ABSTRACT: With the end of the Cold War, both the concept and practice of humanitarian action have significantly changed. The emergence of the so-called 'complex humanitarian crises' made it clear that traditional humanitarian responses based on the classical principles of impartiality and neutrality were not sufficient nor the most appropriate to respond to such complex challenges. The 1990s thus saw the emergence of a 'new humanitarianism', which incorporates much broader and longer-term objectives, such as development or peace and poses significant challenges to humanitarian actors in the field. Most of these challenges relate to the increasing political and militarized nature of humanitarian action that was pursued. This article aims to analyze the evolution of the concept and practice of humanitarianism by critically looking at the main trends that have characterized the most recent aid paradigms and by arguing that effective humanitarian action is now facing significant dilemmas and being undermined by this new approach to humanitarianism.

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I. Introduction

The international community has been permanently confronted with wars, natural catastrophes and extreme situations that affect and endanger the lives, dignity, and subsistence of millions of people. Throughout history, such life-threatening events have prompted the international community to provide humanitarian assistance in an attempt to alleviate human suffering and distress. After the end of the Cold War, the changing internal climate contributed to significant changes in humanitarian and emergency operations. The emergence of the so-called 'complex humanitarian emergencies' made it clear that traditional responses based on the classical principles of impartiality and neutrality were no longer effective or sufficient to respond to such complex needs. This change, along with a certain abuse of the 'humanitarian' label, has raised some confusion in relation to the true nature and purpose of humanitarian action. In response, major international actors (Western states individually and the United Nations collectively) proposed a more integrated intervention approach to account for the multifaceted nature of internal conflicts and humanitarian action. Thus, the 1990s saw the emergence of a 'new humanitarianism’ that included broader and longer-term objectives such as development and peace.[1]

This new approach to humanitarianism has been applied since the mid-1990s with some success. However, the unprincipled responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 reinforced "new humanitarianism’s” most negative and problematic features – politicization, militarization, human
rights conditionality, and erosion of classical principles. These have introduced important problems and even more complex dilemmas to humanitarian actors. With this article, we seek to trace the evolution of the concept and practice of humanitarian action, looking at the trends that have characterized the most recent aid paradigms. We will also consider the main dilemmas and challenges that humanitarian action is facing, without neglecting the direct and indirect impacts of the 'war on terror' as well as the future prospects for humanitarian assistance.

II. Humanitarianism: from the 'old' to the 'new'

The concept and practice of humanitarian action has its origins and roots in historical, religious, and philosophical traditions. However, we can affirm that humanitarian action dates back to 1859 when the young Swiss entrepreneur Henri Dunant witnessed the Battle of Solferino. Outraged and shocked by the brutality of that particular battle, Dunant felt compelled to seek help and medical assistance for the wounded and sick soldiers. Dunant convinced Napoleon III to release the doctors kept as war prisoners in order to provide assistance to wounded soldiers. After Solferino, Dunant returned to Switzerland and wrote his memoirs (A Memory of Solferino, 1862) where he proclaimed that all nations should establish voluntary societies to assist and care for all individuals who are injured, wounded, and sick in war. In 1862, Dunant, along with Gustave Moynier, President of the Public Welfare Geneva Society, and General Dufour, created a committee aimed at guaranteeing medical care and assistance to those involved in war. At a conference in Geneva in 1863, delegates from 17 countries established the International Committee for Relief to the Wounded, which later became the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). These events symbolized the convergence of four fundamental developments within the humanitarian sphere: the crystallization of the idea of humanitarian action; the institutionalization of that same idea with the creation of what has become the most well-known international organization in human crises responses; the codification of the idea of humanitarian action in humanitarian law with the definition of the Hague Law (1899 and 1907) and the 1949 Geneva Conventions (Geneva Law); and finally, the will of a sovereign authority to place humanitarian imperative above national interests and security. Classical humanitarianism involves a series of activities and legal principles that seek to restrain and limit violence and its effects. The type is also characterized by a specific normative and legal basis that includes international humanitarian law, human rights law, and refugee law, all applicable in the context of armed conflicts. Thus, classical humanitarianism and humanitarian action are concerned with the protection of the lives and dignity of all individuals who are not part of a conflict, namely civilians, refugees, or internally displaced persons.

In light of these characteristics, classical humanitarian activities are based on certain underlying principles such as a commitment to provide protection and assistance without any distinction based on race, color, religious belief, or ethnic affiliation. Thus, it is essential for humanitarian action to be guided by the principles of impartiality to ensure all individuals in need are assisted equally and with sole regard given to their immediate needs.

Classical humanitarian action has been, since its origin, justified and legitimized by some distinctive features, such as the defense of certain ethical principles and values and a vision of the human being that is not attached to any political ideology. The notion has also been characterized by the need for an independent and neutral involvement of humanitarian actors. Based on these principles and assumptions, actions led by the international civil society up until the 1980s underlined the vision that this should be, ideally, seen as a universal and unconditional right that could not be tainted by bureaucracy. However, the concept of classical humanitarianism has changed and become more fragmented and complex, referring to a wider range of actions and situations. As a result, and as suggested by Hugo Slim, humanitarian activities became no longer limited to humanitarian agencies in their classical sense. In fact, besides organizations like the ICRC or MSF (by principle dedicated exclusively to humanitarian work), a multiplicity of other organizations and actors, both governmental and non-governmental, were progressively on humanitarian concerns and goals in their mandates.

This was particularly clear in the beginning of the 1990s. The emergence of a 'new world order' was
characterized by important geopolitical changes, a growing number of violent conflicts and crises as well as by a progressive erosion of the distinction between civilian and combatants. During this time, there were equally significant changes at the level of the traditional vision of humanitarianism in relation to the multiple ‘complex (political) emergencies’, i.e. humanitarian crises of a broader, multi-causal nature involving all the dimensions of society and of the populations’ lives. Among UN agencies, a complex emergency is understood as denoting a conflict-related humanitarian disaster involving a higher degree of political, economic and cultural breakdown and social dislocation. An emergency reflecting this condition, requires a system-wide aid response from the international community. In fact, by 1993 there were about 50 “new” wars, mostly internal and defined by the United Nations as “complex (political) emergencies”, i.e., major humanitarian crisis of a multi-causal nature, all-encompassing and involving every dimension of a society and the lives of the whole population. However, responses to humanitarian crises and conflicts were frequently chaotic and ill-conceived, reflecting an international community concerned with the alleviation of human suffering worldwide but, at the same time, ill-prepared and sharing very different interests and priorities. As a consequence, classical humanitarian action has received intense criticism for responses in these new conflict scenarios. This criticism, originally targeted at crises and famines in Sudan and Ethiopia at the end of the 1980s, was mainly directed to the failed humanitarian responses in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda and, more specifically, to its merely palliative and thus unsustainable character. According to its critics, both at the academic and practical level, these actions emphasized the ineffectiveness and lack of professionalism characteristic of classical humanitarian organizations that fed and perpetuated conflicts and crises through their misuse of aid and poor resource distribution.

Claiming to correct the mistakes of the past and representing a radical rupture with the classic conception of humanitarian assistance, a new and more political conception of humanitarianism emerged. The movement gained importance and was adopted by most donor governments, multilateral agencies and many NGOs. This so-called “new humanitarianism” clearly challenged the classic paradigm. Given the change in conflict and post-conflict circumstances, the traditional objectives of saving lives and relieving human suffering were insufficient and merely temporary. The basic idea was that humanitarian assistance should have longer-term objectives such as peace building, human rights protection and promotion and, in a last stage, peace. This trend was related to the need for a linkage between emergency and development assistance that gained increased support and strength through this new humanitarianism during the mid-90s. As Anderson and Woodrow suggest, far from contributing to longer term development objectives, emergency aid was detracting from the future of these populations. It was, therefore, necessary to conceive and undertake emergency assistance interventions, which could contribute, in the longer term, to development and peace. With this ‘new humanitarianism’, a clearer analysis of the contexts is defended, seeking a combination between the immediate needs and future development, reinforcement of local services and structures, empowerment, participation and enhancement of the populations’ capacities, human rights promotion and protection (including gender issues) and contribution to peacebuilding. In this context, and far from its neutral nature, the new humanitarianism emerged, as Adam Roberts defends, “as an answer, or even as a substitute or a supplement to the liberal, democratic ideology.”

As a consequence, in part, of its limited and apparent success, the new humanitarian policy started shifting towards conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. The movement began developing tools and institutions that were able to undertake transformations that would lead to violence reduction and conflict prevention instead of humanitarian assistance per se. In fact, most humanitarian projects funded by Western donor agencies became dependent on this merge between humanitarian and broader security goals. The association of conflict and underdevelopment with instability that could undermine and risk the world’s peace and stability helped blur security and development concerns and was translated into concrete policies by many donor agencies. As argued by Duffield, the promotion of development has become synonymous with the pursuit of security, while at the same time, security has become a prerequisite for sustainable development. Humanitarian action is thus incorporated in this security-
development nexus, with all the implications it entails from the point of view of its implementation and the variety of involved actors, not necessarily all with a humanitarian mandate. This international context of experimentation and chronic instability in many humanitarian aid recipient countries has shaped what has become known as the 1990s ‘new aid’ paradigm. In this sense, the use of “humanitarian” rhetoric has become another instrument of foreign policy at the service of states and reflects the growing politicisation of humanitarian assistance. The term also contributes to a weakening of a specific mandate and objectives that undermine humanitarian priorities. In contrast with classic humanitarianism, which tended to ignore political contexts, this new conception emerged by a much more political dimension of humanitarian assistance that was no longer aimed at responding above all to the victim’s needs and suffering, but instead to stimulate more political and social processes. For that, even humanitarian aid provided within this frame should be ‘politically intelligent and conscious of the contexts in which it is used in order to contribute to such objectives.

Due to the fact that, in contemporary conflicts, humanitarian aid is increasingly tied to political interests, effective and well-conceived humanitarian action requires broader objectives. These objectives are defined in accordance with possible consequences as well as with the degree of cooperation and obedience by the recipient countries and actors to those same objectives. Furthermore, the classical principle of ‘humanitarian imperative’ as a fundamental basis for responding to human suffering gives place to a consequentialist logic according to which humanitarian action should be dependent on the attainment of the defined long-term objectives. No longer seen as a right to which people are entitled to in times of human distress, contemporary forms of humanitarian aid ended up neglecting the principle of humanity by allowing victims of humanitarian crisis to be left without any aid if one considers that such action will risk medium and long-term goals. Donor governments thus take control and initiative of the humanitarian agenda. It also becomes clear that within the framework of this ‘new humanitarianism,’ the guiding principles of classical humanitarian action – humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – are progressively abandoned and replaced by other principles and priorities in these new contexts. They follow a new, integrated agenda to respond to new types of violent conflicts and resulting humanitarian crisis. These new circumstances obliged most agencies to address, more directly, the contested neutrality as well as the independent nature of their actions at the same time they had to adjust to an increasing legal vacuum. By frequently leaving aside traditional humanitarian concerns and principles and replacing these with development and conflict resolution goals, the ‘new humanitarianism’ tried to adapt itself to the complexity of the ‘new’ human crisis. ‘New humanitarianism’ adopted a more flexible type of action according to the circumstances and the anticipated consequences of such action. Humanitarian organizations thus become confronted with a series of difficult and uncomfortable dilemmas in their work due to an increasing difficulty in separating their traditional humanitarian activities from these new political constraints and broader objectives.

Although progressively defended in theory and practice, especially by donor governments, this new framing also raised various important ethical problems since it resulted in a distortion in the original essence of humanitarianism and limited independent and impartial humanitarian action. ‘New humanitarianism’ also started being questioned and challenged in its assumptions by academics and practitioners due to the fact that decisions that had humanitarian implications were increasingly being taken on the basis of political criteria and interests instead of on the victims’ needs. It is exactly in this scenario of important changes that the first criticism to the ‘new humanitarianism’ arises focusing mainly on what were considered as its main risks and challenges: political instrumentalization of humanitarian action, conditionality (mainly in terms of human rights conditions attached to aid); erosion of classical humanitarian principles and militarization.

We will now look in more detail at the content of each of these criticisms. The article will illustrate these with examples that, in our view, reflect many of the challenges and dilemmas faced by humanitarian agencies and raised by this new approach to humanitarian action.
A. Political Instrumentalization of Humanitarian Aid

As previously stated, the relation between aid and politics has changed significantly, with humanitarian aid increasingly seen as being part of a strategy led by donor governments and agencies to transform conflicts, decrease violence, and promote peace and human rights. This ‘new humanitarianism,’ with a focus on political analysis and on the assumptions of liberal development, market economy and participative democracy, was put forward as an alternative to the supposedly failed paradigm of classical humanitarianism. The paradigm was a new model to govern, and to a certain extent, control the borderlands of the international system. The main problem is that this broadening of humanitarian goals was not accompanied by a revitalized and effective international commitment towards conflict prevention and conflict resolution in order to develop more stable states. Instead, for most donors and political actors, humanitarian action was from then on viewed as the main form of political action to avoid and respond to new conflicts.

Again, in most Western countries, there has been a convergence between development and security concerns which was based on the idea that underdevelopment was one of the main causes of conflict, thus threatening international peace and security. As a result, peace and security could only be achieved and maintained only through a liberal development model. Simultaneously, and in relation to NGOs, this convergence made it more difficult to separate their own humanitarian activities from the security objectives and concerns of the northern donors. In these circumstances, attempts by aid agencies to promote development in the context of these new assistance framings reinforced their subscription to political and economic criteria and constraints, namely for funding purposes. In this sense, according to Duffield, humanitarian action becomes an instrument of international regulation, obeying new strategic interests incorporated in the emerging complex networks and structures that constitute liberal peace and development models.

In the words of Tony Vaux, “politicization of aid is an important aspect for debate.” Humanitarian aid workers do not necessarily want to be detached from politics, but they expect to know if they are being manipulated or not by interest do not necessarily support, as well as the risks resulting from the political agendas they are involved in. This seems to be a real and problematic trend with serious implications at the level of humanitarian action, but also at the level of the relations between donors and recipients, and of the perceptions of humanitarian action by the international community. Duffield expresses these same concerns by affirming that political humanitarianism is viewed ‘more as a reaffirmation of a technocratic authority in a mechanical universe than as a way to face complex and permanently mutating systems.’ As a consequence, criticism emerges as to the effectiveness and ethical dimension of this ‘new humanitarianism’ based essentially on the vision of humanitarian aid as a very limited instrument that should be used to prevent and respond to human suffering, rather than to attain other broader political goals, namely security-related ones.

The main problem of such politicization of humanitarian aid relates to the fact that humanitarian agencies and NGOs run the risk of being seen as a resource channel and as a mechanism to provide aid depending on the political will of the main donor countries.

In this debate, many humanitarian agencies and actors have defended the idea that humanitarian action should not be primarily an instrument or a substitute of political action and that there cannot be humanitarian solutions to problems that are mainly political. Despite the many limitations and practical difficulties that humanitarian action has to face, its values and principles, even if not always seen as absolute, should not be founded upon a political agenda since we can end up being confronted with very difficult choices between greater or lesser evils. In other words, instead of a coherent use of the potentialities of humanitarian action as a way to secure structural changes in such volatile and complex scenarios, one resorts to humanitarian rhetoric as a new control tool by developed countries and major donors. The tool imposes conditions and behaviors on the recipient countries that are often incapable of reacting to such authority.

Several other examples illustrate the negative effects of this political use of humanitarian aid. One of these examples is the case of Afghanistan in the end of the 1990s, which was still ruled by the Taliban regime and where the population was subjected to neglect and lived under a very difficult humanitarian situation. According to Mohammed Atmar, although there has been a complex historical relation between aid and politics in Afghanistan, this is a case that demonstrates how
humanitarian policies and practices have increasingly been determined by western political objectives. It is also an example of the negative implications of political conditionality to humanitarian aid in which donor countries that are hostile to the fundamentalist Taliban regime and its poor record in terms of human rights have contributed to a clear marginalization of the civilian victims of the humanitarian crisis in the country.\[34\]

This political use of humanitarian aid can be found in different forms that the involvement and commitment of donor countries in Afghanistan has assumed. One example is related to minimum responses to the Afghan civilian war that undermined the countries’ already precarious humanitarian conditions without seeking coherent and comprehensive political solutions to the problems. Instead, priority was given to isolating the Taliban at any cost, including through punitive conditionality. The result, also acknowledged by Atmar, was prolonged civilian conflict, which underestimated the role of humanitarian agencies as impartial and neutral.\[35\] The negative nature of this political use of aid and resulting imposition of sanctions was itself ranging from security concerns – due to increasing working conditions for humanitarian agencies which led most donors to significantly cut aid- and development and capacity building issues. In this case, the main reason to impose conditions and withdraw necessary humanitarian aid was the fact that these actors were dealing with an illegitimate regime, which was responsible for discriminatory and repressive policies towards its own population. However, the results were obviously negative from the humanitarian point of view since the lack of response to conditionality by the Taliban regime led to the suspension and withdrawal of most humanitarian projects in the country with all the entailed human consequences for the population that was left without access to necessary aid.

Another example of the most questionable side of this politicized ‘new humanitarianism’ was the international response to the Balkans war in the 1990s. In this case, the political interests and imposed conditions by the European countries created distinctions between the various vulnerable groups thus creating clear patterns of inclusion and exclusion when it came to access to humanitarian aid. As an example, some donor countries interpreted the provision of humanitarian aid to the Serbs as being in contradiction with their external political interests fearing that aid would again be channeled to the government. In our view, this action reflected the incapacity to distinguish between humanitarian assistance provided to the Serbs in need and the underlying political situation represented by the Serb authorities.

These short examples clearly show that the political use of humanitarian action, especially in the context of complex political and humanitarian emergencies, can have very negative and counterproductive effects and to a certain extent question and limit an impartial, neutral and effective humanitarian action.

**B. Conditionality and Human Rights**

As analyzed before, the increasing and more explicit political nature of humanitarian aid within the framework of the ‘new humanitarianism’ raises serious problems to the activities led and implemented by humanitarian agencies in the field. Nevertheless, this is not the only aspect of the ‘new humanitarianism’ that puts humanitarian agencies in face of very difficult decisions and choices. The inclusion of negative conditionality in humanitarian action implied very similar dilemmas. The use of conditionality in development aid has been an established practice within the donor community including UN agencies, Oxfam or USAID. However, as development aid has significantly decreased since the end of the 1980s, humanitarian aid has borne the burden of becoming an important channel for donor countries.\[36\] As the borders between the various types of aid were blurred, it also became more legitimate for aid donors to concern themselves with the internal functioning of recipient countries. The political and economic conditionality associated with humanitarian aid is a clear sign of that move. By supporting the possibility to resort to conditionality, the ‘new humanitarianism’ was seen as an important source of normalization of violence since it tended to trivialize human suffering or justify a passive stance towards violence and human rights violations if the conditions imposed were not met. This type of politics often means ignoring human rights and humanitarian law norms in the name of greater and more
important objectives. By pursuing long-term objectives, humanitarian action becomes managed on the basis of a ‘stick and carrot’ strategy with which donor countries reward or punish recipient countries and internal actors according to their behavior and receptivity to the political and economic conditions and criteria defined by donors. As a consequence of all these factors, it is almost inevitable that a tension emerges between the use of humanitarian aid with a long-term strategic vision aimed at combating the root causes of conflict and stimulating development on one hand; and on the other hand, the imperative dimension of humanitarian action viewed almost as an obligation to provide emergency assistance on the basis of the victims’ needs only. For example, towards the end of the 1990s, Afghanistan exhibited mainly punitive humanitarian and human rights approaches and ended up punishing the people already suffering extreme poverty and famine rather than the main target of those conditions. The main reasoning was that without changes in human rights policies, or the disappearance of the Taliban regime, no peace would be achieved and, therefore, no aid should be provided to undertake development goals including education, agriculture or even health issues in the country. These would be conditioned to clear political changes within the Taliban regime. In this context, perhaps the most controversial issue of conditionality from a human rights perspective in its relation to humanitarian action was the fact that donors focused on gender equality claims on the part of the Taliban regime as a condition for the provision of humanitarian aid. Committed to punish the regime and lacking other type of policy instruments, donor governments saw humanitarian aid as the primary, if not the only, means to fight gender discrimination. What followed was, in the words of Atmar, massive politicisation in the form of ill-informed conditionality by donors and aid agencies. The World Food Programme, for example, made part of its food provision conditional upon the Taliban’s change of policy and practice to respond favourably to UN appeals on basic rights for women. As a consequence, several food programmes were restricted or simply curtailed because of the inability or unwillingness of the regime to fulfil the conditions imposed. A second example is related to UNICEF’s action; in face of Taliban’s restrictions on girls’ access to education, the incapacity to change this policy, as well as its own inability to continue its work based on the impartiality principle, this agency decided to discontinue its national-level support that it had been undertaking for the education of Afghan boys only. The results of conditionality have worsened the situation, since the Taliban decided to expand the restrictions to boys nationwide. This has raised difficult ethical dilemmas to humanitarian actors as to whether it was allowable to protect the rights of girls to education by violating the right of boys, especially given the ineffectiveness of such policies in changing the Taliban’s attitudes and policies. One final example relates to Oxfam’s activity in the country and the decision to suspend their clean water program. One primary reason for this suspension was that it would be impossible to maintain it according to their human rights principles and policies, and which resulted in the death of about 2000 lives as Afghans were forced to drink polluted water after the suspension of the programme.

These are only a few examples, but in our view representative of the problems and dilemmas posed by the politicisation and conditionality of humanitarian assistance. No matter what form it has taken, this type of conditionality has placed obvious limits, not only to the independent, impartial work of NGOs and humanitarian agencies in the field, but also to the notion of humanitarian assistance as an imperative. At the same time, these changes and actions were in no way helpful for the promotion and advancement of human rights and peace. On the contrary, the reluctance of donor governments to provide timely and effective humanitarian assistance to the people suffering extreme famine and poverty has proved ineffective, unhelpful, and has cost the loss of human rights, especially children and women.

C. Erosion of Humanitarian Principles

As mentioned before, there are fundamental principles guiding classical humanitarianism ever since its origins: neutrality, impartiality and humanity. In practice, however, clearer commitments and compromises are often necessary since humanitarian actors are not always capable of ensuring full respect and fulfillment of these principles. To some extent, some donors and humanitarian actors felt that the strict interpretation of this principle, along with the absolute respect of the confidentiality vows, had become an obstacle to the effective protection of the victims
of humanitarian crisis and conflicts as well as to the accomplishment of broader and longer-term objectives. However, progressively taking over of humanitarian action, politicization and conditionality in the name of human rights have also significantly questioned impartiality. In Bosnia, for example, the imposed conditionality by donor governments, which was based on the risk of Serbian military distorting aid, damaged the impartial action of humanitarian agencies, leaving thousands of people without any type of help. These actions led the Serbs to view humanitarian aid provided by humanitarian agencies as a political instrument of western countries and not as a neutral and impartial action.[44]

In this sense, and in the context of the ‘new humanitarianism’, both the theory and practice of most humanitarian principles were highly questioned in crisis scenarios like Bosnia. The risk of creating a moral hierarchy of victims who do or do not deserve assistance is one of the most perverse consequences of this new political impulse to humanitarian action.[45] Even if donor governments and agencies have emphasized the importance of impartiality and neutrality, many humanitarian organizations have argued that respect and compliance to these same principles is almost impossible due to very complex and unpredictable operational conditions in the field. Others have argued that when such principles are not respected and fulfilled, humanitarianism is but a façade.[46] Whenever these principles are absent, political actors end up dictating the nature and scale of external assistance and humanitarian action becomes political action.

D. Militarization of Humanitarian Action

Another controversial and problematic feature of the ‘new humanitarianism’ has been the recent and direct involvement of military forces in humanitarian activities. Although the support of military forces in humanitarian action has been a relatively common phenomenon, this has become much more active and explicit ever since the mid-1990s, as a complement of an increasingly political humanitarian action. In these new contexts, and in relation to a new type of conflict, of a more internal nature, the dominant logic is that military forces should create the necessary conditions to allow for the work of humanitarian organizations in terms of conflict resolution and social reconstruction[47] all framed in the peacebuilding framework. As a consequence, external military forces start assuming various degrees of humanitarian roles in large-scale operations, as in Kosovo, Timor Leste, Afghanistan or Iraq. Examples of these broader mandates include providing food or health assistance to populations in need, or even education infrastructures for children in refugee of displaced camps. This new trend of military intromission into what is traditionally considered ‘humanitarian space’ raises a few principle issues and problems, as well as important operational questions from the point of view of its impact on the work of the humanitarian organizations themselves. In fact, this situation raises questions about the existence of different roles and functions between military personnel and humanitarian agencies, as well as the need for a more coherent, independent and impartial response to extreme needs situations.[48]

All these dilemmas and challenges to an effective humanitarian action seem to have been reinforced in the post-9/11 international scenario and especially after the ‘war on terror’. The way in which the United States and other countries have responded to this phenomenon, including through the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, have shown how the most concerning trends of the ‘new humanitarianism’ have been reinforced: a humanitarian action increasingly conditioned on geopolitical and geostrategic interests of the main international actors; an increasing confusion between the civilian and military spheres resulting from the performance by military forces of traditionally humanitarian activities (providing food, water, shelter); a setback in the respect for humanitarian principles, human rights and international humanitarian law; as well as a clear shift in international security priorities making it harder to respond to the crises at the margins of the international system, which became increasingly perceived as not important or non-existing.[50]

Another problem with this increased militarization of humanitarian action relates to the consequences that arise from the different approaches and cultures that characterize both the
military and humanitarian actors. While NGOs often regard the military as being too bureaucratic and inappropriate, the military tends to regard aid workers as undisciplined, disorganised and resistant to military coordination.[51] Furthermore, in the context of humanitarian action, this blurring of roles and confusion of local perceptions of humanitarian agencies and military forces can endanger and undermine the purpose and aim of the activities of humanitarian personnel. This has been a real concern in the context of the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 where civilians tended to associate humanitarian actors with military forces and vice versa. [52]

Dropping food while bombing military targets, for instance, blurs the line between humanitarian action and hidden political agendas. Authors like Barry and Jefferys argue that this merging of roles and goals is inevitable and desirable for the better achievement of conflict resolution and peace-building objectives.[53] However, with the attempt to bring political, military and humanitarian objectives within the same framework, there is a danger that humanitarian objectives and principles will be totally compromised by a strategy that makes aid delivery a means of achieving politico-military objectives and by a blurring that creates increased security risks for the humanitarian workers in an already highly insecure environment.[54] In such complex circumstances, it becomes necessary to rethink the role and place of military forces in the framework of humanitarian action since these may well perform a very useful and important role in the immediate restoration of vital infrastructures and of the security conditions, especially in contexts where the capacity of aid channels is limited. However, it is important that, in humanitarian terms, such contribution is limited to guaranteeing the protection and security conditions of humanitarian organizations instead of assuming broader (and more sensitive) humanitarian mandates.

III. Conclusion

What can be concluded from this analysis is that policy makers, diplomats and aid workers are increasingly struggling to develop appropriate responses to humanitarian crisis and conflict in contexts characterised by state breakdowns and competing military and para-military structures. But what comes out very clearly from the humanitarian experience in the past three decades is that the international community does not know yet how to deal with such dysfunctional states, particularly those which have limited strategic interests[55] and even less in complex human crisis contexts. Without undermining its potential positive contribution to peace and stability in the longer term, one must be aware that the assumption that humanitarian action is the answer to underdevelopment and conflict may not be so linear and may entail a few dangers. In the absence of effective, coherent and committed political efforts and mechanisms by the international community to solve complex political emergencies, the simple intervention in internal ongoing conflicts using humanitarian assistance may, as proved, be problematic and insufficient. Although a new practice of humanitarianism was required to approach the significant changes in the international context and crisis requiring large scale intervention, the results and implications of this new approach do not appear to be satisfactory.[56] What has been experienced and promoted by this ‘new humanitarianism’, is essentially a misconception of the need for humanitarian aid by an international system that simultaneously denies its own role in sustaining or addressing complex emergencies and threatens further the capacity of victims of conflict-related disasters to have access to humanitarian assistance and to the enjoyment of their human rights.

Today’s complex humanitarian crises require a more active political will from the main international actors to face the power structures that benefit from violence and conflict, by resorting to more coherent and consensual solutions, and by limiting the involvement of military forces in the distribution of aid and other traditionally humanitarian activities. In a context where bilateral aid is increasingly denied to countries that do not obey western economic and political structures and demands, maintaining a humanitarian action that is free from political conditionalities and military constraints is even more necessary.[57] It must, therefore, be reaffirmed that when people are actually suffering, the humanitarian imperative must prevail over political and military objectives. At the same time, there needs to be a search for more sustainable and positive relations between humanitarian action and political motivations, as well as durable and coherent solutions for conflicts.[58]
Observing the state of humanitarian action ever since the second half of the 90's, two potentially contradictory conclusions can be drawn: one is that the difficulties and challenges in providing aid are largely caused by the disregard for much of the applicable international human rights and humanitarian law of combatants and the international community; a second is that with the proliferation rather than the containment of major man-made crises in many areas of the world, humanitarian action is likely to be even more necessary. In these contexts, it is important to underline that humanitarian action will remain essential not only to save lives and help people enjoy the most basic rights to food, shelter and water, but also equally important rights to health and education, and equal opportunity which are translated into international human rights law and international humanitarian law. It is also important to stress the need for better and more effective coordination and complementarity between different actors in current humanitarian crisis scenarios in order to achieve more effective responses. This is even more important in a context where human rights advocates, humanitarian workers, development agencies and military forces literally stumble into each other while performing their mandates, that often overlap, and as they increasingly compete for resources and visibility.

As Sanahuja correctly affirms, in the collective imagination, humanitarian action is one of the most direct, effective and immediate forms of expression of the principle of solidarity and commitment with life and human dignity that calls for generous and equitable aid. By providing it, donor governments and humanitarian agencies are somehow giving people hope that the circumstances can improve, that they will be able to enjoy their rights, and that they will participate fully in their own development and future well-being. It is, thus, essential that the various obstacles which effective humanitarian action is facing today are not seen as inevitable, but rather as an opportunity to overcome these challenges, rethink the role and goals of humanitarian agencies and, contribute to the improvement of the potential and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

Notes:


Rienner Publishers, 1999). In Bosnia, for example, aid agencies were frequently accused of facilitating the ethnic cleansing they were condemning, by providing transportation and shelter; Karlos Pérez de Armiño, La vinculación ayuda humanitaria-cooperación al desarrollo. Objectivos, puesta en práctica y críticas. (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Cuadernos de Trabajo de Hegoa, No. 33, 2002): 6. In Bosnia, for example, aid agencies were frequently accused of facilitating the ethnic cleansing they were condemning, by providing transportation and shelter.


[13] This debate about a necessary linkage between humanitarian and development assistance was itself focused on two main strategies: a first one consisting of a number of continuous phases in time starting from an emergency situation, through rehabilitation and ending in the development stage, the so-called *continuum*; and a second one, the *contiguum*, which emerged in part through a critics to the previous one, defending a combination, at every moment, of the different forms of intervention, suggesting an integral and coherent strategy aimed at reducing the vulnerabilities of the affected population and enhancing their own capacities (Armiño, 2002: 13).


[31] Francisco Rey, “Visiones de la Acción Humanitaria en 1997”, *Anuário CIP: Guerras*


[55] Ibid.; Ibid.


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