

Humanitarian Action: Harming Those in Need

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The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action. Edited by Antonio Donini. Sterling, Virginia, Kumarian Press, 2012. xviii + 318 pp., \$29.95 (paper) (ISBN-13: 978-1565494886).

How effective is humanitarian action in helping those in need? This is one of the most important, and enduring, questions in discussions of humanitarianism. On the one hand, there is the pull to “do something” to assist those who are suffering from man-made and natural disasters. At the same time, there is the very real possibility that efforts to help those in need can actually generate unintentional and perverse outcomes, further harming those who are already suffering. This excellent volume, edited by Antonio Donini of the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, is a recent, and welcomed, contribution to the literature attempting to answer this question.

The volume consists of twelve chapters, including an introductory and concluding chapter. In the Introduction, Donini defines “instrumentalization” which is the central concept underpinning the volume. Instrumentalization refers to “the use of humanitarian action or rhetoric as a tool to pursue political, security, military, development, economic, and other non-humanitarian goals” (p. 2). Donini, and the other contributors, illustrate how instrumentalization is prevalent in all aspects of humanitarian action. In pursuing their own, often disparate, goals, the complex array of actors in humanitarian action—e.g., public and private donors, national and local governments, international organizations, public and private recipients, militaries, and non-state actors—all actively contribute to the process of instrumentalization.

A second, and related, theme that runs throughout the volume is that instrumentalization in humanitarian action is nothing new. In stark contrast, the volume makes clear that instrumentalization has always existed and is as old as efforts by supposed humanitarians to help those in need. The two chapters constituting Part I of the book drive home this point by tracing the prevalence of instrumentalization across historical cases of humanitarian action. Both chapters are excellent in making this point and in providing historical overviews of humanitarian efforts more generally.

Part II consists of six case studies of specific instances of instrumentalization in humanitarian action in the post-Cold War period. These chapters do an excellent job of illustrating how instrumentalization is not only omnipresent in humanitarian action, but also how it manifests itself in different ways depending on the specific context. The importance of context exists across cases and even within specific cases. For example, in her chapter (Chapter 5) on Darfur, Helen Young discusses how instrumentalization varied depending on whether the situation was framed as an immediate emergency or as post-conflict reconstruction.

Part III, which consists of two chapters, applies the logic of instrumentalization to the provision of food aid and protection to those in need. The authors effectively demonstrate how manipulation by the parties involved in humanitarian action can undermine the ability to achieve these outcomes. After reading these chapters, one cannot help but wonder—if instrumentalization threatens and undermines relatively basic activities like food delivery and the protection of the vulnerable, why would one ever have confidence in more ambitious, and much more complex, efforts such as reconstruction and nation building?

In the excellent concluding chapter, Antonio Donini and Paul Walker summarize the central insights of the volume and draw a sobering, yet important conclusion. Instrumentalization

is not a bug, but rather a fundamental feature of today's humanitarian system. This feature is here to stay given the "inertia of a humanitarian establishment intent on reproducing and expanding itself," which means that "the humanitarian theatre remains stubbornly self-referential and built around systems, practices, and reward structures that often value growth, if not turf, over principle and effectiveness" (p. 245).

Overall, this volume is accessible, readable, and flows well, which is often rare for an edited book. It will be of interest to a wide range of scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and students interested in all aspects of humanitarian action. The contributors convincingly make the point that claims of independence, neutrality, and other-regarding behavior in humanitarian action are largely empty. In stark contrast, all humanitarian action is influenced, to varying degrees, by the narrow interests of the various parties and stakeholders involved. It is naïve and simplistic to assume that benevolent and disinterested humanitarians can, and will, intervene to help those most in need. One might assume that this insight would be common sense to anyone living in the actual world, but, unfortunately, many people continue to model and discuss humanitarian action as if omniscient and moral super persons are running the show. As the contributors to this volume clearly demonstrate, this is far from the case. Where, then, does this leave us regarding humanitarian action?

I would like to suggest that one path forward is to focus on comparative institutional analysis. Institutions can be understood as the formal and informal "rules of the game." Focusing on understanding and comparing the context-specific rules governing humanitarian action matter for at least two related reasons.

First, rules can be viewed as incentives which create payoffs to those acting under institutions. In the context of humanitarian action, this matters because it is possible for even

narrowly self-interested actors to behave as if they are other-regarding if the appropriate rules are in place. Whether such rules exist, or whether they can be established if they do not exist, is a separate question, but one that can only be addressed by first appreciating the central role that rules play in governing human behavior.

Second, rules will influence the adaptability, or inadaptability, of the humanitarian system. A system is adaptable if it contains feedback loops and incentive-inducing mechanisms. Actors in the system must receive feedback (positive or negative) and have an incentive to act on that feedback to either continue with what they are doing—in the case of positive feedback—or to change their behavior accordingly—in the case of negative feedback. Absent feedback, and the incentive to act on that feedback, perverse outcomes will persist, and humanitarian action will either fail or, worse yet, will harm the very people it is supposedly intended to help.

Focusing on the institutional environment within which humanitarian action takes place fully appreciates the prevalence of instrumentalization and the reality that the narrow and disparate ends of the actors involved in humanitarian action will often be at odds with the stated goals of humanitarian efforts. Given what is at stake in terms of human suffering, understanding the limits and costs of humanitarian action is just as important, if not more important, than understanding its potential benefits. An accurate accounting of these costs and benefits can only take place when the romantic blinders of the idealized, other-regarding view of humanitarian action are removed, to be replaced by an appreciation for the constraints and incentives at work in efforts supposedly intended to help others. By emphasizing the central role played by instrumentalization in humanitarian action, *The Golden Fleece* makes an important contribution to a more realistic, and more accurate, understanding of the realities of humanitarianism.