Doing Bad by Doing Good in Goma

Thomas K. Duncan[1]

Abstract: Christopher J. Coyne's *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails* provides an important look at the systematic problems interveners face during humanitarian actions. The bureaucratic incentive structure of humanitarian organizations and the unintended consequences that arise from their actions often lead to more harm than good. Coyne's analysis makes a compelling case for caution in intervention. This paper applies Coyne's framework from *Doing Bad by Doing Good* to the humanitarian intervention following the Rwandan Genocide and cholera epidemic among the refugees in the city of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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Introduction

Christopher J. Coyne's *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails* is an important and timely follow-up to his previous work in *After War: the Political Economy of Exporting Democracy* (Coyne 2008). In this latest book, Coyne (2013) broadens our understanding of the trials faced by the "man of the humanitarian" system in attempting to design a more humanitarian world. There is much overlap between the two books in terms of economic rationale, as many of the same problems that plague post-war reconstruction efforts also plague the humanitarian efforts to increase societal well-being in recipient countries. The similarities in the problems faced for these differing efforts stem from the similarities in organizational structure of those implementing both reconstruction efforts and humanitarian interventions. In both instances, those attempting to shape the world rely on a top-down, bureaucratic system for implementing their goals.

In *Doing Bad by Doing Good*, Coyne elaborates on the often insurmountable challenges inherent in this top-down approach. The analysis is both clear and compelling. For any given intervention, there is no reason that one should expect that humanitarian efforts will achieve good outcomes, at least not systematically. There may be historical cases where humanitarian aid produced an increase in well-being, but there are other historical cases where those efforts failed dramatically. As Coyne argues, *ex ante* one should suspect that the likelihood of the latter will be higher than that of the former due to the constraints faced by the interveners. The foundation for this argument lies in the realizations that "(1) those carrying out humanitarian actions often lack the relevant knowledge to accomplish the desired goals, and (2) humanitarian action is often not compatible with the incentives of those in political power" (Coyne 2013: 15).

In a slightly altered version of Coyne's points, one can argue that humanitarian action will most often not achieve its stated goal, that of raising societal well-being, because the interveners do not know how all of the moving parts of an intervention will interact and the incentives that the interveners face often clash with the end goal. While each of these considerations taken separately can call the outcome of humanitarian action into question, that question only deepens when it is acknowledged that the incentive structure of aid can lead to its own unintended consequences and exacerbate the problem of understanding the moving parts. The intervener, rather than being a modeler from afar, can become entwined in the society that he is intervening upon, creating even further problems for humanitarian relief. This last phenomenon can be seen in the changing nature of the city of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo after a series of crises lead to the inundation of humanitarian organizations into the region in the early 1990s. Viewing Goma as a case study of humanitarianism illuminates the power of Coyne's framework for understanding an array of efforts to "do good". These are important considerations for those who would plan an intervention, as not taking into account these factors will lead to disappointment at best and utter catastrophe at worse.

The remainder of the paper will be organized as follows. Section 2 will provide more detail as to the framework used in *Doing Bad by Doing Good*. Section 3 will apply this framework in the context of the humanitarian mission in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Section 4 will conclude.

An Analytical Framework for Humanitarian Action

The major framework of *Doing Bad by Doing Good* revolves around a fundamental understanding of the incentives of bureaucratic administration, particularly in a non-profit environment, and the existence of unintended consequences. The current approach to humanitarian action is one that relies on non-profit organizations to work simultaneously for the benefit of those in need and at the behest of the donor, private or governmental, who determines whether the funding supplied is being used in a productive fashion. When a humanitarian crisis emerges, a disconnect between what those in crisis desire and what those in the position of giver demand can arise. Instead of operating in a market context, where the feedback mechanism of profit and loss operates to reward good behavior and punish bad, the current structure of humanitarian action operates in an administrative structure, where the incentive is a combination of an organization showing that it needs more funding and publicizing that need in a fashion that attracts donor attention. The incentive under the non-profit organization is to spend, as an unspent budget shows that too much money was given in the first place. There is also a fierce competition for donors, leading organizations to spend resources for both outright lobbying and advertising (Cooley and Ron 2002: 17; Coyne 2013: 97). With each of these non-government organizations (NGOs) and state agencies competing for funding, many are put in the position of having to choose between actual aid for those in need and finding convenient ways to signal that the organizations are operating where they are needed and that the money is being well-spent.

An appreciation of these incentives leads to Coyne's other caution: interveners should be wary of hubris. Those who seek to plan humanitarian action systematically overestimate what can realistically be achieved. What is required for a successful humanitarian action is for the intervener to know not only what is on the surface of the current humanitarian crisis, but also the depths of what the politico-socio-economic environment was prior to the crisis, how that crisis has changed that environment, and how the intervention will interact and change that environment still further. Coyne (2013: 2-3) provides an example of this misunderstanding of or disregard for indigenous capabilities when he describes the failures of the Helmand Valley Project. The massive dam endeavor in Afghanistan provided an increased water flow, but the Afghan farmers had no concept of how to handle such an increase in the availability of irrigation water. This misunderstanding is but one example of the lack of knowledge from the interveners, and it is one of the simpler to point to as a potential problem. Other unintended consequences that may occur because of intervention are far more difficult to foresee, much less mitigate once noticed.

The Man of the Humanitarian System visits Goma

The theoretical separation between bureaucratic incentives and unintended consequences becomes more difficult to delineate when humanitarian action actually takes place on the ground. Often, the two interact in such a way as to make matters worse for the intervention's outcome. While the feedback mechanisms of a bureaucratic structure may not be conducive to learning and adaptability in terms of how best to aid those in need (Coyne 2013), humanitarian organizations do still have the incentive to provide the appearance of feedback to those donors from which their funding comes. These incentives to show action, and show it publicly, in order to secure funding for future projects can further exacerbate the difficulties of achieving good outcomes through humanitarian action. In fact, these incentives can produce their own unintended consequences that then must be dealt with by the organizations once they become apparent. To illustrate this point, consider case of humanitarian action in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that has been ongoing since the early 1990s. The humanitarian involvement has changed the political and economic environment of the Great Lakes region, and not necessarily for the better.

The Great Lakes region of Africa has been in turmoil for decades. As the Rwandan Genocide and subsequent rebellion played out in 1994, the crises pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees into the areas surrounding Rwanda. Later that same year, the Rwandan Hutus began the genocide of the Rwandan Tutsis. The Tutsis fought back, leading to a civil war in the country. Fleeing the retaliation of the Tutsis, large numbers of Hutus sought refuge in the Zairean city of Goma, which would later become the Congolese city of Goma after Zaire had its own civil war and was renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The legion of refugees descended upon the city, sparking a secondary crisis for the area as the emerging refugee camp suffered under a cholera epidemic. This medical crisis in the region spurred a secondary migration to Goma, a migration comprised not of refugees but of humanitarian organizations. The inflow of aid agencies had a number of unintended consequences, not the least of which being the rearmament and militarization of the Hutu refugee camps, unwittingly paid for and protected by the humanitarian organizations (Chandler 2001: 696-697; Cooley and Ron 2002: 28; Terry 2002: 172-173, 182, 186-187). Other, far more subtle effects also emerged in the nearly two decades since the organizations came to Goma as the sheer number of intervening agencies has had long-lasting effects on the very structure of Goma, economically and politically.

The city of Goma was natural draw for refugees and, subsequently, humanitarian organizations due in part to both its geographical convenience of being near the Rwandan border and the fact that it has an airport capable of handling the inflow of aid. The city also had a further draw for the humanitarian organizations in that the Rwandan Genocide and cholera outbreak were both highly publicized in the media. With the highly competitive nature of the humanitarian organizations (Cooley and Ron 2002: 17; Coyne 2013: 96-97), Goma provided an important hotspot for getting noticed. When the situation in the Congo intensified in the early 1990s, the high profile nature of the crisis was an opportunity not to be missed (Cooley and Ron 2002: 26; Terry 2002: 170-173; Mills 2005: 174). As Mills (2005: 174) notes,

> Large, highly publicized, humanitarian crises can be the perfect opportunity to raise enough funds not only to provide for their operational expenses in a particular crisis, but also to generate funds that help ensure the long term survival of the organization. Thus, the high-publicity area of Goma was turned into a situation where NGOs had to have a presence, even at the expense of analyzing the context in which an NGO might be operating.

Donor support is crucial to the survival of non-government organizations (Bell and Carens 2004), and the higher the publicity of the crisis the more donors there will be, both private and "politicians driven to 'do something' by domestic constituents" (Terry 2002: 194). This situation creates perverse incentives for humanitarian organizations to follow the press even if they must follow it to a place where they are not needed most. The cholera epidemic in the DRC provided the humanitarian community with "a dramatic, well publicized show of human suffering in which the enemy was a virus and the savior was humanitarian aid" (Terry 2002: 171). While the situation in the Goma refugee camps was dire, the sheer magnitude of organizations that flooded into the area is astounding. In response to the crisis and media attention, relief funds for the region rose to roughly $1 billion in 1994. The growth of money available led to the inflow of between 150 and 200 humanitarian organizations into the city within the first two months (Cooley and Ron 2002: 26; Buscher and Vlassenroot 2010: 259-260). The competition for survival in the humanitarian business created a scenario in which no humanitarian organization wanted to be left out of the events in the DRC, where they could "use the CNN effect for their own institutional purposes" (Mills 2005: 174).

There are a number of problems that arise with the influx of this number of humanitarian organizations. The sheer number leads to a lack of accountability for the actions of each individual organization. With so many agencies working in one location, it becomes more difficult to keep track of what any one organization is doing (Coyne 2013: 120-121). Communication between agencies also becomes more difficult, a feature that is only made worse when the competition for funding is taken into account. Cooperation is not always conducive to staking one's own claim in a humanitarian exercise (Cooley and Ron 2002). These issues aside, a further concern of the introduction of such a large number of humanitarian organizations is the impact that their very presence has upon the area in which they are intervening. While there is much written on the Samaritan's Problem (Buchanan 1975), whereby the recipient of aid becomes dependent upon the aid (Easterly 2001; 2006), there is much less written on the problem where the recipient location becomes dependent on the actual presence of the organizations.

Buscher and Vlassenroot (2010) offer an interesting study of the urban dynamics of Goma since the 1990s. Rather than maintaining a separation from the people who are receiving aid, the humanitarian organizations in Goma have become an integral part of the economic and political community in the city. The interactions with the city have created a situation in which the organizations themselves are the economic powerhouses. The presence of the organizations has had deep economic impacts on the areas of employment, real estate, and government infrastructure. The increasing level of humanitarian action "was associated with a growing demand for trained personnel, guards, cooks and drivers, inter alia. Given the context of state failure and a lack of employment opportunities, humanitarian agencies, from their initial arrival on a massive scale in 1993–94, acquired a considerable share of the local labour market" (Buscher and Vlassenroot 2010: S264). The humanitarian organizations have become the chief source of labor for the city as the productive capacities of the private sector activities have floundered.

The real estate market has also responded predictably to the presence of the humanitarian organizations. With the flow of aid workers into the city, "real estate became a booming business, tempting many established business executives to invest in this sector (often funded by the benefits of natural resource trading activities), buying or constructing houses and apartments for rent to NGO or UN staff at extremely high prices" (Buscher and Vlassenroot 2010: S266). The market has also found it profitable to cater to the tastes of those humanitarian workers stationed in the city so that "[l]uxurious hotels, bars, restaurants and nightclubs have mushroomed in number over the past 10 years, with many again almost exclusively oriented towards an international clientele. The humanitarian community perceives the city as a place to rest, relax and sleep" (Buscher and Vlassenroot 2010: S266).

The influx of dollars and bodies into the region through the humanitarian organizations has sparked a reorienting of economic activity. What private sector employment there is in Goma has become almost entirely dependent upon the existence of the humanitarian hub within the city. The permanency of humanitarian operations in the Great Lakes region is necessary for the continued success of what is becoming the industry norm, the industry of catering to humanitarian operations. The humanitarian structure of funding has led to the unintended consequence of an overabundance of organizations that have distorted any healthy economic growth path that might have emerged in the area. The organizations have become, seemingly, a permanent feature even as they should be ready to remove themselves once the humanitarian mission is completed.

Given the current state of the DRC, the permanency does not appear to be problematic, as the fighting in the region has continued with varying degrees of intensity (for example, see Bariyo 2013; Kavanagh 2013). Yet the fighting in the Goma region has at least in part been subsidized by the presence of the humanitarian organizations (Chandler 2001; Terry 2002). The distribution of many of the essential services in the city, such as health, has been entirely subsumed by the agencies working there. The shift in service, as well as the bribes paid to local leaders in order to facilitate the humanitarians' work with the refugees, has created a situation in which the local warlords can gain popular support from the people by claiming they are working with the humanitarian agencies and gain monetary support from the agencies themselves (Buscher and Vlassenroot 2010: S265, S269; see also Terry 2002: 173, 186-187; Schweizer 2004: 549-550). The conjunction of the two has enabled the violence to continue. One would hope that eventually, however, the violence will subside and the humanitarian organizations will face the problem of withdrawing their workforce without destroying the economy of Goma.

Conclusion

Doing Bad by Doing Good provides a straightforward yet powerful analysis of the perils humanitarian aid. The warning inherent in the chapters is that humanitarian organizations, either state-led or private, should be wary of hubris in their endeavors to right the wrongs of the world. A desire to help does not always mean there is ability to help, and the attempts to help can change the structure of the economic landscape in unforeseen ways. Surely the humanitarian organizations that entered into the Goma region did not strive to create what has become a boomtown dependent upon the humanitarian presence. The incentive structure of needing to continuously increase funding had unintended consequences. The current structure of humanitarian organizations, with their funding tied to the goodwill of donors rather than a more profit oriented structure, necessarily creates the perverse incentives to keep funding going even at the expense of the humanitarian effort. If funding were to dissipate, the good that humanitarian organizations do in the world would also disappear. Yet it is a balancing act to maintain funding and be sure that the good done in the world still outweighs the bad.

Notes

[1] Email: thomaskduncan@gmail.com. Address: Department of Economics, Radford University, P.O. Box 6952, Radford, VA 24142, USA.

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