

Charitable donations are often confined to treating the symptoms of poverty and social exclusion. However, it would be better and more effective to focus on their causes, which are frequently of a political nature. Consequently, it is important that we strive for the realisation of economic and social human rights, or defend them against asocial, neoliberal politics.

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Social human rights and social solidarity instead of voluntary charity

According to Bertolt Brecht in his poem “Das Nachtlager” (A place to sleep), giving a homeless person a bed for the night is all very well and good. However, – as he continues – “the world is not thereby changed, [...] the age of exploitation is not thereby shortened”.

This fundamental problem applies to charitable donations from international volunteers and to charity in general. The well-meaning intention is usually to relieve distress, poverty and need. However, if such charitable help only mitigates the need for a short while, it does not normally go beyond treating the symptoms of social evils. Generally speaking, the political causes of poverty and social exclusion, such as a high inequality in distribution of social resources or unfair international economic relations, are not taken into account. Furthermore, in certain circumstances charitable aid may unintentionally contribute towards a stabilisation of social and political situations which generate need time and again. For this and other reasons which will be discussed here, charitable aid needs to be scrutinized carefully.

Helping people in a social predicament is without doubt an ethical principle. However, it would be much better to prevent need from arising in the first place, by eliminating its causes. Where this is not possible and aid continues to be necessary, this should be provided by public welfare services, i.e. by state welfare structures which guarantee entitlement to the appropriate aid.

The status of social security and social justice in an era of neoliberalism¹

Such state and public welfare organisations have come increasingly under pressure in the last decades. The reason for this is a neoliberal reform policy (see also footnote on “neoliberal globalisation” on p. 51), which along with the privatisation of public goods and deregulation of the markets has prompted massive cuts in social services. This increases the loss of institutionally safeguarded assistance and subsequently of social solidarity, instead of reinforcing them.

On a global scale, neoliberal reform policy over all causes greater inequality in the distribution of social opportunities and resources, with the result that the social divide continues to widen. This affects the societies of the Global South especially. In those countries in which at least the rudiments of public welfare services once existed, cuts in social welfare have led to an almost complete collapse of public social services. At the same time, privatisation in the Global South in particular has meant that many people are deprived of access to important resources such as clean drinking water or farmland. In many areas, labour protection laws have been relaxed and the deregulation of international trade has been the ruin of many small-scale producers – especially in the agricultural sector.

These are some of the reasons for the poverty, social exclusion and economic vulnerability affecting large sections of the world’s population – primarily in the Global South. And it is precisely these social evils that trigger the impulse to make a charitable donation in many international volunteers, as they seek to rectify the situation fast. To many of them, this – at first sight – appears to be the least complicated, most effective and therefore most obvious course of action.

Appraisal of charitable aid

Despite all the energy which is invested by charitable aid organisations and by benevolent, private fundraising efforts, they are unable – either from a quantitative or from a legal point of view – to compensate adequately for the mistakes or shortcomings of socio-political institutions or for the disparate access to economic resources within society.

By contrast with public socio-political institutions, private aid organisations and donors are not formally bound by people's needs and rights. The needy can file claims against public institutions, but not against private organisations and donors.

In this instance, not only is giving itself voluntary but likewise the selection of who should benefit from this kind of help is an arbitrary decision on the part of the giver. Therefore it is frequently not those who are in most urgent need of help who receive it, but those who – in the eyes of the donors – “deserve” it most. In an online article entitled “Arguments against charity”, the BBC quotes the following words of a member of staff of an anti-hunger campaign: “[...] I have to compete sometimes with people who want to feed children [to the exclusion of others]. And I hate that. All hunger is wrong. [...] Look, I feed crack addicts, I feed prostitutes.”²

“Global South” / “Global North”

“The terms ‘Global South’ and ‘Global North’ should not be understood in a geographical sense but rather as a neutral description of different situations in the globalised world. Therefore ‘Global South’ defines an underprivileged social, political and economic situation in a global system. On the other hand, ‘Global North’ describes a privileged situation. For example, Australia belongs preponderantly to the Global North. The terms are used in order to avoid a hierarchy between ‘developing countries’ and ‘developed countries’ from a Eurocentric point of view.” (Source: www.weltwaerts.de/faq-sued-nord.html)

Another criticism of both purely benevolent and humanitarian aid stems from the fact that these can take on the role of a kind of repair workshop in societies where deep-seated social injustice and inequality abound. Such aid releases the state and the social elite, who are the winners when it comes to social inequality, from the obligation to undertake any measures to mitigate existing social ills. Wherever charity softens social hardship on an individual or local level, it runs the risk of contributing toward obscur-

¹ Neoliberalism describes an ideological concept and political project, based on the economic process of globalisation. According to this concept, there is not alternative to market forces and economic stakeholders being given free rein in order to ensure prosperity and freedom. It propagates economic policies for the deregulation of international trade and expansion of market logic to all social sectors through privatisation. The notion of society in the sense of a solidarity-based community is largely rejected. Welfare state institutions and labour laws are considered primarily as a cost factor or a distortion of the market and everyone as architect of his*her own fortune. Predicaments such as poverty are attributed to individual failure rather than to social circumstances and the remedy for that is self-optimisation.

² The BBC online article “Arguments against charity” can be found in full on the following internet page: www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/charity/against_1.shtml

ing eventual political legitimization deficits of those in power and dampening the urge of the population to demand political and social reforms focused on the actual causes of social ills. Therefore the wind is unintentionally taken out of the sails of a political mobilisation of the socially deprived.

Charity on a larger scale can also lead to welfare state mechanisms and redistribution policies being reduced, if the relevant political and social elite notice, that benevolent sponsors are willing and able to take over necessary social benefits and also act as a stopgap when public welfare systems fail. Contrary to guaranteed state benefits, with charitable aid there is often an inherent danger that the source may run dry or that it was just a short-term “flash in the pan”. Wherever private fundraising initiatives and charitable organisations replace social services of the state, those in need are exposed to the threat of losing essential assistance once again.³

The aim must be to create a more balanced and just distribution of social resources to guarantee a good standard of living.

Instead of relieving social and political ills, charity can therefore strengthen or even aggravate them. Consequently, it is important to curb mere charitable aid as far as possible and resort to other forms of remedy against poverty, need and hardship.

Cracking down on charity – Putting access to social resources, social security and life in dignity on a legal footing

Facilitating a life worth living in dignity in the long-term does not only imply relieving need and hardship in the short-term but means overcoming the social conditions which are responsible for these shortcomings, such as increasing social inequality, unfair trade relations and the absence of social security services. To this end, a renunciation of the neoliberal policy described above – which partly created and partly aggravated these conditions – is required.

The aim must be to create a more balanced and just distribution of social resources to guarantee a good standard of living. This includes inter alia fair wages, to ensure life above the poverty line, at the same time as promoting a fairer distribution of overall social wealth. Other examples include (affordable) access to resources such as water, living space, farmland

and medical aid. If everyone has access to such resources, hardship will become an exception. Should it nevertheless occur, solidarity aid is required from socio-political institutions which should be financed via legally binding social redistribution (e.g. through taxes).

If access to these social resources and to aid in case of need (social welfare) are put on a legal footing, in other words enforceable rights of access to these resources and services exist, then overcoming need and hardship become unnecessary in the context of voluntary commitment, donations and charity and a permanent solution is guaranteed.⁴

Such a right of entitlement, combatting need and social deprivation, is already anchored in international law. In one of the most significant declarations of human rights, the “International convention on economic, social and cultural rights” of 1966, the contracting states undertake to guarantee all people the human right of social security, a life free of hunger and the highest possible standard of health. Other rights include the human right to work, to a minimum wage standard and the right to education. However, in reality there are but few nations on earth who guarantee their citizens these rights to their full extent. This may have something to do with the fact that such legal guarantees infringe on the interests and privileges of those who so far have stood on the winning side of an unfair world trade order, of the unequal distribution of social resources and the neoliberal reform policy described above. To this day, for the majority of the world’s population social human rights exist only on paper. The battle to alter this, is a battle worth fighting. Whoever really wants to “help” those affected by poverty and exploitation in the world should get involved in political activities rather than just handing out mere alms.

Such involvement does not exclude donations of money per se. For example, it is possible to make a donation out of political solidarity rather than out of charity. This can be in the form of financial support for local social movements, defenders of human rights and such civilian organisations

³ For more detail, see also BBC online article “Arguments against charity”

⁴ Exceptions to this rule are emergencies caused by sudden natural disasters or wars, where access to resources may be lost and where (socio-political) aid services based on solidarity can no longer function or not function properly. In such instances charitable aid – including donations – is meaningful and important.

that strive to implement or defend political, economic and social rights.⁵ Donations inspired by political solidarity can in fact contribute to the establishment of alternative media and communication structures, towards solicitors' and legal fees, to campaigns and public relations work, to administrative and travel costs or to the psychological care of activists who have suffered political repression or violence. The more successful the struggle for economic and social human rights is, the more superfluous charitable aid will become.

Conclusion

The implementation of economic and social human rights, including legally binding aid in the event of hardship, has many advantages over mere charitable aid and donation activities, which in the long run are dependent on the goodwill of the individual. Such activities often only alleviate the symptoms of hardship and run the risk of ignoring the political nature of their causes, at the same time even indirectly exonerating the instigators. A contemporary of the French Revolution, the pedagogue and social reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi said: "Charity is the drowning of rights in the manure pit of compassion". It is these rights, or more precisely economic and social human rights, which we need to re-establish or defend against the neoliberal orientation of politics. 📍

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⁵ These often go hand in hand. It frequently happens that people who are fighting for their economic and social rights are also subjected to restrictions in their political rights to freedom and participation.