

Foreword

Lord David Owen

The pursuit of the goals of humanitarianism, whether through assistance or intervention, has no single way, follows no preconceived pattern. Almost by definition, each experience is different. This means, more perhaps than in any other human activity, that practitioners have to be ready to learn from experience and adapt to circumstance.

As the editor of, contributor to, and inspiration of this much-needed book, Kevin Cahill brings the insights of a clinician in tropical medicine and public health, as well as those of an academic in humanitarian studies. Standing behind the book are twelve volumes still with much relevance to present issues into which readers can delve. The Introduction warns that humanitarian professionals have to “tread softly, to offer change with great care. Attempts to introduce new methods and replace timeworn approaches can be devastating, especially in times of crises, when a society is extremely vulnerable and utterly dependent on strangers for the essentials of life.”

In the summer of 2012, the world watched as a horrendous civil war developed in Syria with appalling humanitarian consequences, and international diplomacy, hopefully only for a short time, died with it. Yet even amidst these troubled times, this book is a testament to the humanitarian instinct which demands that we develop better policies and improve our techniques, our delivery, and above all our understanding. What it also demonstrates is that the structures of humanitarian activity are adjusting, evolving, and triumphing in many diverse and challenging surroundings.

The era of unbridled humanitarian intervention in support of human rights, which began with saving the Kurds in Iraq in 1991, looks as if it has had its day and that what happened over Libya could not be repeated over Syria. The circumstances were very different, but the months-long deadlock in the Security Council carries a warning, particularly for the five veto-carrying permanent members, that diplomacy must never die.

An adjustment to the sweeping delegation of “all necessary powers,” in the language of [Chapter 7](#) of the UN charter, was anyhow coming in the light of the mixed success rates associated with the many interventions over the past twenty years. Just as professional standards have been developed in the field and in academia for humanitarian workers, so the Security Council is imposing through its voting structures limits on UN-authorized humanitarian interventions. Frustration, locally and

internationally, at these constraints abounds. But they are a natural and inevitable tension that is certain to develop within the new humanitarian interpretation of the Charter.

Kevin Cahill and his distinguished fellow authors have distilled in this book much wisdom of lasting value.