People-Centric Approaches as A Requirement for Charity

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Needing and providing help is integral to the way we function as a society. This is how we bond, form relationships, and establish a sense of community. While this is seen as an inherent trait in society, our charities and other giving practices do not always reflect this. I believe that giving practices should be created on reciprocity, where the opinions and needs of the receiver inform how giving practices are structured. The need for building a system based on the pillars of equality and solidarity is essential, especially in a world where certain people's needs are often not taken into consideration. This can take the form of simply respecting each other, taking a non-judgmental stance, or consulting people affected to inform decisions (Cameron et al, 2022). Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that consulting the needs of the recipients of aid is essential to good and effective aid.

Background

A recent example where the need for consultation becomes apparent is the Maui wildfires that happened in 2023. In Hawaii, tourism is a huge contributor to the economy, yet many native Hawaiians for years have made it abundantly clear that tourism does them more harm than good (Lewis, 2023). The high number of tourists has led to an affordability crisis in Hawaii, pushing local people into poverty and homelessness. Natural disasters, like wildfires, can exacerbate these pre-existing conditions and can hugely impact the communities' ability to rebuild. People have been desperate to rebuild their communities and many corporations and real estate agents have swooped in to try and take advantage of the situation by making offers to buy out lands (Lewis, 2023). By doing this, we can observe how corporations and realtors use people to fulfill their professional goals and desires, and to a certain extent, we recognize they are morally wrong; by disregarding people and their inherent worth, they break the categorical imperative or moral laws of Deontology and instead value people for the way they can benefit them (Vaughn,

2020). Additionally, tourists might think they are helping boost the state's economy by traveling and taking part in tourism. However, if the people who have been affected by the fires are saying they don't want tourists, then that opinion should inform the decision of the "giver" or the tourist in this case. If the givers do something they think would be good for the receiver without actually taking the other party's thoughts and opinions into consideration, that is paternalistic. This shows how "helping" in this sense is one-sided and can end up doing more harm than good (Saunders-Hastings, 2022; Lewis, 2023).

Deontology requires that peoples' actions follow universally applicable moral rules and that they fulfill their duties, something essential in the case of philanthropy (Vaughn, 2020). The giver must help people in need, empower them, and get to the root of the issue at hand. They must do so because it falls under the duty of the giver, to have the people's interests at the core of their aid efforts (Vaughn, 2020). Community engagement is one of the many ways in which this can be achieved. By informing, collaborating, consulting, involving, and empowering communities affected, we can create a system of trust and reciprocity, where people's actual needs are addressed. This can be a great way to mobilize resources and influence change (CTSA Community Engagement Key Function Committee Task Force, 2011). Deontological ethics also highlights concepts of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice with an emphasis on the inherent dignity of a person (Tseng et al, 2021). In summary, some core pillars of Deontology are to equally distribute the benefits and burdens associated with an action in the population to prevent exploitation, respect a person's ability to make decisions for themselves, have someone's best interest in mind, and not harm the person you're meant to help (Tseng et al, 2021). Deontology is all about following the law; where the morally good action should be done out of duty and not out of want or inclination (Vaughn, 2020). It's based on the idea of humanity

being an end in itself and not something to be exploited for personal gains. This prevents people from using philanthropy as an excuse to further establish their personal agendas. Not only does deontology emphasize the humanity of people, but it also believes that everyone holds the ability to make rational and informed decisions and that their value isn't dependent on factors like social status, wealth, culture etc. Everyone is equal since the needs and wants of one person do not take priority over the others, and thus everyone should have a say in the matter (Vaughn, 2020).

Another example that emphasizes the need for consultation would be from a city in Russia called Severodvinsk (Handler, 1992). It used to produce nuclear submarines but eventually started loosening travel, trade, and residency restrictions due to a decline in Russian weapons manufacturing. As the economy went into a recession, the residents of the city wanted to switch gears to keep the city afloat and needed outside investments and aid. Yet here the needs of the people and what they received were two different things. The West was sending them food aid, which many found counterproductive as the limited number of resources often created conflicts between people. What they needed was technical knowledge and training on how to transfer skills from a more military-centric economy to a civilian one. The people wanted something that would empower them to take control and not be dependent on handouts. There was a need for a long-term solution that would help them stand on their own feet. A disparity existed between the intentions of the countries offering aid and the perceptions and needs of these Russian citizens (Handler, 1992). Something like this could've been easily fixed by consulting those whom these aid efforts were meant to help. This demonstrates how not consulting the people on the receiving end can be seen as a superficial move to feel good about one's actions and intentions; how it can end up doing more harm than good; and how it might even ruffle some feathers especially when cultural differences exist.

Acts of charity are often praised and emphasized more than taking action to promote social change and prevent systemic problems from happening in the first place (Cameron et al, 2022). It is something that can make people instantly feel good about their actions and the existence of these systemic issues. By not taking the receiver's counsel, they are essentially treating the symptoms without curing the disease. The root causes of issues aren't addressed because often the people providing the aid might not even realize they exist (Cameron et al, 2022). If someone is looking to help; research is the main key (McKay, 2023). For example, in the case of the Maui wildfires, many Hawaiians took to social media to caution people against fraud organizations, urging people to not sell their lands, or telling people about their needs and which charities best represented those (McKay, 2023). These charities were often run by indigenous Hawaiians, working at grassroots levels, addressing local needs, and helping those most impacted (Schuppe & Siemaszko, 2023). Understanding the voices of the people affected, and then making an informed decision based on what is found is crucial.

Methods

Charity and aid are integral to our society and the way we deal with hardships (Cameron et al, 2022). In this day and age, we often turn to aid as a way to cope with the inefficiencies and inability of more mainstream structures to address the basic needs of people. A paper looked at what charity meant and how it was experienced by those who gave and those who received help. This study took place in the year 2018 in Australia and looked at in-depth interviews with twenty-four volunteers and fifty-seven people receiving charity. It talked about the linearity of many charities and how their hierarchical nature created a power imbalance, making those needing help feel shame and anxiety about accessing these services. These internalized feelings of shame combined with the attitudes of the volunteers dictated the overall experience for most

people. In this case, the givers need to take into consideration the lived experiences of the people they are helping; many of whom are often poor and homeless. The study proved that actively taking steps to reduce shame, providing a respectful and non-judgemental approach, and having a relationship based on equality between the giver and the receiver helped improve the experiences of those people.

This paper emphasized that the key to real change is a broader shift from a hierarchical charity framework to a system that is built on reciprocity (Cameron et al, 2022). Reciprocity here means that while someone is "giving back", they are also "getting back". This can help make charity less hierarchical and stigmatized as the people receiving the aid also get to bring something to the table. It argues for a more people-centric approach to giving. In more hierarchical giving practices, the receiver is reduced to a passive entity however, with an emphasis on shared interests and working together to meet these goals, we can promote well-being and solidarity on both the receiver's and the giver's end. While the study might have taken place in Australia, its findings are universal. The charity model is the most dominant form of giving aid and there is still often a stigma attached to depending on charity to survive. These results show how an overall shift away from traditional forms of charity can benefit both the volunteers and the people receiving charity (Cameron et al, 2022).

Ubuntu, an indigenous South African concept, bolsters our argument for a giving system based on needs and reciprocity (Phillips et al, 2015). It is built on the concepts of interdependence and solidarity and believes that working together is the key to sustainable change. Here both givers and receivers of help are seen as equals, and the act of giving is a circular concept rather than a linear act. There is no shame attached to giving or receiving help as money and other materialistic resources are not the focus, rather it's based on needs and

intentions. Even the most disadvantaged groups can practice giving, making them active agents of change. Ubuntu falls in line with what we have established to be an inherent quality of a society and is something more modern acts of giving fail to capture (Phillips et al, 2015).

Another paper, *Participatory Decision-Making in Contested Societies* looks at how community philanthropy organizations engaged and empowered local communities to make key decisions, breaking away from the more traditional formats of funding (Kilmurray, 2015). This approach helped with resource mobilization, meeting the needs of the people, improving the way community-based organizations functioned, and establishing trust between the communities affected and the activists helping out. It looked at how this concept helped build resilience in the presence of political conflicts. Unlike more traditional practices of giving, it looked at issues and needs not as something that took place in a vacuum but rather in the context of the political environment of the region. It mentioned how organizations were accountable to local people and built on concepts of equity, inclusion, and strength. This meant that the people were involved in decision-making, actively taking part in deciding and voicing how certain actions would impact them and, in the process, empowering communities to take charge. It perfectly encapsulates our argument that the best way to help someone is to respond to things in the way they need. This paper connects to the concept of community engagement whereby including people, consulting with them, and working towards equity, we could empower them to eventually lead to a systemic transformation. Participatory decision-making with people affected, partnerships with activists, advocating for systematic change, funds management, etc. can all help empower people and make sure the giving taking place is something that can lead to substantial results.

An example of this would be the Village Decides program, which was implemented in a small village in Palestine. It looked into the local community priorities, needs, and capabilities,

and then asked community members to reflect on the best way to meet these needs and what would be the best organizations to receive grant money. In this way, by taking into consideration the needs and wants of the people impacted by these interventions, they made sure that money was being put into areas where real change would be felt. The participants picked four organizations and the grant budget of $12,000 was distributed among the participants who then decided how to distribute the money between these four groups. This not only gives people a sense of engagement but can also help them feel more in control of their circumstances by being active agents of change that help vocalize local needs and priorities, which otherwise might be overlooked. Even a small budget can go a long way if the decision-makers know where the people's needs lie and can help contribute to the community's sense of confidence and engagement. This way aid can also reflect the lived experiences of people, rather than be something that is based on what the donors think is needed. (Kilmurray, 2015)

Critiques

A potential critique could be that prioritizing resources based on community needs might not be efficient. They can argue that these rationings, from a utilitarian and economic perspective, might be invested in something more urgent and essential, (Vaughn, 2020). Decisions must be made from a more unbiased and logical lens with no room for these abstract concepts of humanity and solidarity. So rather than focusing on the duty of the donor to do the right thing, it's the consequences of an action that determine what is moral. For example, some might argue that in the case of Hawaii, it might be more efficient to purchase land and build resorts and hotels to rebuild the community and economy rather than investing in more foundation-level efforts. People might even argue that providing aid to indigenous-run, grassroots-level organizations might not be efficient as the aid would reach fewer people and

these organizations might not have the proper skills and resources necessary to use the aid most efficiently. The ultimate goal is to have maximum utility for everyone involved and each action is evaluated based on the positive outcomes it'll produce. This can often result in a shift away from the more people-centric efforts this paper is arguing in favor of. They can argue that under utilitarianism, we must not only consider the good for everyone affected but also give everyone's needs an equal weight. Here, the givers themselves might be taken into the equation. This can potentially lead to local voices not being heard to reach more people.

My counter-argument is that the concept of doing the best or maximizing aid can often lead to shortcuts and superficial solutions. It is often too objective and numerical and doesn't usually hold room for sympathy and caring, two things that are crucial motivators of helping and charity (Adams, 2023). Many supporters of Utilitarianism and its subset Effective Altruism are also often people in privileged positions; therefore, they are more likely to be ignorant or misinformed about what actually might help make a difference in people's lives. (Adams, 2023) Effective altruists tend to think of ways to maximize the good per dollar. This clinical view of aid doesn't account for a more holistic approach to giving (Steuer, 2015). It can also lead to aid providers trying to maximize their gains under the table. But even within utilitarianism, there is something called rule utilitarianism, which states that the right action would follow rules that when followed consistently, would lead to the best for everyone involved. This subset of utilitarianism has a similar emphasis on rules as deontology does. (Vaughn, 2020) With proper guidelines, committees, methods to engage the communities affected, and transparency efforts, we can make sure that help gets to the areas it's needed. Not doing so can lead to inefficiencies and resource allocations to areas where it wouldn't make an impact. The people who need help

know what they want and thus helping them voice their thoughts can be a great way to empower them and make them active-agents in creating change.

Conclusion

When aid is being provided, I believe community engagement should be made a mandatory part of the process. Whether that is during the research stage or the implementation stage, local communities should be involved in providing aid. This could be implemented at different stages by charity volunteers on a day-to-day basis where they listen and respond to the needs of people, or by charity organizations who can employ or conduct focus groups to help community members voice their opinions. Government bodies could also create legal requirements to help marginalized communities or give international aid. This could take the form of community involvement guidelines that organizations and people looking to help are required to follow. Another example could be to establish a committee that represents the target population that reviews and provides feedback on aid plans. Being transparent about motives, decision-making processes and outcomes of aid can also be a great way of holding people accountable. All these combined can help reinforce feelings of trust and solidarity between the people offering and the people receiving help.

In this paper, I argued that giving practice should be built on reciprocity, where the opinions and needs of the receiver inform the way giving practices are structured. Consulting the needs of the recipients of aid is essential to good and effective aid. In this paper, I looked at Deontology as a way to hold aid providers accountable. Here the giver must help people in need, empower them, and get to the root of the issue at hand. To achieve this, one way suggested in this paper is by informing, collaborating, consulting, involving, and empowering the communities affected. By doing so, we can create a system of trust and reciprocity, where

people's actual needs are addressed. People are autonomous and hold the capabilities to know

what is best for them and thus getting their input to inform a system of giving can help establish

trust and solidarity between all parties involved.

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