

Summary of “Medical Humanitarianism and Human Rights: Reflections on Doctors Without Borders and Doctors of the World”

Nongovernmental humanitarian organizations, in particular Doctors Without Borders and Doctors of the World, must ensure that they address cultural tensions in an internationalizing world. Doctors Without Borders (DWB) and Doctors of the World (DoW) were founded in 1971 and 1980, respectively, by French doctors who served together in the Nigerian civil war. They were influenced by the post-WWII world they came into, and in particular by the former Nazi occupation of France, the Holocaust, Communism (in the Soviet Union), and decolonization of Third-World countries.

DWB and DoW both strongly value the “French ideas” of human rights, including the right and duty to interfere, speak, and act. They disregard barriers between nations (as “injury and illness ‘do not respect borders’”) and do not take into consideration their patients’ identities. They affirm a global, almost “New World Order” view of the world, not regarding the national sovereignty of states if a crisis demands humanitarian aid. They believe in radical humanitarianism.

While DWB and DoW have both been incredibly helpful in emergencies, they have struggled in a few areas. One of these areas is human and material resources. Faced with wars, natural disasters, and chronic disease around the world, both organizations have found themselves stretched thin and often incapable of effectively responding to all situations. The dilemmas of who should get funding and resources have taxed both organizations. Another area that has been a struggle is military intervention. When humanitarian organizations utilize the military (often the UN, sometimes the US) to assist in delivering medical service, it can harm people’s perception of them. On one particular occasion in Somali, one faction became convinced the military interventions favored their opponent and retaliated, leading to hostility and a number of deaths. Collaborating with militaries in politically charged situations remains a challenge for DWB and DoW. Another dilemma these organizations face is how to use media. Both organizations have typically relied heavily on media to promote their message and mission. However, this has often led to a desensitization to other people’s pain or dehumanization of the sufferers. How to respectfully and effectively share their message is an issue these organizations will need to face. Another concern is the background, motivation, and training of workers. In both DWB and DoW, workers do not receive significant cultural training before they are deployed to the field. In some cases, aid appears to be an imposition upon the people, rather than a collaboration with them, as well. These organizations do not seem to be concerned with asking themselves questions about the value of cultural competency in humanitarian situations. There have also been concerns about how DWB/France and DoW/France approach domestic humanitarian problems. In contrast with DWB/USA, their interests began in the Third World and have been centered there, whereas DWB/USA focused on their immediate vicinity (NYC) and spread out from there. When DWB/France and DoW/France were initially averse to direct efforts in their immediate surroundings. Finally, there have been concerns about their French nationalism and difficulty in working with workers of other nationalities and branches of their organizations from other countries.

Finally, a large scale concern they will need to address is how to be truly global (and not just international). DWB and DoW need to ensure they address cultural differences instead of ignoring or minimizing them. They need to recognize their place as humanitarian aid organizations and not a solution to all of the world’s problems.