

Assistance, Dignity and Humiliation

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Schools of thought differ about the effects of humanitarian and development assistance to needy populations. Some purists, notably those that in the past were influenced by Marxist-Leninist dogma, held that certain forms of assistance created dependency and that it negated the people's revolutionary destiny, the capacity to self-improvement inherent in populations desire to rise up against the chains of humiliation and occupation. Notable and extreme examples of such dogma were the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1970's, the refusal of early Soviet and later Stalinist authorities to accept aid for the Russian-Ukrainian famines of the 1920's-1930's and the Maoist Chinese agricultural problems of the 1950's. In each case, millions died but the concerned societies evolved and adapted, however high the cost.

A related and newly fashionable trend, is that populations who are assisted, those dependant on the extended presence/proximity of charitable, non-governmental or United Nations organizations, fail to develop as efficiently as those neighbors left on their own. Or somehow collapse or fail to adapt when these organizations leave them. Little empirical evidence exists to support this hypothesis admittedly because it is difficult to find populations, outside of isolated tribes in the Amazon basin or Papua New Guinea, who are not indirect or secondary recipients of assistance given to a neighboring population.

In the Middle East and the West, thanks mainly to Muslim-Judeo-Christian values of giving and sharing and later, more equitable distribution of the wealth of high performance capitalistic societies, it was and still is, a measure of a both individual and national pride to be able to give to those less fortunate than oneself. The poor person, head lowered, accepts the gift and/or advice of the richer person. Dependency is not always the issue. Rather, concepts of charity, justice and guilt are the motivators of the giver, although the concepts of improvement, the doing away of suffering and in some cases, the desire to achieve political or peaceful gains as in the case of US- Iraq, Saudi/ Gulf Arab or even Israeli Labour party strategies reveal.

The issues though that may be of concern here, are the possibility of counter productive effects as regards humiliating the recipient. This may have short term or long term effects. Responses may vary from the contemptuous, or dismissive, to the violent.

Religious organizations are more effective in some areas and in certain conditions than large aid agencies. Mostly because of their staying power, low overhead costs and missionary zeal. But if they humiliate recipients by being overly forceful or are perceived to have a hidden agenda, the results can be very different, even dangerous. The effectiveness of Islamic charities for example, even in areas where religion was not of

paramount concern for the recipients, is that they are quite open and honest in wanting to create religious followers. In most of the cases that I have seen, in Africa, their doctors and para-health workers, do not proselytize but go about their business with much expertise, emphasizing the importance of clean living, prayer and obedience... this in contrast to other lay or non-lay agencies which in the past, made many hypocritical references to “not wanting to change your beliefs.” Invariably, they try to do so in an underhand way only to find they are mocked, their supplies stolen or misused or in some cases, their personnel harmed.

Leaving obvious preferences aside, that is a Moslem prefers being helped by a fellow Moslem or a Jew in Israel from a fellow Jew, there are certain ethnic groups, even populations, particularly in parts of Africa and Asia, who are paradoxically more willing to accept aid from givers who are much more different, ethnically or religiously, than they are.

“White” men and women, those from Europe or the United States, Australia, New Zealand or Canada, are sometimes more accepted or trusted than equally competent aid workers from African or Asian societies. Why this inverse “racism”?

Is this because, for historical reasons, these “white people” are people from the omnipotent, former “master race”? A legacy of the power and awe these conquerors gave to local ancestors?

Or is this because, they have less chance of being the spies and underlings who exploited them in the past, because these were the “agents” or executioners of the great imperial powers and today, the current “corrupt Government”?

I was once witness to an extraordinary scene in Northern Sudan: A very old tribal leader informed an efficient and well meaning Sudanese official that he did not want his advice or assistance. Turning to me he said that he would only accept assistance from a British expert because in the past the British colonial authorities did not humiliate them, tax them by counting their cattle or take their women to live in the cities.

Another time, I was told by a health official in the occupied West Bank not to provide Egyptian doctors, for they would, “remind us of the humiliation Sadat has caused us by recognizing Israel.”

But there are also cultural patterns that shape attitudes: The counterpart from a society where cast and rank predominate is more used to issuing orders, speaking in a rougher or more authoritarian manner to those less fortunate than himself. And what is worse than those insensitive “supermen” who come from a very efficient society who get furious with those from a less efficient milieu because they are perceived as slothful and lazy. The contempt seen in their attitudes and eyes lead to such humiliation for those being assisted, that it seems perfectly justifiable at times to understand the violence that could result from such “assistance”.

Even a benevolent “pat on the back” as is practiced by some from certain cultures, can be a humiliating gesture to people from a proud past...

But so what? One may well ask if any of these “feelings” have a practical impact?

A person or society humiliated by an aid giver, or perceiving such a slight, is rarely capable of full cooperation. Nor is it possible to exchange the necessary feedback. There is thus a waste of time, money or other resources. Aid givers need frankness and cooperation to achieve self help and to assess the real usefulness of any given assistance. That is, feedback, in its broadest sense. Also, since any one item of assistance will need further inputs that can be built up on it, brick upon brick, meaningful trust, communication and honest feedback are necessary for the edifice to stand. Secondly, if peace, security or cooperation are the objectives, the aid giver must be perceived as having an honest agenda. It is no use using military personnel as aid givers, (except in extreme emergencies), for no matter their sincerity, they will always be assumed to represent the military or occupying authority, thus someone interested in some form of conquest, information or collaboration. As for using civilian personnel that are bought in after a conquest, they could be a double humiliation. Not only have they been brought in by the outside power, but they are also pretending to be independent of them.

Another element of distrust is that aid givers are going to collect intimate information. That is, who is friendly with whom, what family or local problems may exist, what hidden resources are present. That information is going to be easier to obtain if the aid giver is from a similar culture, than if he/she is from a distant one. That in itself can cause a problem, because more “revealing truths” can be found out using local workers. Not everyone wants the truth told about his or her family circumstances.

Paradoxically though, there might be resentment and added humiliation to reveal intimate information to culturally insensitive outsiders. For instance, I have seen very motivated health workers being forced out of villages because they humiliated certain families by forcing them to bring their deformed or sickly children to health clinics where other inhabitants of the village could see them.

Another more “sensitive” example: Programs to put a stop to female circumcision or infibulations have rarely worked when undertaken by outsiders. Nor have they worked very well when undertaken by locals who were too dogmatic or who used the law. They seem to work best when local women who themselves were victims of the practice or who carried it out, have spent a great deal of “slow” time, chatting to expectant mothers about risks, explaining why it might be eventually better to do away with the practice, even modifying it so that it is less drastic. Respected male figures from a religious background or those who say they have “accepted” uncircumcised women are more effective than most vocal health workers or high officials because they are less likely to condemn. To a “Western” woman, the practice is a humiliation. To a Somali or Ethiopian not to undertake the practice is to lower the dignity of the female person. To humiliate her for life.

Such differences in what constitutes “humiliation” is what I think some of us should be exploring in more detail. Local sensitivities often clash with our desire to help or to reform.

The Chinese proverb states, “do not give a man a fish, teach him how to fish.”

But some already know how to fish.

They may be asking for something else.

And the teacher must be the right teacher.

Finally, to those suffering from oppression or occupation, I think it is a humiliation not to attempt to discuss with them possible solutions. Solutions to regaining Dignity.

Samir Basta, August 2005