

Humanitarian Action – Whose Business is it anyway? Good humanitarian action requires strong foundations in society

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A conference report by Barbara Müller

“Humanitarian Action – whose Business is it anyway?” There has to be some significance to this question, considering it has brought, *Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe*, *Caritas international* and *Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders* together for the first time, for a jointly hosted international forum in Berlin. 70 participants from German and international humanitarian aid organisations as well as science, government departments, advisory bodies, universities, the media, human rights groups, and the German Bundestag discussed these matters in depth on the 14th and 15th of April. The newly appointed *Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Aid*, Dr. Bärbel Kofler, explained her current positioning as commissioner and emphasized the government's openness to conversation and dialogue.

What was the purpose of the conference? Dr. Oliver Müller (head of *Caritas international*) concluded: "I think that good humanitarian action requires strong societal foundations, a commitment and understanding of the conditions and challenges, broad interest within the

general public, and in-depth knowledge amongst decision makers in government and parliament."

Humanitarian aid organisations are under a great deal of pressure to act. "Crises, conflicts and wars are having a more direct and immediate effect on us than ever before." More than 140 million people annually have been affected by natural disasters in recent years, and the number of ongoing conflicts has increased dramatically", as Oliver Müller emphasized. Barbara Lochbihler seconded this notion from the perspective of the European Parliament: "Since the year 2000, the need for humanitarian aid has quadrupled worldwide. In 2016, US\$ 20 billion will be requested from donors in order to provide life-saving aid to 87 million people in 37 countries. For the year 2015, the European EU budget allocated € 909 million for humanitarian aid, less than 1 % of the EU's overall budget. This is completely inadequate in the face of the current crises, despite the fact that the EU is one of the largest donors in terms of humanitarian aid." However, there are no humanitarian solutions for political problems: Europe's political failure in respond-



ing to the refugee crisis pushes humanitarian aid organisations even closer to their absolute limits, as outlined by Kathrin Schick, Director of the European NGO network *VOICE*: “The members are professional organisations, they are all stretched as it is, and they all have responsibilities in terms of funds for the work with communities outside of Europe. There are now so many humanitarian requirements that the organisations are completely overwhelmed and simply cannot meet those increasing requirements alone any longer.”

So is humanitarian aid the responsibility of professional organisations, which have become totally overstretched? What makes humanitarian action – often seen as simply helping other human beings – so complicated in reality? Taking the example of Yemen, Pascal Daudin, Head of the Humanitarian Policy Unit of the *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)* in Geneva, explained just how complicated it really is. The situation in the country is politically unstable, and the acts of war perpetrated by various warring parties add to the complexity. In order for humanitarian help to reach the people concerned, short term emergency aid needs to be organised, transported and distributed, but the changing life situation and continued survival of vulnerable communities must also be taken into consideration long term. Humanitarian organisations need to negotiate with all warring parties, control access to communities in need, and at the same time gather sufficient finances from donors to be prepared for future developments. There are increasing numbers of active parties coming to the fore; nevertheless, the existing aid system cannot keep up with increas-

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ing requirements. In practice, humanitarian aid is a complex balancing act, a fact that is difficult to explain to the general public, as the expectation is that every penny should reach people in need. But how is that possible, when warring parties deliberately starve whole cities, as is currently happening in Syria? Ralf Südhoff (*World Food Programme – WFP*) reported that – after lengthy negotiations – a city under siege was recently provided with supplies from the air. 24 palettes with food will prevent thousands of people from starving for about a month. Whilst the air plane was in mid-air, it was suddenly flanked by two Russian fighter jets and accompanied on its journey. This had not been planned in any way. Shortly afterwards, Russian television showed how the Russian army facilitated humanitarian aid. 6 out of 24 palettes did not reach their destination – their whereabouts remain unknown. This is the reality of humanitarian action today – every day. So what can be done? Stop aid supplies because the warring parties used it to their own advantage? Stop aid supplies because the warring parties have enriched themselves? Or tackle those “grey zones” and dilemmas proactively and simply say: yes, this is the reality, but we can still accomplish our mission for the most part. “There are currently more than 1,000 armed groups participating in the Syrian conflict”, says Eva Svoboda, who observes the situation in Syria, amongst other countries, for the *Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute*. “When trying to supply aid by land, there are countless checkpoints where negotiations are inevitable – negotiations with the militia as well as various ethnic groups, just to reach the communities in need of aid.” Time to accept the facts!

Added to the complexity on the ground, there are the funding mechanisms which are, for in-

stance, subject to the principle of annuality. How this situation can be dealt with, even medium-term, remains to be seen. In addition, there simply aren't sufficient funds to cover ever-increasing requirements. Barbara Lochbihler provided an example from 2014 when, shortly after the European Parliament elections, a committee meeting was called even before the first parliamentary session. "At this meeting, the then Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid reported that they had reached the limit and that there had never in the history of the EU been a time when there were four significant humanitarian crises which far exceeded capacities." In the same vein, journalist Andreas Zumach criticises the current funding situation as "completely inadequate" and suggests that a total restructuring process is necessary.

But who then decides which communities are most in need of aid? Which humans will receive help, and which ones won't? Who makes those decisions, based on which criteria?

The history of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan, as Antonio Donini (Geneva) from the *Feinstein International Center at Tufts University* knows from his own experience, is also the history of the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action. It has had an impact on humanitarian work in Afghanistan ever since western nations provided "humanitarian" aid to the Mujahideen, to enable them to fight against the Soviet Union. For the purpose of the fight against the Taliban, Colin Powell announced that the humanitarian organisations were part of the combat forces. So it comes as no surprise that humanitarian aid workers are considered spies, and that Taliban computer experts analyse where aid organisations active in the territory receive their funding from.

As Mrs. Füllkrug-Weitzel, President of the *Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe*, explained in her



introductory speech, humanitarian aid follows different principles, and with good reason. International Humanitarian Law has developed in leaps and bounds, particularly after the end of the Second World War. Humanity and impartiality, independence and neutrality are principles that humanitarian aid must be able to follow. The conduct of warring parties is subject to limitations, too: Persons who are not directly involved in the hostilities, including soldiers who are not participating in combat any longer, have to be treated humanely at all times and without discrimination. Injured and sick persons should be rescued and treated. All warring factions have to accept the impartiality, independence and neutrality of humanitarian organisations like the *International Committee of the Red Cross*, and enable them to do their work.

September 11 2001 and the subsequent "War on Terror" undoubtedly marked a sea change. Based on the Afghanistan case study, a small team analysed just how much of an impact this event had on attitudes internationally, all the way to the United Nations. She mentioned the following buzzword: "We cannot afford justice any longer." In Sri Lanka, too, the impact of September 11 is apparent. In this civil war, which Norah Niland from the *Graduate Institute Geneva* and her working group looked at more closely, it is obvious that humanitarian aid became dependent on a government which was willing to fight the Tamil rebels by all means possible – with no consideration for civilian victims. Why did the humanitarian organisations remain silent? Why was there no outcry? Why were they planning for the time

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after the conflict, whilst civilians were bombed indiscriminately, and military operations were cynically described as a “humanitarian activity?” This case clearly shows the vulnerability humanitarian action can be faced with. Local colleagues were put under pressure, the probability of future projects was questioned. The organisations in question had to ask themselves: should we raise our voices now and ruin relations with the government completely, or maintain a good relationship with the government in order to be able to help in the future? Some hoped for an international intervention which never materialised because the same consideration had been made at state level. The result was more or less an implicit “green light” for ruthless military operations without any consideration for civilian victims. Humanitarian aid organisations are increasingly faced with the question whether they cannot just help the victims afterwards, but also provide humanitarian protection and thus prevent more victims.

The erosion of the legal frameworks which enable humanitarian action is continuing to this day. By now, it has reached the EU, too. “A human rights catastrophe”, Barbara Lochbihler calls the EU-Turkey Agreement. What significance do international treaties and principles have if the key players do not adhere to them, a conference participant asks? And Kathrin Schick points out that the EU has signed almost all of the legal framework agreements and usually defends them internationally. Europe tried to ignore the migration of those looking for protection as long as possible. Germany and Sweden opened their borders, the other countries just move them on. “We are currently in breach of just about the entire legislation. Instead of acting in a humanitarian manner, we use funds to buy our way out of our responsibility.” Another point to note is that the capacities in Europe do not meet the requirements of



providing for a “population in motion”. As a result, a “classic humanitarian situation” has developed, in dire need of help. Unfortunately, the professional organisations were often engaged elsewhere, and no funds had been allocated for rich Europe. This situation led to a surprising development for professional humanitarian organisations. Barbara Lochbihler explains:

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“If you look at the situation of refugees in Germany, when all those people seeking protection arrived, we were able to observe that a large segment of the population showed humanitarian responsibility

and acted accordingly, as a matter of course.” Tobias Debiel, Scientific Director at the *Institute for Development and Peace*, also emphasises the ability and readiness of the population to step into the breach when the structures of a weak administrative state are failing. This new experience could turn out to be an opportunity, says Barbara Lochbihler: “There is this huge opportunity to build on the personal experiences of many people from all parts of Germany: On this basic human instinct to help others in need. There is a chance to involve them long term and to foster their enthusiasm for humanitarian aid. The decisive factor is to make the public aware that humanitarian action can be owned by each and everyone, as long as they are willing to take it on.” This indicates that the conference organisers' hope for deep societal roots is not without base. Who are the potential allies? In addition to Frau Kofler's offer of cooperation, two other alliance partners were identified during the forum. On the one hand, there are societal platforms and networks. In his contribution, the director of the *Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaft-*





liches Engagement (National Network for Civil Society) began to lay foundations to combine societal transformation with the values of humanitarian aid. Based on Ansgar Klein's offer, we can look forward to the Humanitarian Aid Campaign Days.

In any case, humanitarian action doesn't have to shoulder everything alone! Michael Windfuhr, *German Institute for Human Rights*, also offered his help. "Yes, humanitarian action has to observe human right standards! But does it really need to express and demand this, too?" Another offer of help was forthcoming here, too. The connections between human rights and humanitarian action do not seem to have been fully explored by any means. It is likely that those engaged in a human rights-based approach to humanitarian action which is sensitive to the rights of those seeking protection have much in common with human rights activists – and it is also worth contemplating who is just paying lip service, and who is silently putting their money where their mouth is.

The combination of speeches, inputs and small working groups managed to establish a conversation between the different viewpoints: International experts from research and practice (Antonio Donini, Norah Niland and Eva Svoboda) as well as networking (Kathrin Schick) presented examples from the inner

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works of humanitarian action. And journalists (Andreas Zumach), human rights activists (Michael Windfuhr) and representatives of civic society (Ansgar Klein) added their own views on humanitarian aid to complement rather than work against current humanitarian action concepts. This led to a "surprisingly frank exchange", as a participant from the humanitarian action contingent emphasised.

Towards the end of the conference, the participants compiled a list of the next steps to take to reach the general objective:

- Create spaces and structures for reflection and analysis
- Systematically organise exchange towards politics and media on the one hand,
- human rights, peace and development on the other
- Raise awareness for humanitarian action issues
- and a deeper public perception.

To this end, the conference certainly created interest amongst a number of potential new allies from other areas of society. It is an exciting prospect to find out what will happen when the voice of humanitarian action becomes involved in a discourse which has hitherto been dominated by security concerns. Perhaps this is a way to end the domination of the counter-terrorism debate and emphasise human values and rights once more. Germany's debate landscape would certainly benefit.



Photos Hermann Bredehorst