Partners or Patrons? Paternalism, Localization, and the Power Imbalance in Humanitarian Aid

The global humanitarian system is meant to provide relief to those in times of crisis. However, at the core it is deeply estranged from the power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South. The relationship between the Global North (largely donor countries) and the Global South (primarily aid recipients) has been defined by an unequal and biased power dynamic in humanitarian aid distribution. The term "paternalism" indicates the top-down pathway through which aid strategies, priorities, and decisions are almost always imposed by the donor countries or large international organizations without sufficiently incorporating local actors. In my view, this is an important question to raise because it investigates and addresses the likely limitations of such a system. Despite it, localization to a large extent acts as a response to this issue. It is the shift toward involving local actors in decision-making and execution of humanitarian aid. However, does this just serve as a new medium of paternalism, where donor states mobilize localisation to inherently maintain control while seeming to be empowering local actors. Hence, ultimately questions the impacts of it on local autonomy, sustainability, and the effectiveness of the solution as a whole. Therefore, the proposed research question is to what extent does paternalism shape the distribution of humanitarian aid between the Global North and the Global South, and is localization just the new form of paternalism? Hence, paternalistic approaches continue to shape humanitarian aid through control by donor states, and while localization claims to

empower local actors, it may still be the medium through which the Global north ensures influence.

Humanitarian aid has been an idea in production for over centuries. In the 21st century, there now finally exists a disciplined and somewhat efficient humanitarian order meant to protect and preserve the importance of humans and life. In modern terms, it is a global effort meant to palliate mass human suffering during times of crisis. It is heavily founded on the meanings of altruism as well as the principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence and other factors. The system strives to provide aid to populations suffering from natural disasters, war, as well as systematic inequality. Initiatives within the system include laws, norms as well as institutions which forces and convinces numerous kinds of interventions. However, despite its straight-forward purpose it has rather developed into a complex, dynamic and an intertwined power structure. In addition, the international humanitarian order to a lot of extent can be defined as somewhat similar to governance. Therefore, it does not only deal with immediate threats but also with those that have existed for years to come. Even more so, it also includes the initiatives to transform present cultures, social relations, and institutions to reduce entrenched and historical vulnerabilities. Hence, in the long run this will encourage vulnerable communities to reimagine their lives.

The modern day humanitarian system is an imperial, neocolonial, and neoliberal system where the Global North countries unequally dominate and hold power to make decisions. Additionally, a lot of these decisions are made through varying intentions. For instance, contemporary governance to a great extent is an equal balance between control

and care. A great majority of global governance is structured to reduce and alleviate human suffering as well as improve human flourishing. The governance also demands any if not all forms of intervention. Interventions are often actions which are welcomed by those in need. Therefore, ultimately it is something that is seen as an altruistic action and behavior done for the benefit of humanity and in the name of the people. Which is why an intervention's legitimacy is almost always defended by the argument that this is what the people want. However, interventions do establish a sense of hierarchy and dominance within the system of actors. For instance, in modern humanitarianism there is often a recurrent theme of paternalism. This is a top-down approach where intervention is often termed as interference. However, it is also justified on the altruistic motivators of welfare, good, need, as well as interest among others. However, it is fully and undoubtedly paternalism when such actions are performed without the consent of intended beneficiaries. Gerald Dworkin has infamously defined the term as "the interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced" (Dworkin 1972)

Paternalism is a direct byproduct of colonialism. Settler colonialism for decades, and centuries in some places, established a status quo where the colonizers and colonized had a vast difference in power and resources. Even after the end of the colonial period in many of these places, after the colonial power had pulled out the locals were not usually well equipped or could not adapt to the institutions the colonizer had created. This

usually led to weak governance becoming a trend in former colonies, often marred with corruption and poor leadership.

In the context of humanitarian aid, paternalism can be defined as the power imbalance between donors and recipients. The donors are the one party that exudes utmost authority and control over the dictations regarding aid delivery, to whom it is delivered as well as how it is delivered. Therefore, in such situations there is often an imposition of priorities and values that may not necessarily be in alignment with the interest of the affected populations. At its most basic stage, aid distribution and governance has been dominated by donor countries in the Global North. Nations of the Global North have exerted control over decision making and resources, essentially adopting an approach which is paternalistic and marginalizes the recipients of the Global South. It is often a situation where the people of the Global South are left waiting for the Global North to recognise and intervene for their needs. The Global South includes nations which are lower-middle income countries near a specific geographic location. Whereas, the Global North refers to the geopolitically strong countries with an exponential GDP per capita.

Over the last decade countries such as Somalia, Lebanon, and Afghanistan have been heavily reliant on the assistance of aid. Critics have argued that this dependence to a large extent is because of humanitarian crises that the Global North and their governments have contributed to. On the contrary, these Northern governments often term themselves as the ‘humanitarian police’(Bremmer 2018). However, the involvement

of the North within the governance of humanitarianism has to a great extent overshadowed the actors of the South. Hence, downplaying them into substitutes rather than an associate. In today's era, this issue of power imbalance has been rather obvious and blatant. In fact, actors of the South have also now started to fight against the status quo by establishing a more dominant stance of leadership.

The effect of dominance has been prevalent for various reasons. For instance, the labels given to both sides in itself is problematic. It reestablishes and narrates the hierarchical nature of relationship that both sides foster with each other. From the period of early colonialism, the Global North has had a history of influence and power of the Global South. In fact, this was further solidified when the South in itself founded various aspects of the humanitarian system and governance after the second world war. Therefore, it begs the idea that was this a genuine effort to battle the growing humanitarian crisis in the opposite part of the world, or was it a means to employ dominance through the strategic use of diplomacy, economy and politics. Regardless, this ultimately created a system of top-down strategies where the North still seems to be at the heavily advantageous position, and the South are ever so dependent and overshadowed. Previously established in modern governance, the North are the providers of aid and the South are the recipients of aid. It is ultimately an influence and position that the Global North has taken strategic measures over to maintain. For instance, about 15 to 20 country donors from the development assistance committee predominantly fund the international aid system (Miolene). Moreover, dominant countries of the North such as the US and other Western European countries are aware of this hegemony, and hence work towards

the establishment of power hierarchies. This is established through the over exploitation of the dependence of aid for survival by the Global South. For instance, around the period between 2009 and 2021, about 10% of actions were led by the Global South civil society organizations on Global North led aid projects (Miolene). The limitation of the interference of Southern actors, therefore re-establishes the hegemony of the North. Moreover, the Global North are also the largest donors and financial supporters to Northern humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam, the International Community of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as the United Nations (UN) agencies.

Paternalistic humanitarianism has a lot of downfalls ranging from top-down decision making where local actors are excluded because they are assumed to be incapable of managing their own crisis to other issues that seem rather apparent on closer analysis. Humanitarian headquarters are often established within cities and hubs that are situated in the North. Such geographical locations fail to consider the cultural, political and social backgrounds of the communities they serve for. Hence, such a situation will lead to the misalignment of aid. For instance, food aid might overlook the local diets of a certain area. Additionally, shelter programs may overlook the traditional building layouts of the area. Moreover,a s briefly mentioned earlier, paternalistic aid will also create a situation of dependency. This is a trend which is particularly evident in settings of crisis where there is an apparent lack of long term development goals. Hence, another downfall of paternalistic humanitarianism is the emphasis of short term immediate crisis over long term sustainable development. It is essential to know and understand that short term relief is crucial in emergencies. However, this viewpoint often leads to the ignorance of the

addressment of the root cause of the crisis itself. Therefore, there are recurrent disasters where the locals are not equipped to fight back and protect themselves.

The humanitarian response to the devastating Haiti earthquake of 2010 revealed pitfalls in aid distribution pertaining to paternalism. International donors including the United States and large organizations like the Red Cross, controlled a large proportion of the relief efforts. Even though billions of dollars were pledged, local governments and the Haitian civil society organizations were often excluded from decision making processes. This top-down approach led to inefficiencies which included the construction of temporary housing that did noy meet local standards. Essentially, distribution challenges bypassed local supply chains. Despite struggles, grassroot efforts were made by organizations like Fonkoze. Fonkoze is a Haitian microfinance institution which demonstrated the potential of localised approaches by directly engaging with affected communities. Hence, the Haiti earthquake response serves as a cautionary tale of how paternalistic strategies can undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of aid.

In apparent terms, paternalism within humanitarian aid is a heavily debated topic with its own downfalls. Therefore, as a counter solution to paternalism, a new mechanism termed as Localization has been brought to the spotlight. It is a mechanism which advocates for the empowerment and involvement of local communities and actors in the humanitarian system of governance. It encourages the partnership between international actors and local actors to ensure a sufficient and efficient distribution of aid. This concept first gained importance through the Grand Bragian of 2016 (“About the Grand Bargain | IASC”). This was an international agreement which aimed to transfer about 25% of

humanitarian funding towards national and local responders ("About the Grand Bargain | IASC"). Hence, this concept was one of the first initiatives towards the promotion of local responsibility, ownership, sustainability as well as cultural relevance within aid distribution. Furthermore, Localisation offers a number of benefits such as local ownership where local actors have the opportunity to lead aid programs. Secondly, it also deals with the threat of short term unsustainable solutions that paternalistic approaches bring about. Specifically, the empowerment of local actors ensures the swift response to future crises without the need of foreign intervention. Hence, it ensures a sustainable approach to humanitarian aid. Moreover, in addition to responses to disadvantages of paternalism, localization also establishes a sense of cultural and contextual mutuality between the local actors and the community affected. Therefore, cultural relevance leads to more acceptance from the local community and ultimately positive feedback.

Therefore, it begs the question, that despite the promise behind its efficiency and effectiveness, why is it so hard to implement? Modern critics have argued that it is a mechanism that perpetuates an almost identical power imbalance that it also seeks to dismantle. Essentially, localisation does not give autonomy to local actors, rather it still has the North portraying it as a "big brother" of sorts in the background. The North essentially is always pulling the strings via conditions and other factors. For instance, donor countries often impose conditional fundings to localization efforts. This essentially means that local actors must adhere by binding, strict, and non-negotiable laws and guidelines to acquire a certain amount of fundings. Therefore, it establishes a situation of

distrust where local actors are not seen responsible enough to manage resources. Hence, essentially local actors are seen as mere puppets meant to show face. This entails that local actors are involved in superficial participation to portray a sense of inclusivity to garner local trust. This form of tokenism reimagines the power imbalance where local actors are carrying out donor driven actions in the absence of meaningful agendas. Ultimately, if local stakeholders are not altruistically committed to the humanitarian cause because of reasons such as this then humanitarian aid and assistance is at a great risk of being politicized for selfish agendas. Hence, this ultimately reduces the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, the ultimate argument is that donor states establish domestic interests through international institutions.

There are several illustrative examples of the potentials of localization to transform humanitarian aid. For instance, in the past few years there has been rapid emergence of localization within the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh. The Rohingya crisis is a stark example of the complex interplay between paternalism and localisation. Following the mass exodus of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in 2017, there was a rapid mobilization of humanitarian aid to camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh by international humanitarian agencies. While there were significant quantities of resources allocated from donor nations like the European Union and the United States of America. Localization played a huge role in the rehabilitation efforts of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh. These efforts were evident through partnerships with local NGOs such as BRAC as well as Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (Mannan 2024). These organizations were able to connect with the population on cultural and logistical

commonalities. However, there were criticisms regarding persistent paternalism. There were situations where donor countries demanded and prioritised visible and quick results over sustainable solutions. For instance, nutrition and housing decisions were often made without adequate decision and consultations with local actors. Essentially, efforts to localisation were disrupted due to power imbalances where donor agencies retained control over funding and oversight. However such an establishment took an extensive level of negotiations and effort to be successfully implemented.

Another challenge of localization is the slow progress of transferring resources and capacities from international organizations to local actors. This includes systematic and structural challenges, funding and accountability issues, political and social dynamics as well as other practical obstacles. In terms of systematic and structural challenges, International humanitarian organizations are often hesitant when it comes to transferring resources and complete power. There is an insecurity stemming from loss of influence, funding as well as control. Such a resistance is also greatly fueled by the common stereotype that international organizations are always better than the local ones. This is a notion that is also believed by the recipients as well in certain cases. Moreover, for localization to be successfully implemented, IHO must provide support on all aspects of transition in power. This is often a challenge because IHO is internally divided in terms of motivation and external pressures. In most cases, IHO would rather maintain and improve existing operational structures. However, it is also unjust to expect IHO's to operate completely on the whims of local expectations. This is solely because the primary

mandate and expectations of IHOs include rapid response and global logistics, even if it conflicts with localization goals.

More on the context of difficulties in establishing localization efforts include funding and accountability issues. For instance, donors almost often prefer working alongside well-established and large organizations due to perceived accountability, credibility, and capacity. This fixed and unchangeable preference results in reduced and limited funding for local efforts. Therefore, it contributes to the long history of dependency and underdevelopment among local actors. Moreover, funding is almost always done on an earmarked and project-based basis. This is a feature that is almost always ensured in IHOs and absent from local organizations. Hence, on a whole overview, funding majorly plays a huge role within limitations because there are always concerns surrounding accountability and transparency regarding supporting localization efforts.

To touch base, local actors are also often concerningly lacking in terms of necessary infrastructure, quality control mechanisms and expertise. More specifically, they are limited on medical expertise. It is crucial to understand that local actors only have access to resources from their homeland in most cases. These are homelands that are often in ruinous conditions. Conditions that are by products of natural disasters, war, and armed conflict among other things. On that very note, localization is inherently context-dependent and differs massively on region. Therefore, localization efforts can never be uniform. Whereas, IHO operations are almost always within a system and proper structure. However, localization efforts are not solely shorthanded because of

internal limitations, but also constrained externally. For instance, in many situations these are countries with unstable government bodies. Therefore instability often leads to resistant host governments. In fact many such governments instrumentalise localization for their own benefits. In the sense that they do so to maintain control over humanitarian activities. This underscores the efficacy of humanitarian aid almost entirely. Therefore, sometimes locals themselves are the main obstacles in the way of complete local empowerment.Therefore, should the idea of localization just be dropped completely? Since efforts to localize aid often clash with historical and conceptual frameworks. Localization has its own downfalls. However, in today's time there are other initiatives which can counter paternalism.

A real life case which explores these hurdles within localization is Tanzania. Tanzania has faced significant challenges while trying to empower local actors. The primary reason for this challenge lies within the legal and political framework of the country. There are frequent and massive changes within the bureaucracies of policies pertaining to this issue. Such changes include the Cybercrime Act as well as the NGO Act. These are initiatives that essentially limit the autonomy of non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, the government of Tanzania also labels refugees as a short term crisis which essentially closes the issue up to any possible sustainable solutions. Moreover, there is also a clear disconnect between local NGOs and international non-governmental organizations. This disconnect is rather visible in refugee camps where there is a lack of coordination between various service providers.

Another example, which talks about the strengths and limitations of localization is the Ebola epidemic outbreak in West Africa from 2014 to 2016 (World Health Organization). In this event, international actors such as the Medecins Sans Frontieres and World Health Organization (WHO) led initial response efforts which often sidelined local health systems (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al.). This approach was subjected to local and international criticism. This criticism included the undermining of local expertise and cultural sensitivity. Therefore, essentially a majority of initiatives from these groups were received with mistrust. Fortunately, as the epidemic progressed, the organizations realised that the only way to effectively support the local citizens was through the involvement of local actors. Hence, traditional healers and community leaders were engaged to combat misinformation and promote health practices. For example, in Sierra Leone, localised efforts such as the involvement of burial teams proved to be essential in controlling the spread of the virus. This was primarily because the burial teams included local volunteers. While the outbreak was eventually curbed to a control, this case revealed how a paternalistic approach initially delayed the process. This process by no means did not have to be delayed.

In response to that it is imperative to understand the SSC. The SSC is a model which includes a broad initiative meant to collaborate partnerships and frameworks among countries in the Global South. This aims to promote solidarity, mutual development and goals within the Global South. It is an initiative that emerged as an alternative to the dominant North-South cooperation paradigm. The SSC is deeply rooted within the principles of equality, solidarity and mutual benefits. They function through

the emphasization of shared aspirations and experiences. Therefore, countries that contribute and engage within the system of SSC engage as equals. They reject paternalistic relationships similar to the South and North relationship. Therefore, they promote reciprocity and partnership over hierarchical approaches. SSC plays an imminent role in modern humanitarian governance. The SSC has often worked together to solve issues pertaining to natural disasters, conflict, displacement, and public health emergencies. For instance, Cuba has sent medical teams to disaster-stricken areas in the Global South such as Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Similarly, China has also provided infrastructure, food aid, and technical assistance to African nations during drought, floods, and other crises as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, Brazil has also transported and delivered food aid and agricultural assistance to regions in Africa affected by severe drought.

These are examples which illustrate that in modern times localization can be a product of paternalism. However, the origins and causations of paternalism are not as prevalent as they once used to be. This is because several countries in the Global South are also now capable of assuming the role of donors. Essentially, the Global South is a surging term. It is essentially a colloquial term that is often thrown around rather inconsequentially. According to a report from Carnegie, “the label amalgamates a remarkably heterogeneous group of 130-odd countries, representing perhaps two-thirds of the world’s population” (Patrick and Huggins 2023). The report further mentions that the “category encompasses both major emerging powers, including aspirants to UN Security Council seats such as Brazil, India, and Nigeria, as well as small states like Benin, Fiji,

and Oman"(Patrick and Huggins 2023). Therefore, the definitions and stereotypes are rather outdated dichotomies. It is a convenient classification that sorts the worlds into an easily analysed and recognised political, economic and geopolitical grouping. Therefore, given the conventional definition, does the Global South even exist? The definitions group countries that are "third world" "developing versus industrialised states" together (Patrick and Huggins 2023). However, as mentioned before, certain countries do not fit into this category anymore.

However, while SSC does have significant potential, it is not without its challenges. There is still a significant power imbalance within the Global South itself. There are limited financial resources as well as a lack of institutional framework for coordination. Hence, there is no doubt that the Global is undoubtedly more organized. It is a region that has had time to reach the global position it is in today. Therefore, the SSC might not be entirely where it needs to be today. However, its role in humanitarian aid is likely to prosper as countries in the Global South continue to develop stronger and concrete global and regional partnerships.

In conclusion, the interplay between localization and paternalism within humanitarian aid showcases a longstanding power dynamic between the Global South and the Global North. Case studies such as Tanzania, the Rohungya refugee crisis, the Ebola Outbreak, and the Haiti earthquake underscores both the limitations or paternalistic approaches and the transformative potential of localization when executed authentically. The top-down approach often marginalizes local voices and initiates inefficiency and dependency even when paternalism might stem as a well-intentioned

intervention. Conversely, localization offers a pathway to empower communities, ensuring aid aligns properly with social, cultural and contextual factors. However, sometimes even localization is hidden paternalism. Therefore, this is an issue which demands a more participatory and equitable approach within humanitarian governance.

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