

BOOK REVIEW

TITLE: *Blinded by Humanity. Inside The UN's Humanitarian Operations*

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We heard of Martin Barber's book while on 14 November 2017 attending the conference "Winning back the human race" at Chatham House in London, commemorating the work of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICIHI) and its inspirational secretary-general, Zia Rizvi. A commission which during its lifespan from 1983 to 1986 formed humanitarian assistance policies of the international community for decades onwards, notably those of the UN. Back home, we have read the book and were quickly absorbed by its professional, sound contents and fine writing style. Barber's enthusiasm for his work with humanitarian operations during four decades is contagious. It is difficult to close the book until the last sentence has been read. He analyses ups and downs in several humanitarian operations from a field perspective as well as from that of the UN headquarters and offers insights and recommendations that all people involved in humanitarian operations can learn from, from the volunteer worker to the secretary-general of the United Nations. Barber is a good example of the kind of experience that the UN needs: people that have worked themselves up from modest assignments in remote field settings to leading positions at the Secretariat in New York. People that have seen, and lived with, the UN from bottom up.

Blinded by Humanity is also a personal account of a social anthropologist and UN official equally committed to working in field situations, where decisions are carried out as in the UN Secretariat where decisions are made. We are reminded that good intentions are not enough in humanitarian operations. They need to be effective too, and the setting in which they are to be implemented must be considered. Barber drives home the point that ought to be obvious, but is not always in humanitarian operations: the importance of getting the best people for the job. Barber clearly was one of them.

He is sharing with us the paramount importance of involving a variety of actors in humanitarian operations, from local actors and organisations, as exemplified by Operation Salaam, to royals that succeeded in moving the anti-personnel mine ban convention (the Ottawa Treaty) towards adoption in December 1997 (Princess Diana) and in encouraging UN member states in the Middle East to become a party to the Treaty once it was adopted (Queen Noor of Jordan). Barber also sets forth an interesting peacemaking proposal for countries ridden by conflict: abandon the early national election strategy where the winner takes all and subsequently contributes to perpetuating the crisis and go for

a decentralized process, establishing autonomous cantons where local conditions set the political agenda within a confederal structure, such as in Switzerland. The UN might learn something here and contemplate to test it out, for instance in Afghanistan, South-Sudan and Yemen.

Barber sets out to present an objective account, but falls into the trap of commenting on the behaviour of colleagues on good and bad, a theme which is per se hardly objective, for do we really understand why people act as they do? Can we get to the bottom of it as outsiders? Do people always mean what they say? He questions the importance attached to the pursuance of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) item “New International Humanitarian Order” by Zia Rizvi, beyond the year 1991 when, upon the recommendation of ICIHI, the General Assembly established the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (today’s OCHA). What Barber appears not to be aware of is that Rizvi in 1996 had conveyed to the UN that there was a need for developing an “Agenda for Humanitarian Action” by the United Nations similar to what had been done by the Secretary-General in other important domains (“Agenda for Peace”, “Agenda for Development”). The suggestion was subsequently mentioned in some of the Secretary-General’s Reports to the General Assembly on the item and resulted in four General Assembly resolutions from 2002 to 2008, calling for an agenda for humanitarian action, which Rizvi personally monitored through UNGA. The resolutions ensured discussion on the humanitarian policies of the UN which member states could relate to over the years and had influence on the “Agenda for Humanity” presented at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016. The Agenda, calling on global leaders to stand up for our common humanity and reduce human suffering, is now gaining ground as humanitarian assistance policies around the world. Barber’s book is however a goldmine of insights into humanitarian operations and his treatment of the issue of coordination of policies and programmes among the best seen. We keep our fingers crossed that he will write another book on the dynamics of coordination within the UN and between the UN and other actors in humanitarian operations. He has the insights and writing skills to do it, and it is an issue that needs to be further developed for the benefit of adequate humanitarian response to complex emergency situations and their onward development process. Read the book and get wiser. It is full of interesting and useful info for all who care about international humanitarian issues. It deserves a wide readership.

Profile of Book Reviewers: Hanne Christensen and Poul Brandrup, former United Nations staff members