from both sides. Sometimes they are forced to “buy” access, although access has already been guaranteed by the Geneva Convention. Such situations have brought on the accusation that humanitarian aid organizations prolong violence.”* (Eberwein/Runge:2002:19f) The Do no Harm Project^{vii}, initiated by Mary B. Anderson in 1994, was an ambitious attempt at recognizing participation in the extension of violence and avoiding or lessening it in the future. With the help of field studies examining conflicts in 13 countries, a pattern was recognizable in which aid projects did in fact prolong and encourage armed conflict. However, it also showed that within each conflict there were in fact powers that did avoid outside influence, that did want to escape the spiral of hate and violence and that - in spite of war – were able to maintain communication between enemy population groups.

The political traps are multifaceted. They extend from the allocation of means for humanitarian aid through state donors to the question whether the approval of emergency aid relieves local governments of their duty to help their own population in distress instead of financing prestige projects or arms expenditures.

Closing remarks: Increasing demands on professionalism

Professional humanitarian aid must be technically solid, politically independent and ethically motivated. It must always include the three dimensions of professionalism, otherwise it comes up short. In addition, humanitarian aid is neither a substitute for failed politics nor a romping place for notorious do-gooders. It is a difficult and responsible field for professional and experienced organizations and their qualified personnel.

The need for humanitarian aid will continue to increase. This can be deduced from the developments of the last decades and serious predictions of the future. Global development trends such as the increase in the world's population from currently 6.7 billion to at least 9 billion by 2050 and the related shortage of food with the threat of increased distribution struggles and famine contribute to this theory. The beginning recession of the world's economy, climate change, increased global warming and the continued instability of environmental conditions as well as the shortage of fossil fuels such as coal and crude oil are further factors which could contribute to an increase in the number, intensity and length of violent armed conflict, humanitarian crises and emergency situations.

Even if one does not share these pessimistic forecasts of the future, special challenges for humanitarian work already exist. Aid workers are increasingly confronted with protracted crises and increased violence towards the civilian population and the aid workers themselves. Political exploitation of humanitarian aid and the proliferation of humanitarian actors present increasingly difficult conditions for humanitarian aid organizations.

Along with the increasing number, frequency and complexity of humanitarian crises and catastrophes, the volume of international aid grows and with it the necessity for humanitarian actors to improve professionalism and the efficiency of their work. Therefore, the standards of truly professional humanitarian work will also increase. At the same time more and more players are permeating humanitarian aid that do not stem from a professional tradition of hu-

humanitarian work for example the fire department, civil defense or the military. These organizations and their protagonists consider humanitarian work mainly as logistical or technical and measure quality solely on the speed and efficiency with which relief goods such as water, accommodation and medicine reach the beneficiaries.

Eberwein states correctly that the specialist demands on humanitarian organizations have risen considerably within the past years especially because of new conditions and requirements from institutional donors. The allocation of subsidies from public funding is increasingly tied to better instruments and methods of need surveys, improved planning and steering, increased coordination of field players, economic observations, more transparency, accountability and controlling, detailed reporting etc. For smaller NGOs which have difficulties fulfilling these specialized minimum standards due to their organizational capacity, this development can lead to the loss of project funding and in turn threaten their very existence if not enough private donor funds are available to finance their work.

The growing pressure of professionalism will lead to operational skills becoming a crucial criterion for quality in humanitarian aid with the result that civil society organizations are pushed to the edge in favor of technically and operationally well-equipped high-tech organizations. These are not only the big global players but also state-run implementation organizations which can perfectly organize aid programs with a lot of money, sophisticated technology and much know-how. This development is encouraged – among other things – by the following:

- Training offers of professionalism in humanitarian aid almost always refer to operational elements.
- Political and public criticism of humanitarian aid (for example from the media) concentrates on practical-technical aspects like imprecise coordination, speed with which aid is delivered, not enough transparency of the donor organizations in the field, etc.
- Donor governments increasingly carry out aid measures through state-run implementation partners who have a lot of technical know-how but do not consider the ethical and political implications of their mandate.

In any case, the biggest traps are found within the field of political professionalism. The image of non-political humanitarian aid which does not get politically involved but simply dives

in and helps the helpless victims is still cultivated in the public eye but is no longer accurate. Humanitarian aid may not become an instrument of politics; least of all an instrument to fight terrorism. Humanitarian aid must play its own independent role. It may not – not even conceptually – come to a mixture of military measures and humanitarian aid. And finally: It is the duty of humanitarian organizations to continually clarify that crisis and conflict cannot be solved solely through military actions. The opportunities to create and guarantee peace through military means are often overestimated. Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq are examples of the difficulties encountered in the attempt to reach sustainable peace beyond military deployment.

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ⁱ Code of Conduct of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief;
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ⁱⁱ www.peopleinaid.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Zu dieser Thematik siehe WCHS Panel „Career and/or Calling? Employee and Employer Perspectives on Humanitarian Work, organised by Jonathan Potter (Director People in Aid) and Melinda Mills, Valeska Korff, Liesbet Heyse (Groningen University)

^{iv} „The Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship“ (Grundsätze und bewährte Verfahren für humanitäre Hilfe), Stockholm, 17. Juni 2003, im April 2006 von der OECD-DAC gebilligt

^v Vgl. Pietz Tobias / Burghardt, Diana: Integrierte Missionen der Vereinten Nationen – Liberia, ein Prototyp? In: Wissenschaft & Frieden 2006-4: Zivil-militärische Zusammenarbeit

^{vi} Vgl. Europäischer Konsens über die humanitäre Hilfe, Ziff. 15

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