Humanitarian Ethics and Humanitarian Effectiveness: How Are They Related?

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Introduction

My purpose today is to think aloud, and get your help by thinking together, about the emphasis on effectiveness in the WHS process.

In doing so, I want to make sure that ethics as the realm of values (morality) remains integral to effectiveness as the realm of implementation (project management) in OCHA’s humanitarian policy development for the WHS.

To ensure that we capture the full range of ethical demands on humanitarian action that are now in play, I will take up the challenge of the WHS Concept Note and identify the many new ethical principles now in play around humanitarian action. These new ethical demands have come either from within the agency community, or as directives from the donor community.

Structure

I will organize my thoughts as follows:

1. The essential difference between ethics and effectiveness in abstract terms
2. Their essential interdependence in practice - danger of one without other
3. How do we give effectiveness an ethical character in humanitarian action?
4. The need to evaluate “ethically effective” humanitarian action

1. Meanings and Differences

Being ethical is about being good, right, virtuous, and embodying this in character, behaviour and action.

Being effective is about being functional, workable, fit for purpose and delivering results.

In essence, ethics is all about trying to put a value on things and effects. In essence, effectiveness is only about the functionality of a process to produce an effect.
This means that effectiveness is essentially value-neutral. Something can be very effective even if it is very bad. Something can be effective even when it is not desirable.

eg putting hundreds of thousands of cars on the roads of New York at 5pm can be a very effective way of creating gridlock.

feudalism can be a very effective way of holding land, power and wealth within a small minority while impoverishing the majority.

imprisoning IDPs within an electrified perimeter fence for 6 months and feeding them a rich and nutritious diet can be a highly effective way of reaching international nutritional standards.

setting up high-tech hospitals for sophisticated war surgery is a very effective but expensive way of treating people injured in fighting, and does little for the majority of people suffering from hunger and disease.

So, effectiveness without ethics can be unethical.

But, equally, ethics without effect can be unethical.

eg Identifying landmines as an unethical weapon but doing nothing to ban them is value-full but effect-neutral.

Writing a human rights policy for your company but not insisting on rolling it out is ethical thinking but not ethical doing.

Knowing how to give first aid to someone hurt in a car crash but not stopping to do so because you will be late for a dental appointment is an ethical error. It makes you ethically ineffective even though you get to the dentist on time, and shows an inability to judge what is ethically important in a changing context.

Ethics need to be effective just as much as effectiveness needs to be ethical. And, as the dentist example shows, definitions of effectiveness must be ready to change with context and circumstance. Judging a person’s effectiveness only on the basis her ability to keep an appointment when a changing situation suddenly demands much more from her is ethically wrong.

3. The Interdependence of Ethics and Effectiveness

This means that in humanitarian action – like anything else – effectiveness is not enough in itself. An effective system may have a lot wrong with it. It needs to be driven by ethical goals and ethical means.

So, humanitarian ethics and humanitarian effectiveness need constantly to inform one another in any humanitarian operation. A humanitarian operation can only be truly effective if it is ethical, and it can only be truly ethical if it is effective.

In short, the main theme of the WHS should be “ethective aid” rather than effective aid.
This neologism is an ugly one but the idea of something being “etfective” makes a point about the importance of **ethical effect**.

This is particularly important when we set hard metrics and targets for humanitarian effectiveness. As situations change, they may leave us measuring the wrong thing – like good timekeeping rather than life-saving first aid in the dentist example.

There is also a danger hard metrics of effectiveness can skew a humanitarian programme towards meeting hard targets at the cost of softer ethical goals. This has been a problem in the UK’s National Health Service lately where a race for hard output targets (patients seen, waiting lists etc) have sometimes seem staff cutting corners on other ethical processes that value patient dignity and respect.

### 3. How do we give effectiveness an ethical character in humanitarian action?

The ethics of humanitarian action has developed fast in the last 20 years. This explains the feeling that we need a Summit and a new Declaration.

In many ways, humanitarian ethics now stand as a sort of mini human rights charter for extreme situations. A significant ethics creep has expanded the moral goals of the humanitarian project. Prevention, resilience, recovery and capacity-building have been poured into the traditional principles, prohibitions and injunctions of IHL, and the original humanitarian principles of the Red Cross.

Humanitarian ethics today are like a highly compressed UDHR – with the old bottles of humanitarian principles now bursting at the seams as they fizz with the new wine of expanded ethical demands.

So what is now the goal of humanitarian ethics and what do we need to achieve to be ethically effective? Today, there are **many ethical goals embodied in many principles** across a very wide range of ethical intention: prevention, rescue, protection, development and good management. A brief overview of contemporary humanitarian good practice suggests 17 ethical demands expected of the sector. The first of these are familiar from our core humanitarian principles.

1. **Life** – the physical protection and bodily survival of a person
2. **Life plus** – the dignity principle and respect for the whole human person in its fullness
3. **Equality principle** – radical equality of impartiality, non-discrimination and need-based response
4. **Trust and confidence principle** – neutrality to achieve the freedom of operational access
5. **Independence and autonomy principle** – to achieve the freedom of operational autonomy

Operational demands can most easily be captured in a range of prepositions that reveal specific ethical obligations on humanitarian action.

6. The “before” principle – a responsibility to prevent suffering before it happens
7. The “after” principle – a duty to alleviate suffering after it has happened
8. The “from” principle – an obligation to protect people from harm when it is happening
9. The “with” principle – doing all this together with affected people and national authorities in respect of their rights to autonomy, self-determination, inclusion and participation
10. The “up” principle – to build up people’s strength to increase their resilience, capacity and capability, and enhance national agencies.
11. The “down” principle – a post-colonial obligation to play down and reduce the role of exogenous international agencies.
12. The “without” principle – doing all this without creating unfair political or military advantage in armed conflict (as per GC IV:23 and neutrality)
13. The “between” principle – the ethics of collective action that require various different actors in the same cause to leverage common resources and advantageous diversity to maximum effect, avoiding waste, duplication and disorganization.

Then there is a range of ethical demands that are generic to any activity taken on in the public interest.

14. The ‘knowing and showing” principle – evidence, accountability and transparency as ethical contract with affected population and affected givers
15. The “learning and improving” principle – moral responsibility to act on new knowledge and to get better and not repeat mistakes
16. The “managerial and stewardship” principles – efficiency, appropriateness, timeliness, value-for-money and business integrity
17. The “good employer principles” – staff terms and conditions, safety, equal opportunity and career development.

**Evaluating Ethics and Effectiveness Together**

Each one of these 17 principles is ethical – based on a moral good. Each one of them also sets out to produce a corresponding ethical effect.

If we are to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action we must then deliberately design it and evaluate it as ethically effective in line with these moral goods, not just as output and function effective.

But, in most project proposals, programme design and operational evaluations there is still very little explicit analysis of ethics – even of those ethics that are traditional to the sector like humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.

The significant progress in the theory of humanitarian evaluation made by ALNAP, DAC and others has been around the social science of effectiveness: purpose, outputs, cause, effect, variables, outcomes, impact and attribution.

The pendulum now needs to swing back a little to track the specific ethics of effectiveness – the effectiveness of humanitarian aid!

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