Development in Practice, Volume 16, Numbers 3&4, June 2006

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Editorial

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> *Breaches of human rights and humanitarian law including mutilation, rape, forced displacement, denial of the right to food and medicines, diversion of aid and attacks on medical personnel and hospitals are no longer inevitable by-products of war. They have become the means to achieve a strategic goal.* (Sérgio Vieira de Mello 1999, quoted in Frohardt *et al*. 1999:65)

The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in Iraq, Sérgio Vieira de Mello, and 23 of his staff, were killed on 19 August 2003 in an attack on the UN compound in Baghdad. He had told the UN Security Council in the previous month that the mission might become a target. Some observers suggested, however, that the true target was the political reconstruction of Iraq under conditions of occupation.

Humanitarian intervention invariably rubs shoulders with politics, albeit awkwardly and sometimes, as in this case, with tragic results. Tensions between them take many forms, ranging from differing assessments of the extent or even the existence of a crisis[1] to claims that humanitarian assistance is not saving innocent lives but sustaining politico-military forces,[2] or to the conclusion that the constraints upon them compel aid agencies to withdraw from the area of operation – whether to ensure the safety of their own staff[3] or because they believe that their integrity is unacceptably compromised by staying.[4] Framing these operational issues are questions of the role of 'military humanitarianism' (Slim 1995) and the political economy of 'network wars' and the 'securitisation of development' (Duffield 2001).

Clearly, not all providers of humanitarian assistance have compatible mandates, analyses, priorities, or ways of working. But even among broadly like-minded agencies, one organisation may judge that it can achieve more by closing down its mission in order to engage in 'humanitarian advocacy', while another may stay because it prefers to continue to provide assistance–even if much of its aid is falling into the wrong hands–or to offer a modicum of protection to civilians whose lives are at risk, if only by making it harder for the abusers to escape exposure in the media or via human-rights networks. In other words, agencies may have equally valid justifications for choosing quite different courses of action. If the question is one of judgement rather than of principle, then no single position can be absolutely right.

To some extent, it may be argued that the challenges facing humanitarian agencies since the end of the Cold War, in particular since the declaration of the 'global war on terror', are contemporary permutations of age-old problems–the apocalyptic predictions following the events of 11 September 2001 notwithstanding.[5] Although international covenants governing the treatment of civilians and enemy prisoners in situations of armed conflict may not be widely known or cared about, this does not in itself render them redundant. Nobody would suggest, after all, that the continued use of torture invalidates the 1985 Convention Against

ISSN 0961-4524 Print/ISSN 1364-9213 Online 3–40235-5 © 2006 Oxfam GB
Routledge Publishing DOI: 10.1080/09614520600694638

Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The view that 'humanitarianism is dead', as some observers have claimed (Slim 2003), seems as premature as the claim that the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall heralded 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1992). The unprecedented response to the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster also belies the argument that donors are terminally 'fatigued', although it is true that chronic tragedies–for instance, the number of lives needlessly lost each year to malaria, TB, and HIV/AIDS–fail to kindle the same spirit of compassion and global responsibility, a fact poignantly illustrated in this issue by **Mary Kayitesi-Blewitt** in relation to the long-term consequences for the many hundreds of women and girls who were raped during the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

That having been said, the greater willingness of some Western governments to intervene with military force in situations that they deem threatening to the local population and/or to global security makes it increasingly difficult for humanitarian actors to avoid furthering Western political agendas, whether or not they endorse them. Many humanitarian organisations, including the specialised UN agencies, agonised over the question of whether their contingency plans for post-invasion Iraq constituted in some sense an endorsement of the US-led military invasion. Even if they eschew government funding, humanitarian agencies may find it hard to adhere to the traditional principles of independence, impartiality, and neutrality when their access to people in need is mediated by armed intervention. Moreover, conflict and catastrophe interact in ways that complicate the humanitarian terrain. Thus, when the tsunami struck areas that were already in the throes of armed conflict, such as Aceh and Sri Lanka, the issue of who should control the relief and reconstruction programmes there necessarily responded to politico-military considerations as well as to 'simple' humanitarian concerns.

This issue of *Development in Practice*, guest-edited by **Tony Vaux**, of Humanitarian Initiatives, seeks to address some of these issues and the dilemmas that they pose for aid agencies and their front-line staff in interpreting the principles of humanitarianism in the contemporary context. **Vanessa Pupavac** sets the scene, arguing that while humanitarian advocacy has traditionally underlined the causal relationship between state policies and situations in which people's lives are endangered, the recent tendency to challenge national sovereignty helps to legitimise the erosion of equality among sovereign states and the reassertion of international inequalities. **Andrew Bonwick** challenges the assumption that the 'protection of civilians' depends on international intervention, arguing that humanitarian action should support and strengthen the rational decisions that people themselves take to try to ensure their own safety, rather than focusing exclusively on lobbying governments and other powers that have a legal duty to protect civilians. This theme is taken up by **Gretchen Alther**, who describes some of the ways in which national and international agencies can support Colombian grass-roots 'peace communities' in their efforts to create non-violent solutions to Latin America's longest-standing armed conflict. While material assistance may help such communities to sustain themselves economically, living alongside or accompanying such communities and bearing witness to their struggle may be just as important in ensuring their survival. In a review of recent literature on the political economy of conflict, and feminist writing on women in conflict, **Martha Thompson** notes that the former tends to be gender-blind, while the latter generally fails to take the wider political issues into account. Both perspectives need to be integrated, in order to understand how women and men survive conflict, and the ways in which their differing survival strategies affect subsequent gender-power relations.

Four contributions to this issue examine the mechanics of delivering humanitarian assistance, focusing in particular on the relationships among the long string of agencies typically involved–from official donors to international NGOs, to national governments, to local NGOs, to the affected communities. **Udan Fernando** and **Dorothea Hilhorst** examine three

types of response to the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka, arguing that the real way to understand humanitarian aid is to focus on what happens in practice, and how those involved navigate their way through the challenges and dilemmas facing them. **Jonathan Makuwira** describes the problems experienced in trying to balance the accountability demands and the political and operational priorities of three 'partners' – an official donor, an intermediary agency, and a local organisation – in the case of post-conflict and conflict-prevention programmes in Bougainville. He concludes that formal accountability frameworks are a poor substitute for the mutual trust that will make relationships between such partners effective. **Volker Schimmel** draws on the case of a group of renegade soldiers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) who claimed refugee status in Rwanda. The artificial separation of political and humanitarian considerations, reinforced by the fact that the two areas were managed by different agencies, had the perverse (though unintended) effect of foreclosing on a political outcome that would have been acceptable to all parties – and would have helped to consolidate the fragile process of transition to democracy and the rule of law. He calls for agencies involved in humanitarian operations to be proactive in seeking to understand and complement each other's mandates and insights, and in particular to cross the political – humanitarian divide. This raises questions about the skills required of humanitarian workers, an issue addressed by **Frances Richardson**, who reports on a recent survey among leading aid agencies concerning the difficulties of recruiting and retaining qualified staff, and the need to reduce the traditional reliance on expatriates and attract (and train) more people from the countries most vulnerable to crises.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of standards and systems designed to increase agencies' accountability to donors and to their intended beneficiaries. As **Tony Vaux** argues in his introductory essay, the impetus for this trend was the 1994 Rwanda genocide, but the enormous expansion of the emergency-relief industry had already led to concerns that the resulting competition within the sector could depress rather than raise standards. The problem with the insistence on technical and measurable standards – such as the size of food rations for refugees in enclosed camps – is that they tend to foster a 'checklist' mentality that can seduce aid workers into believing that a good job is being done simply because the boxes on the form have all been ticked. Standards and frameworks are not, after all, navigational tools: they will not tell you where you are, why you are there, or where you are headed. As is clear from other contributions to this issue, and from the wider literature covered in the resources list, it is quite possible to do a good technical job within an overall context that is far from positive in its impact. As Vaux points out, '[t]he awkward reality is that providing relief aid . . . can create new threats to human life'.

Notes

1. The case of 'famine' in North Korea is a recent example of this kind of stand-off. Specialised UN agencies, such as the World Food Programme, claimed that food shortages were leading to extensive and chronic hunger and malnutrition, while the Pyongyang government initially denied that the situation was critical. A report written for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) referred to '[a]n acrimonious policy debate . . . within humanitarian organizations about the severity of the famine – indeed, its very existence – and the role of international food assistance in ending it' (Natsios 1999:2). The report went on to admit that these questions were not new, but that they reflected 'legitimate concerns about the effect of food aid to a country where those with political authority may have objectives very different from those of humanitarian agencies trying to reduce death rates' (*ibid.*). The interlinked nature of humanitarianism and politics was underscored by the passing of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act, which simultaneously provides US humanitarian assistance and allows North Koreans to be granted asylum in the USA (Amnesty International 2005).

2. The definition of 'humanitarian' aid is often bitterly contested. During the 12-year civil war in El Salvador, for instance, the military authorities persistently maintained that any assistance to civilians in areas outside government control, including aid to refugees, was part of the rebel FMLN war effort. As Martha Thompson, an experienced humanitarian worker, notes, 'Counter-insurgency is about militarising politics, and politicising the military. Humanitarian aid to the war-displaced becomes a military issue. ... In counter-insurgency, where the state must control everything, "non-government" means "anti-government"' (Thompson 1996:327). Meanwhile, in 1985 the Reagan administration requested US$ 14 million in military aid for the Nicaraguan Contra, promising to restrict this to 'humanitarian' assistance if the Sandinista government agreed to a ceasefire. In 1998 a further US$ 47.9 million was granted, again for 'humanitarian' purposes, despite the exposure in 1986 of the Reagan administration's acquiescence in illicitly smuggling arms to the Contra in the so-called 'Iran–Contragate' affair.
3. For instance, in January 2006 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) withdrew from the southern region of the Republic of the Congo (RoC) after threats made against its staff by so-called Ninja fighters loyal to rebel leader Frédéric Bitsangou (International Relations and Security Network 2006). In July 2004, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) withdrew from Afghanistan after five of its staff had been shot and killed while serving there. Only weeks before the murders, MSF had criticised attempts by the US-led coalition forces 'to co-opt humanitarian aid', arguing that this was 'endangering the lives of humanitarian volunteers and jeopardizing the aid to people in need'. In particular, it condemned 'the distribution of leaflets by the coalition forces in southern Afghanistan in which the population was informed that providing information about the Taliban and al Qaeda was necessary if they wanted the delivery of aid to continue' (MSF 2004).
4. MSF, for instance, withdrew from the Rwandan refugee camps because it judged that humanitarian assistance was doing more to strengthen the *génocidaires* than to relieve suffering. Though sometimes accused by other humanitarian agencies of being utopian, Fiona Terry, formerly the Research Director for MSF and now an ICRC delegate in Burma (Myanmar), counters that it is utopian to imagine that aid can be given without causing any harm; and that such a pretence makes it harder to assess the relative good and harm of a specific humanitarian intervention and to act accordingly (Terry 2002).
5. Terry (2002) argues that too much emphasis is placed on perceived changes in the post-Cold War context to explain the difficulties encountered in assisting victims of conflict. She expresses the view that such changes are used by some aid agencies as an excuse for avoiding responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The complex intertwining of aid and conflict is nothing new, and Terry argues that some of the dilemmas that aid agencies faced in the past – for instance, the case of assistance for Cambodians along the Thai–Cambodian border and inside Cambodia in the 1980s – were if anything more difficult than those being faced today.

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