

## Original Paper

# Has the UN And NGO Reform Of The Humanitarian System Sufficiently Addressed Its Principal Critiques Of The 1990s?

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### Abstract

*Due to ponderous humanitarian needs, the UN and NGOs are bedeviled with outstretch of its resources coupled with complex reality of conflict-related emergencies which has outstripped its capacities. In an attempt to efficaciously address humanitarian response, the UN and NGOs have taken bodacious steps to draw consensus to fulfill their mandates. Consequently, the UN and NGOs have taken catalytic reforms and critiques (in 1990s and 2000s) to create a robust rapid response to emergencies and take advantage of new system-wide mechanisms. Irrespective of relentless reforms and critiques, there have been vehement debates on the effectiveness and efficiency of the UN and NGOs in addressing its principal critiques. This research paper sought to make inquiry into the UN and NGOs efficacy to its principal critiques of the 1990s. The essay found that the UN and NGOs humanitarian system has not sufficiently addressed its principal critiques of the 1990s and that they have been unpredictable and unreliable in response to emergencies.*

### Keywords

*UN, NGO Reform, Humanitarian System, Humanitarian Response, Development, Economic and Social Affairs, Peace and Security, International Order*

### 1. Introduction

*“Development must target the millions of children affected by humanitarian crises. We must break down the barriers between development and humanitarian response, to put in place long-term efforts to end poverty and hunger.”—Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the UN Children’s Emergency Fund, United Nations Foundation, 2016.*

Research from Kent Randolph underscored the Second World War as a critical point where governments began to fathom the need for humanitarian intervention to curb crisis (Kent, 1987, p. 36).

Outlining antithesis to this, the French accounts of humanitarianism have accentuated the germane Cold War epoch and the Nigerian Biafra War in 1967 to 1970 as the turning point in promoting emergency assistance (Ryfman, 2008, p. 19; Aeberhard, 1994; Davey, 2012). Over the 1990s and 2000s, UN and NGO humanitarian architecture have undertaken various reforms to consolidate their structures to dispense more efficacious humanitarian action. Furthermore, the UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 created a system to ameliorate the UN agencies and NGOs to perform humanitarian assistance. Also, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 1997 initiated the broader UN reform packages which triggered improvement in thirty odd departments and programs and funds under four major areas encompassing humanitarian affairs, development, economic and social affairs and Peace and Security (Renewing the UN, July 1997). The December 1991 resolution 46/182 resuscitated current institutional structures and further strengthened coordination for inter agencies using mechanisms such as Emergency Relief Coordination (ERC) supported by Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA later becoming OCHA), Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) and Standing Committee for Humanitarian Affairs (IASC).

Over the years, humanitarian action has become a complex one. The signification of humanitarianism has been outstretched with humanitarianism being viewed as a more new interventionist international order. Challenges in civil wars such as Syria, Sri Lanka and Burundi among others have exposed inconsistencies in political remedy to violence and restricted humanitarian access. Irrespective of international and local actions to curb conflict in Somalia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq etc, resolutions have remained fruitless as expostulations and conflicts persists in these regions. Also, national disasters such as earthquakes in Haiti in 2010 and 1994 Rwanda genocide have raised questions about the effectiveness of international humanitarian assistance. After 30 years, the humanitarian system has developed creating crisis response preparedness structures, building institutional capacities and soliciting funds to better offer humanitarian assistance. In spite of consolidation of the UN and NGO humanitarian system to palliate humanitarian crisis, the UN and NGOs continue to be buffeted with incessant obstacles. The exigent challenges which overwhelm governments, people and institutions has engendered rebukes to the UN and NGO reforms and critiques. There also exists dynamic canvases among scholars on the effectiveness of the UN and NGOs humanitarian system in administering its principal critiques.

While scholars such as Stockton (1998) contend that the humanitarian system has improved its performance in terms of quality, Reiff (2002) identifies that the humanitarian system has inadequate capacity to address its critiques with Jones and Stoddard (2003) propounding deficiencies in humanitarian action due to executive committees created under the UN reform process which have added a degree of confusion to the ongoing process of humanitarian reform. This paper therefore takes a standpoint that the UN and NGO reform of the humanitarian system has not sufficiently addressed its principal critiques of the 1990s. The paper further takes turns to underscore factors such as accountability, leadership and coordination as impediments to tackling the 1990s critiques. The final

section of the paper concludes that the humanitarian system has inadequately addressed its critiques providing appropriate recommendations.

The critiques of the UN elements of the humanitarian system and the extent to which the reforms have addressed them Problematic principles, human rights and conditionality is one of the main critiques levied against the UN elements of the humanitarian system. In the changing faces of the crisis, humanitarian principles have become malfunctioned. Also, given the complex nature of emergencies, the humanitarian principles tend to lead to “politically blind acts of charity” rather than delivering positive impacts. According to Margi Buchanan-Smith of Action Aid, “humanitarian assistance are sent impartially based on need which fails to yield the necessary impact” (Curtis, 2001). The humanitarian coordinators who are appointed by the UN do not adequately comprehend humanitarian action (failing to understand the humanitarian principles and standards) and do not understand the importance of partnerships, resulting in underestimation of NGOs and ineffective humanitarian response that are accountable to affected populations. In recent times, new wars have focused conflict on recent populations and to be neutral, the UN tends to turn a blind eye to most crimes against humanity. This was evident during the Rwandan genocide in 1994 when the international community took a passive response when active stance was needed which impeded humanity principles and further affecting the purpose of the UN system (Shearer, 2000, p. 412).

**Organizational issues and poor performance** constitute yet another seminal critique. The humanitarian system is a complex one and often assessing the extent to which success or failure has been achieved is difficult due to lack of defined system-wide objectives. Mostly, beyond the broad goals of rescuing lives and reducing suffering, both actors and observers lack specific aims to agree upon, which tend to undermine the performance, purpose and principles of humanitarianism. Within the humanitarian system, there exists ineffective organizational arrangements which has caused severe weaknesses of the system. The flaws of the humanitarian system has been imputed to be mainly weak coordination, poor leadership, lack of accountability among others. The weaknesses of the humanitarian system has severely exposed the inadequate performance of the system. For instance, the Rwandan genocide and Haiti disaster exposed the UN poor performance. Gordon and Donini (2016) uphold that the genocide of Rwanda in 1994 raised key questions about the professionalism, competence and willingness to act of the humanitarian sector. The critique of organizational issues is pertinent as it helps to understand why the reform of the UN has been a recurring feature and also whether there is the need to make conscious efforts to address the changing nature of humanitarian crisis (Eriksson,1996).

### **Humanitarian Alibi**

Humanitarian Alibi is “the misuse of humanitarian idea and humanitarian workers by governments eager to do so as little as possible in economically uncompromising regions like Sub-Saharan Africa” (Reif, 1997). Without political solutions, humanitarian intervention tends not to be effective. The Sudan crisis spells out the West had no interest in pacifying the crisis leading to “excuse to do nothing” (Meier,

2013). In addressing humanitarian crisis, state governments sometimes exercise their interests to misuse the idea of humanitarianism. Also, given the complex nature of disasters and the “emergency imaginary”, state governments sometimes defend national sovereignty and refute humanitarian assistance or conditionality of aid. Moreso, the allocation of humanitarian aid to crisis affected regions can lead to “spectre of the well-fed dead” as it could fuel conflicts (Peters, 1996). Humanitarian Alibi, has not been adequately tackled and for instance in Sudan, more than two billion humanitarian aid spent to rescue lives has also facilitated continuous conflicts (Branczik, 2004).

Though the critiques highlighted above are principal, one main devastating critique omitted is **state interests and humanitarian role in global governance**. In the era of globalization, the new role of the UN, is a complex one as the global structures of authority tend to interact with states and local systems. International law outlines states right to non-intervention, yet between 1990 and 2000, the UN military has 56 times intervened forcefully in states questioning the legitimacy of the UN intervention in weak states (Pattinson, 2011). States interest is therefore pertinent to enable humanitarian system to uphold the principles of state sovereignty (Chandler, 2009). State’s interest and role in global governance have therefore been omitted since it allows Western governments to extend their influence over other state regions (Gordon, 1991; Thomas, 2001). Also, this allows Western powers to monopolize security to justify humanitarian intervention which was particularly evident in how politics shaped policy responses to the Syrian crisis (Watson, 2011).

## 2. The UN and NGO Humanitarian System

In spite of the UN and NGO humanitarian system undertaking various reforms to curb humanitarian emergencies, the gaps in humanitarian leadership tend to inhibit the humanitarian system from adequately attending to its principal critiques of the 1990s. In the past, the UN humanitarian reforms discussed leadership mainly in the context of humanitarian coordinators. These humanitarian coordinators who are appointed by the UN do not adequately comprehend humanitarian action (failing to understand the humanitarian principles and standards) and do not understand the importance of partnerships, resulting in underestimation of NGOs and ineffective humanitarian response that are accountable to affected populations. Also, the humanitarian coordinators have challenges of building consensus with resident coordinators of countries. This has resulted in a range of standards, approaches and initiatives of the UN being compromised. The expectations and skills of humanitarian coordinators are different from those of resident coordinators. While the resident coordinators are responsible for developing operations and working closely with national governments to advocate the interests of the UN, by contrast the humanitarian community role is to be amenable to quickly save lives and mitigate suffering. This in effect means that since the role of the resident coordinator is a diplomatic one, they cannot take stance against national governments and in some cases tend to construe NGO’s as nuisance infringing on principles of impartiality. The leadership gaps existing in humanly coordinators and its clusters has caused a mediocre performance of the humanitarian system (Cohen, 2008).

Also, there exists cluster leadership challenges since no systematic arrangements have been reached relative to country-level protection. The humanitarian coordinators instead consult with UNICEF, OHCHR and UNHCR to address natural disaster situations. The organizations consulted have not taken a systematic engagement in natural disaster management. In 2010, according to the UNHCR review, out of 58 natural disasters in the preceding five year period, the UNHCR involved only in 13 and supported other five (Deschamp, 2010). Again, the distance in humanitarian leadership accounted for the failed performance to major crisis such as the West African Ebola and Rwanda genocide. It is in this light that Bennett (2016) maintain that there is no incentives for such engagements as power dynamics and culture create compelling reasons to explain why the humanitarian system remain closed and centralized. Furthermore, the discontinuity in leadership has caused deficiency of the organizational system and horrendous performance of the humanitarian system. Within even the humanitarian system, there is a principal challenge. This concerns the lack of defined system-wide objective to gauge process of success or failure. This has led to ineffective organizational arrangements and flaws in performance. The gaps in leadership with the humanitarian system creates a situation where it is not clear on what the humanitarian system and NGO attempts to accomplish. There is moreover, absence of specific aims on which observers and actors would agree beyond goals of saving lives and attenuating suffering. In view of this, rapid response to massive sudden onset disasters tend to overwhelm countries coping capacities as well as advocacy on behalf of crisis affected people has adversely been affected. It is in no doubt that the various UN reforms that have taken place which follow major disasters have questioned the UN's performance and leadership hierarchy. The complexity of the humanitarian system poses a challenge as it has created long-standing gaps in the global humanitarian system (Weiss et al, 2008).

Accountability deficit, mainly downward accountability remain one of the key factors obstructing the NGO and UN humanitarian system from sufficiently addressing its principal critiques. There was a great deal of emphasis placed on accountability when the reform started as one of the glaring gaps was accountability to affected populations. The humanitarian reform placed much emphasis of accountability of the global cluster leads to Emergency Relief Coordination and country clusters to the Humanitarian coordinators, yet there exist a challenge of accountability to affected populations. Also, in spite of accountability applying to all humanitarian actors that in different humanitarian context and space tend to exert power over individuals affected by their action, the most affected and least powerful stakeholder group ie crisis-affected populations has received little accountability while traditionally the focus of humanitarian accountability has tended to focus on accountability to donors and more powerful stakeholders. Despite the NGO community developing a set of quality and accountability initiatives in the mid-1990s, the UN and NGO's tend to command immense logistical, financial and cultural power which leads to irresponsible use of power mostly in situations where there is intense pressure to act quickly to save lives and meet reporting demands of their humanitarian community. This has precipitated corruption whether for personal, social or political gains, abuse of power including bias allocation of aid undermining principles of impartiality and humanity. The accountability deficit of the

international NGO has undermined its mission and performance and transparency (Hilhorst, 2002). Also, the Disaster accountability report in 2011 elucidated how poor response and deficient levels of accountability of NGO's tend to affect vulnerable communities. The report outlined that the Haiti earthquake received cooperation from only 20% of the NGO's involved and found that 52% of the donated funds had been spent a year after the disaster although eight hundred thousand people continue to take shelter in tents or open air at night (Disaster Accountability Project, 2011).

Moreover, the NGO reform which led to the adoption of various codes of conduct and standards have contributed to the accountability deficit of the humanitarian system. First, there is lack of clarity of the principles and standards adopted by the NGO community and this has engendered a more lack of accountability in their implementation. The Sphere and Core Humanitarian Standards which are the main accountability frameworks tend to underscore the significance of principles without pronouncing clearly their applications. The Core Humanitarian Standard for instance states "based on an impartial assessment of needs, organizations should commit to providing impartial assistance based on needs". This in effect raises a key issue about the codes and standards of the NGO reform since telling an organization to be impartial does not explain how to be impartial. Considering this, in today's humanitarian landscape, NGO's just state and utter principles without adhering to them or weave assessment of principles and standards into their project planning process or evaluations. Mierop (2015) maintain that NGO's promote principles but fail to routinely demonstrate them. Moreover in advocating for adherence of principles and standards, this leads the humanitarian organizations to align with political and military activities thereby willingly compromising their principled approaches. Also, the sphere standards lack compliance monitoring and the perverse incentives of quality assurance. In view of this, the Sphere was introduced to ameliorate the quality of humanitarian action. The Sphere has produced a less clear picture of the movement to improve the rights and dignity of those caught in disasters and war. "The human massacre of the DRC and the low malnutrition rates in South Sudan confirm that the professional standards interpreted restrictively in technical norms fail to bolster victims of disaster and war" (Walker & Purdin, 2004).

Weak coordination remain an essential setback of the UN and NGO humanitarian system to effectively addressing the 1990s principal critiques. The reform process of the humanitarian community has centred on the most visible aspect of coordination which is the cluster approach. In recent times, the focus of the humanitarian community has accentuated on improved coordination not only at clusters but the field level. However, there exists weak partnerships within clusters which has impeded coordination to better address humanitarian response. Coordination structures tend to alienate those who engage in bulk work (like local and international NGOs) when there are no strong partnerships. The cluster approach was introduced by the humanitarian community to enhance partnerships between UN agencies, international and national NGOs and government departments (James, 2008, p. 359, IASC, 2006, p. 1). The aim of the cluster approach has not fostered strong coordination between international and local NGOs and the UN agencies. Furthermore, there exists the problem of equality

and mutual respect, transparency and dialogue on an equal footing among the UN agencies and NGOs thereby debilitating complementarity capacities of local and international agencies. The cluster approach mostly fail to incorporate the perspective of local NGO actors and of that of the national. This tend to create the situation where NGOs feel their roles are inactive in the clusters, where they resort to taking direction from cluster leads agencies rather than using the clusters to build capacity to bolster efforts of humanitarian response.

Also, there exists weak levels of coordination among clusters and NGOs and UN agencies because the NGOs tend to perceive the cluster approach as being UN-focused treating the NGOs as subordinates and maintaining that it was introduced without proper consultation with non-UN actors. For instance in DRC in September 2009, 49 representatives of DRC NGOs, Red Cross and civil organizations wrote a letter to the UN agencies criticizing them for not supporting or failing to coordinate with civil society organizations (Street, 2011, p. 43). Moreover, the NGO reform which led to the adoption of cluster approaches has precipitated deficiency in performance, purpose and principles of the humanitarian system. The performance and principles critiques are mostly undermined since there exist inconsistent coordination as cluster co-leads tend to lack clarity of their roles. The cluster approach during the NGO reform impeded the humanitarian principle of independence, impartiality and neutrality. NGOs are financially dependent on lead agencies which tend to decline their independence. Also, when cluster or lead agencies establish connections with peace keeping operations and governments that are parties to conflict, it undermines the impartiality principle of humanitarianism. Furthermore, there exist weak coordination in the cluster approach during extensive crisis. For instance, the Haitian earthquake in 2010 which brought together various national and international actors, weak cluster coordination was realized due to varying capacity and skills of humanitarian actors (Stumpenhorst & Razun, 2011).

### 3. Conclusion

The desire to meet the needs of people, institutions and governments across the global sphere engendered rapid changes in the geopolitical landscape in the humanitarian responses. Over the years after the Second World War, there has been mammoth changes in the humanitarian system, proliferating the number of stakeholders to the discourse of humanitarianism. In view of this, the humanitarian architecture is providing more emergency assistance to people, institutions and governments. Irrespective of the graceful support of humanitarian system to affected populations, the system is outstretched and the very definition of humanitarianism has become complex with vulnerable populations perceiving humanitarian support as woeful and diminishing. The humanitarian stakeholders have upsurged entering the humanitarian landscape, with breakthrough technologies being introduced to bolster humanitarian work. Nevertheless, the humanitarian system keep struggling to address the changing nature of conflicts and growing demands of humanitarian crisis. The growing challenges of the humanitarian system warranted incremental reforms and critiques in 1990s and 2000s.

Notwithstanding this, the humanitarian system is plagued with challenges which get exposed during

global most enduring crisis which raises questions on the effectiveness of the UN in conforming to critiques. In spite of the UN and NGO humanitarian reform receiving various critiques, there has been some improvement in the humanitarian response to crisis. This paper ascertained whether the UN and NGO reform sufficiently addressed its principal critiques of 1990s? The paper outlined key obstacles of accountability, leadership and coordination obstructing the UN and NGOs in effectively addressing the principal critiques of 1990s. In this paper, three main principal critiques have been underscored, mainly organizational issues and poor performance, problematic principles, human rights and conditionality and humanitarian Alibi. Also, critical factors such as weak coordination, accountability gaps and leadership challenges were highlighted as main impediments to the effective operations of the reforms. In view of this, it is imperative that the UN and NGO humanitarian system to firstly fathom the historical evolution of humanitarianism from its foundations in the mid 19th century to the 1st and 2nd World Wars to the end of the Cold War and the new global world order.

Also, there is the need for the humanitarian system to advocate for actors outside the tradition that created humanitarian principles of neutrality, humanity, impartiality and independence to fathom and support adherence to humanitarian principles. Moreover, it is pertinent to meet development, security, and peace objectives through robust coherence and complementarity between humanitarian and aid intervention. Also, the humanitarian space requires greater probity and transparency in its conduct of operations within the sphere of humanitarianism. In addition to this, the humanitarian system should eschew one size fits all approach in crisis response. Humanitarian actors should be more effective in addressing needs discarded of their beliefs and operational models. In sum, it will be advisable that the international NGO and its main accountability initiatives should work in line with UN actors to improve their accountability and transparency to crisis-affected populations. Also, the international NGOs and UN agencies should find ways to involve national partners in humanitarian coordination. It will be momentous for the UN agencies, global clusters and donors to also ensure dedicated cluster leadership.

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