

U.K. : After Grenfell, we need to bring humanitarian responses into our politics if we want to save lives

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Neoliberalism means abandoning people to the whims of markets. Abby Meadows argues that we need to use the tools of humanitarianism to address the depth of the social crisis.

We are living in an age where the governments of the West can no longer ignore their domestic humanitarian responsibilities. Grenfell was a tragedy born out of a neoliberal agenda, which destroyed the protections the Grenfell residents should have been given. As serving firefighter and West Midlands Fire Brigades Union brigade chair Andrew Scattergood says, 'How is it that in the sixth richest country in the world emergency services are going backwards, damaging the safety of citizens?'

Neoliberalism makes it harder to respond to a disaster, because it leaves public services with less resources, and trains councils to function with a 'profit first' mentality. The government response to Grenfell has demonstrated this in crystal clear terms, with the biggest issue for the residents being that the government has been too slow with its assistance (as reported by the Independent Grenfell Recovery Task Force). However, the difficulties neoliberalism brings for developing a humanitarian model are two-pronged. Not only does it weaken a state's ability to respond with appropriate resources, but neoliberalism also makes it harder for states to prevent humanitarian crises, as this style of economy destabilises infrastructure, which leads to tragedies like the Grenfell fire. At its core, neoliberalism makes it more challenging to develop a functioning humanitarian model for disaster relief.

Humanitarianism and colonialism

Generally speaking, humanitarianism, disaster relief, and words of this field are concepts relatively absent from politics. Historically, humanitarianism is associated with the global South. The global North has traditionally taken on the role of sharing their skills and technical capabilities with the South, by helping them 'to develop'. This power dynamic has deep colonial roots and has been refuted by many economists in recent years. Most notably, Dambisa Moyo, who claims foreign aid to be harmful and counterproductive to letting economies grow. But this colonial framework, which deems humanitarian issues an apolitical matter of charity only relevant to people in distant, racialised places, allows governments to avoid talking about its responsibility for human disasters both in domestic and foreign policy.

We can no longer avoid the need for a humanitarian approach in politics. Recent humanitarian emergencies in Europe, like the Grenfell fire, have pulled back the mask on the global North. We are deeply unprepared for humanitarian emergencies on our doorsteps, lacking an appropriate domestic humanitarian model for disaster relief. Quite the contrary – governments have spent recent years

unravelling social protections which might have guaranteed people access to basics such as housing and healthcare. The Whilst international development is a well-established and practiced field for Western governments, it is more complex to respond to a domestic crisis where culpability lies on your own doorstep.

Often, trying to anticipate and prevent possible disasters involves the kind of legal regulation that many people dismiss as 'red tape'. The framing of 'red tape' as a burden we should aim to relieve ourselves of, is in reality a reduction in our humanitarian safeguards. As George Monbiot says, safety regulations are 'what makes the difference between a good society and barbarism'. The slashing of red tape is a key feature of the neoliberal agenda. Moreover, years of austerity have brought us further away from a working model for humanitarian disasters. As Andrew Scattergood said when speaking of the emergency services:

'They will not take solace from the same politicians who are now offering their thoughts and prayers and praising their efforts, but who have treated them and their profession with utter contempt for seven years, attacking their pensions, working conditions and cutting brigades to the bone'.

From fire service cuts, to responsibility-shifting councils, neoliberalism has undeniably had an impact on the public service's capacity to respond. Developing a sustainable model for dealing with disasters, and pursuing neoliberal economics, are concepts which come into direct conflict with one another.

Neoliberalism vs the people

Across Europe we can see voids created by rich Western countries who fail to adequately respond to humanitarian emergencies. These voids are filled by charities and volunteer organisations. This dual small state/strong state mentality is a classic trait of neoliberalism, as councils and states shrink the social state and focus their efforts on ensuring capitalism's maximal access to the lives and land it governs. This means both slashing safety nets and checks on the ability of businesses and local government to neglect or exploit. The government is in the grip of a hollow neoliberal logic meaning it has no duty to intervene to protect people without much market power. This is again, where humanitarianism is always already a deeply political matter by the time disaster strikes. It is a political decision for wealthy governments to leave the vulnerable at risk.

Of the Grenfell disaster, Muslim Aid CEO Jehangir Malik said he would have 'expected this chaos in a developing country' with poor infrastructure. Disaster relief models haven't been prioritised in our society. This has left us with huge discrepancies between our wealth and resources, and our knowledge and skills of how to deal with a disaster. Malik added that the chaos was 'telling of our emergency services'. Herein lies an unavoidable truth. Relentless cuts to our services under an economic programme of austerity has taken us further away from a disaster relief model fit to deal with the humanitarian challenges our changing future will bring.

Bring humanitarianism to the table

Bringing politics into humanitarianism, and a humanitarianism approach into the government policy could help better prepare us for future disasters. Because it allows us to look beyond narrow, divisive and damaging government frameworks according to which the poor and vulnerable deserve their poverty. It treats human needs for housing, food, protection, etc, as inherently politically urgent. And it allows us to think about packages of immediate relief and long-term reform which span many different government sectors. This could involve deepening the relationship between politics and the third sector, in order to formulate a functioning humanitarian model. As a report by Muslim Aid on the volunteer response to Grenfell lays out:

‘Overall links across the [third] sector and between the sector and government were weak, reflecting the lack of effective mechanisms to facilitate the involvement of the full range of actors engaged in emergencies at local level and beyond’.

Since July, the fire service who responded to the disaster have been giving their evidence to the inquiry. From October, the Grenfell inquiry will hear accounts from the bereaved, survivors and local residents. The lessons which must be learnt from the enquiry are multi-faceted and complex, but the elephant in the room is clear, how can we go forwards as a society who wants to protect its civilians, whilst continuing with an economics of damaging austerity?

We can no longer ignore our dangerous future- resilience must be built.

Some may say Grenfell was a rare tragedy, and that disaster relief is still a concept only fitting for the global South. However, a look at the frequency of humanitarian crises challenging the global North in recent times suggests otherwise.

Climate change knows no borders, and the bleak environmental predictions for the future demonstrate we are in fact very much in need of a working humanitarian model in the global North too, and fast.

States must invest more, in resources, as well as in multilateralism, in order to produce a coordinated, effective humanitarian response to the challenges the future holds. A less neoliberal and more socialist style of governance would enhance this, as a shift away from a profit driven, cost cutting mentality is essential to safeguard ourselves better. To start describing these crises in humanitarian terms is essential. We face graver disasters than a single tower block fire, yet we are painfully underprepared to deal with them.

Abby Meadows

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