CRITICAL REVIEW

Do No Harm: Not an Ideology but a Cornerstone of Good Humanitarian Practice
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ABSTRACT

Critical analysis of humanitarian emergencies and responses since the 1990s has led to an evolution in the understanding of ‘humanitarianism,’ extending it beyond the goal of saving lives to include peacebuilding, a continuum towards development, and a rights-based approach. Traditional humanitarians continue to be contrasted with new humanitarians in highly polarised debates. In the midst of these debates, the concept of harm has emerged as an acknowledgement that humanitarian assistance can have negative impacts on human welfare. The concept of harm is interpreted in a number of ways — harm is inevitable, thus actors should either do nothing or should attempt to minimise harm; doing no harm is not enough and the emphasis should be on doing something good; not doing harm is possible; and doing no harm is but one of a number of stances an organisation can take. This paper demonstrates that the concept of do no harm as it had been intended by the ‘Do No Harm’ project and its origins in medical ethics has been misinterpreted by some, limiting its usefulness in humanitarian assistance. This paper argues that ‘do no harm’ should be considered as an overarching principle of humanitarian action, rather than a specific strategic position at odds with other approaches.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, a number of attempts have been and continue to be made to redefine humanitarianism; debates on principles and practice were launched following what many have called the ‘humanitarian failures’ of the 1990s and continue still today. Attempts to understand the crises and humanitarian responses of the early part of that decade resulted in a proliferation of analyses, critiques and forward-looking suggestions across the academic, policy, and practice spheres. A stronger emphasis was placed on accountability, and some reformers began to connect humanitarianism with larger goals of human rights advocacy, peacebuilding, and longer-term development. One of the themes emerging in both
empirical and normative debates was that of harm, in have negative ramifications and could cause harm. Different understandings of the concept of harm include the belief that it is possible to do no harm; the idea that harm is inevitable, thus actors should either do nothing or should attempt to minimise harm; the suggestion that doing no harm is not enough, and the emphasis should be on doing some good; and finally that harm is not a concept but one of a number of stances an organisation can take.

This paper looks deeper into the concept of harm by considering three different uses of harm: that by Mary Anderson and the ‘Do No Harm’ project, the use of do no harm in nuanced debates on the evolving nature of humanitarianism, and contemporary use of do no harm in practice. This paper will argue that there are contradictions in the way do no harm is understood, partially stemming from a misunderstanding of the ‘Do No Harm’ project and more deeply from a poor reading of the concept of do no harm.

A focus is placed on non-governmental humanitarian actors (NGHAs), as defined by the Red Cross Code of Conduct; thus a review of state-level, intergovernmental, and other stakeholders (including donors, the military, and development actors) involved in overseas development assistance are beyond the scope of this paper. This paper also does not seek to look at wider objectives beyond humanitarian practice by NGHAs, such as military interventions, diplomacy, or peacekeeping, nor does it deeply analyse other aspects of the discussions on the evolving nature of humanitarianism, particularly those surrounding the relationship between humanitarian, military, and political objectives.

The debates surrounding humanitarianism, the origins of the concept of harm in humanitarian practice, and how do no harm has been understood within these particular the understanding that humanitarian aid could debates will be exposed in the first section. Next, the ‘Do No Harm’ project and the contemporary uses of do no harm will be reviewed. Finally, the contradictory uses and understanding of do no harm between normative literature and contemporary usage will be analysed, concluding with an argument for a broader understanding of do no harm as a principle. More specifically, do no harm is not simply an ideological form of humanitarianism, as is argued by some scholars, but it is rather a fundamental cornerstone of all good humanitarian practice.

**Harm and the Changing Nature of Humanitarianism**

The conflicts of early the 1990s in Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, and elsewhere significantly challenged humanitarians, and sparked off debates that continue till this day. Acknowledging that aid could be misused, could have negative consequences, and may play a role in fuelling conflict (Anderson 1999; Goodhand & Atkinson 2001; Weiss & Collins 2000), academics, policy makers, and aid workers began to analyse the purported failures of the earlier part of that decade. Until today, efforts have continued at both empirical and normative levels to improve the delivery of humanitarian aid, have found innovative approaches, and have introduced new ways of thinking. Concepts of effectiveness and accountability have been introduced into the humanitarian sphere, and policies, guidelines, and codes of conduct continue to be developed and improved. Examples include the Code of Conduct for the Red Cross and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the Sphere project, and the Humanitarian Accountability Project (Goodhand & Atkinson 2001).

A key example of the empirical work undertaken in the 1990s is Mary Anderson’s work titled *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace--Or War* (1999), which analyses the relationship between conflict and aid, and
proposes ways to reduce the harm associated with aid delivery. Anderson’s book forms part of the Do No Harm project (formerly the Local Capacities for Peace Project), launched in 1993 by the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA, 2007), and lays out the main insights gleaned from the project. A collective effort between local and international NGOs, the project’s purpose was to understand the interaction between conflict settings and the assistance given in such contexts. Thus, by making them more sensitive to and aware of the conflict context, potential harm from assistance programmes could be minimised. Although looking at harm in relation to humanitarian interventions was considered ground-breaking at the time, the concept of ‘do no harm’ is not a new one.

The concept is historically associated with the 5th century BC physician Hippocrates, who wrote in *Epidemics:* “make a habit of two things – to help, or at least to do no harm” (Hippocrates, cited in Weiss & Collins 2000, p. 111) and is often mentioned in relation to the Hippocratic Oath – a moral and ethical code for physicians (Isaacs 2011). The Hippocratic Oath and subsequent similar oaths and declarations set out basic principles, virtues, and commitments for medical doctors to adhere to when exercising their profession. By signing such a declaration or oath, doctors are committing themselves to upholding the outlined ethical principles. Moving towards uses outside the medical profession, do no harm is implicit in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; for example, through references to freedom from torture, cruelty, and inhumane treatment and protection against discrimination and violations (United Nations 1948). It is the central theme of the Geneva Conventions in their intention of reducing harm to non-combatants (Hanlon 2006, p. 46). Thus, the principle of do no harm has existed for centuries in the medical profession, and it forms an implicit foundation for a number of international decrees and standards. However, the explicit connection to humanitarianism is relatively recent, with Anderson being credited with the merging of this age-old ethical code with humanitarian aid (Atkinson 1996).

Moving on to the more normative level debates, the conflicts of the early 1990s challenged the very nature of humanitarianism, in particular the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, and neutrality. A proliferation of literature addressed the subject, and a new humanitarianism was born where “aid is linked to military and diplomatic tools in a coherent conflict-resolution strategy.” (Fox 2001, p. 275). Others have coined the new humanitarians ‘maximalists,’ ‘political humanitarians,’ or those that do ‘developmental relief,’ distinguishing them from ‘minimalists’ or those that continue to adhere to a more ‘classical’ humanitarian approach (Goodhand 2006a; Goodhand & Atkinson, 2001; Weiss, 1999). New humanitarianism and its clear connection to politics are in stark contrast to traditional or classical humanitarianism that prides itself as being apolitical, highlighted in the fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality (amongst others see Collinson et al. 2010; Fox 2001; Mills 2005). The new humanitarian or maximalist approach explicitly interconnects humanitarian assistance with other policy approaches such as diplomacy, security, and trade. It looks beyond immediate relief (saving lives and alleviating suffering), placing the emphasis on connecting immediate relief to longer term developmental goals, the use of a rights-based approach (including both advocacy and protection of human rights), and working on conflict transformation and peace-building (Chandler 2001; Goodhand & Atkinson; 2001; Mills 2005). The minimalist versus maximalist debate has been criticised as being both too polarised,
and not taking into account the necessity to adapt and evolve strategic choices based on the local context (Goodhand & Atkinson 2001).

Contemporary Humanitarianism: A More Nuanced Debate

Amongst the academics that have tried to nuance this debate are Weiss, Barnett, and Snyder, as well as Goodhand. In a well-constructed article published at the end of the 1990s, Weiss analyses the impact of that decade on humanitarianism, in particular on the creation of different types of humanitarians. Weiss (1999) maintains throughout that, in spite of attempts to uphold traditional apolitical humanitarian values, humanitarianism cannot be divorced from politics. A detailed analysis of all the arguments put forth by Weiss (and subsequently by Barnett and Snyder, and by Goodhand) is beyond the scope of this paper. The focus here is restricted to their use of harm within their suggestions of the differing positions of humanitarian actors.

Starting with Weiss, he outlines a continuum of four distinct positions for humanitarian actors with those that respect traditional humanitarian principles to the left, and those that embrace a political mandate to the right. In order from left to right, the four positions are: classicists (‘completely insulated from politics,’ including the ICRC), minimalists (‘do no harm’), maximalists (‘transform conflict’), and solidarists (‘choose sides,’ abandoning neutrality, impartiality and consent) (Weiss 1999, p. 2-4). A simplified version of his continuum is presented below (see Figure 1; Weiss 1999, p. 4).

In a more recent and excellent volume on the contemporary challenges for humanitarian intervention edited by Barnett and Weiss, a matrix – non-linear this time – is proposed; it has been recreated below (see Figure 2; Barnett & Snyder 2008, p. 146).

A number of parallels can be drawn between the two frameworks. For example, Bed for the Night could be associated with Weiss’ Classicists and Peacebuilding with Maximalists, while both use do no harm as a ‘minimalist’ position. What is interesting in this matrix is that it offers an interconnected ‘taxonomy’ of positions, which, as Barnett and Snyder (2008) argue,

<p>| Accept constraints | Bed for the Night: unqualified short-term emergency relief to those in life-threatening circumstances. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change constraints</th>
<th>Do No Harm: provide relief while minimizing the negative side effects.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apolitical</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back a Decent Winner: deploy resources to achieve a stable political bargain that will halt gross violations of human rights.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacebuilding: eliminate the root causes of conflict and help promote a more peaceful, stable, and legitimate political and economic system.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1.** Continuum of humanitarian actors (Weiss 1999)

**Figure 2.** Matrix of contemporary humanitarian challenges (Barnett & Snyder 2008)
allows us to discriminate between phases of a humanitarian operation—at different points different actors are likely to favour different strategies.” (p. 146)

Weiss’ (1999) argument of a linear progression only permits movement between adjacent categories, confining an organisation to a fairly rigid strategic position. In contrast, Barnett and Snyder’s (2008) four-fold matrix is more dynamic, allowing movement between even the most opposing polar positions. This dynamic approach corresponds more closely to operational reality. It also responds to earlier criticisms of the polarised debates (Goodhand & Atkinson 2001), where choices are most often informed by context, and a certain position chosen in one context may be in complete contrast to one chosen in another. For example, an organisation may focus on providing medical and other emergency relief to save lives in a context immediately after an earthquake. In another context where an authoritarian government has been replaced by a democratic one, the same organisation may focus on supporting this transition through peacebuilding efforts. Moreover, an organisation may simultaneously demonstrate aspects of differing positions, as argued by the ICRC in a response to Weiss’ (1999) (Sommaruga 1999). Thus, Barnett and Snyder’s (2008) taxonomy accommodates for the inherent flexibility and capacity of humanitarian organisations to adapt to different and evolving contexts and to choose a stance that incorporates aspects of differing positions.

Goodhand (2006b), in proposing a matrix to analyse risks and opportunities for aid interventions, similarly places do no harm in one of four distinct positions. His matrix analyses war-related risks against peacebuilding opportunities, with the aim of assisting aid practitioners to decide how detailed their analysis of a conflict should be, and whether they will work ‘in’ or ‘on’ conflict. Goodhand proposes that a do no harm approach is considered to be useful in a high war-related risk environment, where there are low peacebuilding opportunities. The particular emphasis on the negative impacts of interventions is logical in a high war-related risk context, where the potential harm from aid interventions can be assumed to be higher.

With most academic literature focusing on the highly polarised minimalist and maximalist positions of traditional versus neohumanitarians, the more nuanced frameworks proposed by Weiss and more recently by Barnett and Snyder are welcomed. In the efforts to define new ways of thinking about humanitarianism and to place organisations along a spectrum of positions, Barnett and Snyder’s argument of the evolving nature of a context and, thus, an organisation’s strategy is particularly appreciated and builds on earlier commentary by Weiss along similar lines. Goodhand’s practitioner-focused framework of opportunities and risk analysis is similarly useful for field workers to design interventions based on sound analysis. All four authors correctly argue that humanitarianism has evolved from the simple approach of saving lives and preventing suffering, and that self-reflection and deeper analysis are necessary to understand one’s own position and its relation with other humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors. However, it is here where the error in their arguments can be exposed. Placing Do No Harm as one of four positions in a continuum or matrix exposes a critical flaw in their reasoning and understanding of the concept of harm.

**Do No Harm in Humanitarian Practice: Origins and Contemporary Use**

To better understand the problem, it is necessary to first return to the objectives of the original ‘Do No Harm’ project, then to subsequent literature produced in association with the project, and finally to do no harm
in contemporary practice. First, as introduced earlier, the ‘Do No Harm’ project aims to assist aid workers “to improve aid” (Anderson 1999, p. 3) by reducing the negative effects of humanitarian assistance. Anderson’s (1999) book clearly states this interaction between aid and conflict at the outset: “When international assistance is given in the context of violent conflict, it becomes a part of that context and thus also of the conflict.” (p. 1) She sets the stage for the book by then stating: “with the ability to anticipate aid’s impacts on conflict the possibility arises of avoiding the negative effects and enhancing the positive ones.” (1999, p. 2)

The project website, Anderson’s (1999) book, and a subsequent operational manual (2000) focus on learning lessons from past and on-going programmes with the goal of providing practical guidance to implementing actors on how to more effectively deliver humanitarian aid in conflict settings. A practical framework is proposed to assist programme teams to identify ‘dividers’ and ‘connectors,’ with dividers being associated with sources of tension while connectors are associated with local capacities for peace and include for example structures, attitudes, and systems (Anderson 1999, 2000).

Although the project does look at ways to promote peace at the local level, the main goal is a clear and pragmatic one, as stated by Anderson (1999) herself in the opening pages of her book:

Nongovernmental organisations...are and can be positioned to support peace and negate war as never before...The premise does not imply that aid agencies should become peace agencies...aid agencies should remain true to their original mandates...Our purpose is to improve aid. (p. 3, emphasis added)

Some of the early critiques equated do no harm to the possibility to do nothing (see in particular Chandler 2001; Macrae 1998). Whether this reading of harm is correct is open to debate; it is however a clear misreading of the project. For Anderson (1999), and for the wider project, doing nothing is not an option, as this is morally incorrect and it would certainly cause harm to withhold aid. Two other critiques of the work on do no harm are worth mentioning here. First, Fiona Terry (2002) argues that it is not possible to do no harm, and the priority should be to minimize harm. A second argument purports that doing no harm is not enough and that the emphasis should be on doing some good (Atkinson 1996).

Second, subsequent work has been done to clarify the objectives of the project and to assist organisations to better utilise the do no harm concept, the proposed framework and the project findings. Part of this stems from misreading of the project and its objectives. A number of articles, guidelines and case studies have been produced and are available via the project website (CDA 2007). One of the major misunderstandings that is dealt with is the relationship between do no harm and peacebuilding. Do no harm is clarified as a conflict sensitivity tool, and conflict sensitivity is distinguished from peacebuilding. For example, Woodrow and Chigas (2009) aim to clarify the differences between conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding, and they argue that the goal of the do no harm project is to ensure conflict-sensitive programming. While this could apply to peacebuilding programmes, the two are distinct. Their understanding of conflict sensitivity is (Woodrow & Chigas 2009, p. 10):

The ability of an organization to:

• Understand the context in which it is operating, particularly intergroup relations;
• Understand the interactions between its interventions and the context/group relations; and
• Act upon the understanding of these
interactions, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.

According to Woodrow and Chigas (2009), conflict-sensitivity is an approach that should be applied in all programmes, in all contexts, while peacebuilding is a type of programme to which conflict sensitivity should also be applied.

In a guidance note released by CDA, it was repeated that do no harm is a conflict sensitivity tool, reiterating that the do no harm project targets all organisations working in conflict contexts. The note poses a similar argument to Woodrow and Chigas, stating that the do no harm framework, while not a peacebuilding tool, could also be used in peacebuilding programmes, thus by those working on conflict. More significantly, do no harm as a conflict sensitivity approach should be used in all programmes (CDA 2011). The transversal nature of the do no harm approach has thus been confirmed in recent literature on the project.

Third, do no harm is widely used in contemporary practice in everything from policy guidance to practical operating manuals. In the OECD Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations, ‘Do No Harm’ is the second of six principles (OECD 2007). The concept also appears implicitly in the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief— the most widely-accepted voluntary operational principles for humanitarian non-governmental actors operating in disaster contexts’—as part of Principle 8, with direct reference to the importance of minimizing aid’s negative impact (IFRC 1994). Interestingly, its use in the Code of Conduct directly contradicts the ‘Classicist’ position put forth by Weiss (1999), as the ICRC, by co-authoring and signing onto this Code of Conduct, accepts minimizing harm as a guiding principle. In an interview on the ICRC’s independence in humanitarian action, their then head of delegation in Chad reiterated the importance of minimizing harm when he spoke of the importance of supporting not only fleeing conflict-affected persons, but also their hosts, stating “we strive to…avoid contributing to protracted displacement or to increasing tensions between displaced people and their hosts.” (Merkelbach 2008)

Do no harm is also a prominent component of the Sphere (2011) handbook, a widely-used operational guideline which outlines a humanitarian charter and minimum standards for use by implementing actors in humanitarian emergencies. Acknowledging that aid delivery can have unintended consequences, minimizing negative or adverse consequences of aid programming is a central commitment of Sphere’s humanitarian charter. Further, the first Core Protection Principle sets out the following aim: “Avoid exposing people to further harm as a result of your actions…take steps to avoid or minimise any adverse effects of [your] intervention.” (Sphere 2011, p. 33). Do no harm also forms core Principle 3 of the IASC Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Guidelines, guidance aimed at humanitarian organisations delivering mental health and/or psychosocial programming (IASC 2007).

The Humanitarian Practice Network at London’s Overseas Development Institute recently commissioned a network paper on conflict sensitivity in emergency response (Zicherman et al. 2011). The paper is associated with a wider project on conflict sensitivity that started in 2008, which has as its objective the introduction of conflict sensitivity to humanitarian, peace-building, and development programming (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium). The paper outlines the results of a study on current conflict sensitive
practices within humanitarian aid delivery, and it pushes for commitment to implement programmes with a conflict sensitive lens, amongst other reasons, to minimise harm. With their definition of conflict sensitivity analogous to that used by Woodrow and Chigas above, the paper has a similar stance to the Do No Harm project on the use of do no harm as a conflict sensitivity tool to be used in all humanitarian aid delivery. Although the authors identify in the study that the Do No Harm framework proposed by Anderson (1999) is not always used as a stand-alone tool by practitioners, they do identify that the do no harm concept is an integral component in making programmatic decisions (Zicherman et al. 2011).

Thus, as seen from the examples above, do no harm is widely used as a basis for humanitarian practice, from policy to field-level operational guidelines. Within and outside the ‘Do No Harm’ project, do no harm is mainly used as a transversal value or principle, to be considered by humanitarians in order to minimize negative effects of aid delivery across a wide range of programming. The next section returns to the core argument, that the classification of do no harm as a strategic position goes against a more appropriate principled notion of not doing harm.

Do No Harm: A Principled Approach

The Oxford Dictionary (2011) defines ‘principle’ as: “a fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief or behaviour or for a chain of reasoning” or more simply “a fundamental source or basis of something.” A principle is thus a means to achieve an end, a basic foundation on which to build upon. Weiss (1999) provides an excellent definition to support this understanding:

Operational principles thus are not moral absolutes ... they are norms toward which to strive, but without the illusion that their application is possible in every situation or that their success is guaranteed. They are means to achieve ends but not ends in themselves. (p. 7)

Returning to the original usage of do no harm in the medical profession, we are reminded that do no harm is indeed a principle, part of the basic foundation for the ethical practice of doctors. By adhering to the do no harm principle, doctors do not promise to always do no harm, nor do they limit themselves to only doing no harm. Rather, they commit themselves to behaving with integrity, striving to avoid intentional harm and promote good health. Thus, they even go beyond the limited aims of simply avoiding harm. These commitments can be seen in most medical declarations and oaths, such as the Declaration of a New Doctor drawn up by Sritharan et al. (2001).

Similar to the medical profession, and as outlined in the previous section, at a policy and practice level, do no harm is mainly seen as a principle amongst humanitarians. Placing it in a framework as done by Anderson (1999), does not restrict its use, as has been seen in the study results by Zicherman et al. (2011). In any case, an analytical framework should not be seen as a closed system. An analytical framework is a way to organise thoughts, provide structure and sequence, find correlations and interconnections (relationships), and justify decision-making. Providing a framework assists aid workers to conceptualise the principle of do no harm in a more concrete way, which is particularly important during a humanitarian emergency where pressures are high and it is difficult to conceptualise in an abstract manner. In that sense, Weiss and later Barnett and Snyder’s proposition of frameworks to classify humanitarian action can be seen as welcome approaches to allow for macro-level analysis. Goodhand’s opportunities and risks analysis is also appreciated in assisting organisations to operationalize
different strategic choices.

However, the key flaw in all three frameworks is to place do no harm as a competing objective amongst others, instead of as a principle. Using do no harm in this manner takes away from its universal nature as a foundation upon which to build and adapt programmes, to be applied in any context, regardless of the (a)political strategic choices made by an organisation and the particular context it is working in. By placing do no harm as a potential strategic or ideological objective (as has been done in these frameworks), do no harm becomes a fixed goal. A boundary is placed around it, restricting the possibility to adapt and evolve the concept. One either chooses to do no harm, or chooses not to do no harm.

The solution is to remove do no harm as a possible strategic objective, and place it as an overarching principle, as it is for the medical profession. By considering do no harm as a principle, a certain flexibility and adaptability is introduced. O’Gorman very eloquently supports this argument in writing “the principle of ‘do no harm’ provides the moral minimum, the floor beneath which international actors who intervene should not fall” (2011, p. 16). Zicherman et al. (2011), in their paper on conflict sensitivity, also propose that do no harm should be a value concept inherent in all programming, with conflict sensitive programming, aiding in minimising harmful impact of aid delivery in emergencies (pp. 2,17). Interestingly, Weiss contradicts himself as even he promotes do no harm in this way:

The key lies in making a good-faith effort to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action, and then to choose that option that will provide the greatest benefit and cause the least harm. (Weiss & Collins 2000, p. 157, emphasis added)

As stated by O’Gorman (2011) above, a reading of do no harm in this way provides the minimum standard, the foundation upon which positions are built, which then also permits a wider understanding of do no harm. For example, in situations where negative effects may occur regardless of which potential solution or approach is employed, minimising harm becomes a more realistic goal than attempting to do no harm at all, as argued by Terry (2002). Weiss makes a comparison between humanitarian work and the medical profession, which is particularly pertinent, considering the origins of do no harm in the medical field. He compares humanitarian decision-making to that of medical ethical review teams (Weiss 1999, p. 9). Both are often forced to make difficult decisions and often need to choose between two harmful situations. Looking beyond minimising harm, one can also focus on doing some good as argued by Atkinson (1996) and promoted by the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (Zicherman et al. 2011). We then return to what the initial ‘Do No Harm’ project promotes: that ‘Do No Harm’ is a conflict sensitivity tool that should be used in all programming, regardless of the programme objective—be it saving lives, peacebuilding, or something else.

Do no harm should thus be considered an operational principle, and not a policy choice. Taken as a principle, Weiss’ (1999) argument then becomes appropriate:

Operational principles thus are not moral absolutes … they are norms toward which to strive, but without the illusion that their application is possible in every situation or that their success is guaranteed. They are means to achieve ends but not ends in themselves. (p. 7)

Conclusion

This paper has revisited the concept of do no harm, as it applies to humanitarian practice by non-governmental humanitarian actors. Over the last two
decades, humanitarianism has undergone, and continues to undergo, an evolution in its understanding, practice, and its place amongst other spheres such as long-term development, the military, and politics. Humanitarianism has been acknowledged as being much more complex than its origins in saving lives and alleviating suffering, and differing positions have emerged on the nature of humanitarianism. Amidst the polarised debates between the traditional and new humanitarians, few have provided a more nuanced analysis. This paper has looked at three different efforts to provide this finer analysis, and, in particular, their use of do no harm in their analysis. A scrutiny of the other positions proposed in their analysis was beyond the scope of this paper, and although fleeting mention has been made to other uses and/or critiques of do no harm, this has not been the objective of this paper. The objective has been to compare and contrast the use of do no harm as a position within the theoretical debates on the evolving nature of humanitarianism with that of the project titled ‘Do No Harm’ and with contemporary use of do no harm by humanitarian actors.

Contradictions exist between the use of do no harm by some critics within the academic sphere and by humanitarian practitioners. The aim of the ‘Do No Harm’ project was (and continues to remain) the application of do no harm as a conflict sensitivity tool to all types of programming and contemporary use by practitioners tends to support this suggestion. Although not necessarily using the framework proposed by the project, stakeholders from policy-makers to practitioners have incorporated do no harm (or a variant of it) into guidance documents and practice. In contrast, in their well-intentioned and useful attempts to provide an understanding of the differing positions within humanitarianism, Weiss, Barnett, and Snyder, as well as Goodhand, place do no harm as a strategic position amongst other options. As argued in this paper, this reading of do no harm is flawed. Do no harm should be considered as an overarching principle for all humanitarian action.

By identifying do no harm as a principle, it can then be seen as a moral foundation, a baseline that should be considered and applied in all circumstances. Do no harm is thus not an absolute, but an objective to strive to or even go beyond, all the while understanding that sometimes the best that can be done is to minimise harm, or choose the least harmful solution.

The relationship between harm and humanitarian action has continuing relevance for contemporary humanitarian practice. Arguments initially developed in the 1990s continue to apply today, particularly in light of related on-going discussions on the relationship between humanitarian, military, and political action. Moving forward from this paper, it becomes then necessary to revisit the analysis and understanding of the different stances of humanitarian actors, removing do no harm as a strategic position selected by actors. Removing do no harm would also mean revisiting the frameworks as a whole, and the positions proposed within them. This is something this paper has not sought out to do, but that remains relevant in the on-going debates about the evolving nature of humanitarianism.

Footnotes
1. Humanitarianism or humanitarian aid is generally defined as the response to an emergency or crisis situation, either manmade (i.e. conflict) or due to natural disaster. The traditional humanitarian approach focuses on saving lives and alleviating suffering, although other views consider humanitarianism to have wider objectives as this paper will describe.

2. Non-governmental humanitarian actors are defined as encompassing the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental
Organisations (NGOs). This definition is consistent with that appearing in the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief (IFRC 1994).

3. While Anderson limits her definition of conflict to violent conflict, the contemporary understanding exposed by Zicherman et al. in a later paragraph considers conflict as “the pursuit of contrary or seemingly incompatible interests” which may or may not lead to violence (2011:1).

4. In the case of Weiss’ argument, a number of responses were made to his paper in the same journal issue.

5. To facilitate readership, Weiss’ continuum has been simplified here, removing details that are described earlier in the text.

6. While the format has been modified, the contents are an exact reproduction of the original matrix.

7. Including both manmade and natural disasters

References


