



Humanitarian Cafe: The necessity and limitations of humanitarian neutrality

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Summary report

During the Humanitarian Cafes, humanitarian professionals reflect on their humanitarian work and engage in critically constructive dialogues (under Chatham House Rule). This edition of the humanitarian cafe was hosted by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and facilitated by KUNO. This session aimed to reflect on the necessity and limitations of the humanitarian principle 'neutrality', taking into account recent developments regarding the conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan and Gaza.

Sophie Désoulières, the head of Humanitarian Affairs, Operational Communications and Advocacy (OSCAR) at Médecins Sans Frontières, kicked off the session with an introduction to the humanitarian principle of neutrality and offering her insights on it. Afterwards, the floor was opened for discussion among all the attendees.

Sophie explained that she, as a humanitarian practitioner, despite the challenges of it, perceives neutrality to be a tool in the toolbox, which is needed to do humanitarian work. To ensure operational space, the perception that an NGO does not take sides – or that the only side it takes is that of the affected population - is crucial. Yet, this is precisely what has been contested. INGOs have been perceived to aid one side of the conflict or as too Western to uphold true neutrality. Consequently, this poses challenges for accessing affected populations. Furthermore, neutrality seems to be harder to navigate in conflicts closer to home, such as Ukraine. Nevertheless, Sophie states that we need to stand by it since all the principles are at stake here. Yet, she acknowledges that the implementation and interpretation can be ambiguous, urging us to view it as a guiding compass amidst the complexities of humanitarian work.

The challenges of neutrality

Following this, the floor was opened for discussion. Firstly, it was mentioned by a participant that the understanding within the general public about the nature of humanitarian organisations and what neutrality exactly entails is not accurate. The proliferation of (mis)information and commentary in today's digital age often hinders the immediate acceptance of these organisations. Therefore, we as a community must define humanitarian organisations to the public and explain certain terms that are being used. This links also to the question of the universality of the concepts of the humanitarian principles, as some terms can be seen as Eurocentric. Furthermore, humanitarian principles can represent a sense of 'holiness' of the humanitarian system, leading people to hold it to unachievable standards. Therefore, we need to look at how we present the principles and what kind of language we use, and, importantly, translate the terms to the context and bridge it to culturally sensitive language.

Secondly, it is hard to say that humanitarian aid is inherently apolitical. The majority of NGOs are funded, and consequently, dependent on government and/or bilateral funding. Donors have foreign policies and cannot single out humanitarian aid, which means humanitarian aid is also part of political agendas. In some countries, this connection to the government can cause trust and access issues. Still, it was suggested that we should use humanitarian principles to navigate through this political landscape.

Moreover, there is also the difficulty that being neutral might not be well received. There is a particular school of thought that says 'If you are neutral at all costs, you are taking the side of the oppressor or enemy'. In some conflicts, there is even the belief of local authorities or conflicting parties that 'if you [NGOs] are not with us, you are against us'. This causes great problems for access, acceptance and even safety of NGO staff. There have been incidents where not speaking out against oppressive regimes caused backlash from civilians, such as in Hong Kong. A different example of when neutrality was contested was in Myanmar when doctors and nurses organised resistance to the coup of the military and urged international humanitarian and particularly medical staff to take an associated stance. Also, the origins of a humanitarian organisation can lead to mistrust and disadvantage access, because affected populations do not trust organisations from specific states or they do not trust the donors of that organisation.

Contemplations

The discussion about neutrality is not new. We are however dealing with different challenges nowadays, like technology and social media, which makes the issues more seen. What has also changed is the clear policy change to a 'with or against' us rhetoric.

Furthermore, a prominent discussion point was whether claiming neutrality means you cannot speak out when you observe human rights violations. The consensus in the room was that neutrality does not mean silence. There are instances where speaking out is imperative, whether to demonstrate solidarity with the affected populations or to address the underlying causes of suffering. Lastly, it was emphasised that the conceptualisation of neutrality in advocacy and its legal implications differ from its practical implementation on the ground. Different partners might not share the same views on the necessity of neutrality, and when engaging at the individual level, there are occasions where voicing concerns is essential for building trust and meaningful engagement.

So, how do humanitarian actors determine when to speak out, and what factors should they consider? Primarily, their decision-making is rooted in bearing witness to injustices, and they are compelled to take action based on what they observe. Participants highlighted various considerations, including Presence in the situation: Are we actively engaged and present where the violations are occurring?; Comparative voices: Who else is speaking out, and does our voice offer a unique perspective or add value to the discourse?; Risk assessment: What are the potential (unintended) consequences of speaking out, such as the risk of losing access? While remaining silent may safeguard access, speaking out can also enable it.; Unique position: Are we the only entity capable of speaking out on behalf of those affected? Or is another NGO doing this already, since this would decrease the incentive to speak out and risk an NGO's adherence to neutrality?

By weighing these factors carefully, and keeping in mind the different public and cultural understandings of neutrality, humanitarian actors should contemplate their use of neutrality and ensure that their voices are effectively utilised to advance the cause of those in need.

Humanitarian Cafe

The series Humanitarian Cafe is an initiative of Médecins sans Frontières, the Dutch Relief Alliance, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Netherlands Red Cross and KUNO.

