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Humanitarian trends and dilemmas

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(Guest editor)

Introduction

The concept of humanitarianism is applied in two contexts: war and general disaster. Both are included in the scope of this issue of *Development in Practice.* The idea behind humanitarianism is that in extreme cases of human suffering external agents may offer assistance to people in need, and in doing so should be accorded respect and even 'rights' while carrying out their functions. The capacity of Western agencies to respond to crises has increased rapidly, with greater resources, faster travel, and a general easing of restrictions following the end of the Cold War. But so, too, have global tensions, arising from the assertion of Western power.

Although there have always been a few agencies with an explicitly political agenda, humanitarians have traditionally described themselves as non-political. But today they find themselves constantly questioned about their political connections. Instead of working in neutral territory between the two global superpowers, as in the Cold War, humanitarianism now finds itself rubbing shoulders with a single superpower and its allies, and it is this relationship that is a primary cause of concern for aid workers today.

This issue of *Development in Practice* presents some of those concerns in the words of practitioners and their academic counterparts. How should Western aid agencies manage their relations with Western governments? How should they relate to local organisations? Should they extend their functions from humanitarian relief to the protection of civilians, and address the political causes of conflict and disaster? If so, how will they remain independent?

One of the most immediate causes for concern is that global humanitarianism is highly biased towards a few situations that interests the most powerful Western politicians, such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, or those that trigger an emotive response from the Western public, such as the 2004 Asian tsunami disaster. People suffering in situations which have a low political and media profile get less help than others. The pattern of humanitarian aid is more closely related to donors' interests than to the needs of the affected communities.

This is not to say that humanitarianism has suddenly become 'politicised'. It has always been affected by major political trends, and from time to time politics converges more closely with humanitarianism or even takes it over. Similarly, humanitarianism sometimes takes the form of a reaction to narrow political interests. For example, Oxfam[1] is one of several aid agencies that have highly political origins. During the Second World War, the British government refused to allow relief supplies into occupied Greece, despite a famine that is thought to have claimed 250,000 lives, mainly those of children. Citizens around the UK set up committees to protest against this policy, lobby parliament, and send supplies through the blockade, defying the authorities. The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief was prominent among them. After the war it

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broadened its scope and renamed itself as Oxfam, and subsequently as Oxfam GB (OGB), to distinguish it from other national Oxfams that had been established in various countries (later joined by other Northern NGOs under the umbrella of Oxfam International). In contrast, at about the same time, CARE was founded as the 'Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe' with the aim of helping the US government to deliver surplus US-army food parcels across post-war Europe (Stoddard 2003:27). It later changed its name to the more neutral 'Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, Inc'. Western non-government aid agencies have always been close to politics, either supporting political initiatives or reacting against them.

The current trend is towards greater assertiveness by the Western powers and less consensus about their legitimacy. During the Cold War period, the superpowers provided arms to various regimes but, except in their own 'back yard', did not intervene directly, for fear of coming into confrontation with their prime enemy. For instance, the USA was extensively involved in the wars of Central America throughout the 1980s, but refrained from intervention farther afield, notably in Africa. Now there is little to stop the USA from doing as it likes, usually with the support of other major aid-giving countries. These geopolitical shifts and tensions send shock-waves through the humanitarian profession.

Much depends on whether the person receiving assistance accepts the political baggage that comes with it. If individuals feel that their suffering is being exploited in order to make a political point, they may feel angry – especially if they do not agree with the point being made. This tension may be particularly acute in cases of conflict and war. People in need of assistance may have very different perceptions of political issues from those of the givers of aid. Their perceptions may not be the same as those of local organisations, or their national government. There can be serious implications. They may refuse to cooperate with aid agencies, or withhold information that might be important for security. All this creates, at the very least, an uncomfortable feeling for the aid giver, and uncertainty about whether and how to be transparent about the sources of funding. There is also a fear of becoming a tool of Western politics.

Hence the 'politicisation' of aid is an important topic of debate. It is not necessarily that aid workers want to be detached from politics, but they want to know if they are being manipulated by interests that they do not support, and they want to know the risks that arise from the political agendas that surround them. All this affects their relationship with the person in need of assistance.

There are, however, positive aspects to Western assertiveness and its closer linkage with humanitarianism. Aid has come closer to the centre of public and political attention. This gives the agencies greater profile, more resources, and more influence. But the same dynamic also leads to greater expectations: is it not reasonable to expect that with such advantages the aid agencies should be able to address the root causes of problems?

The continuing killings in the Darfur region of Sudan have demonstrated that the new world order will not solve every problem, and may indeed create new ones. Cold War politics continues to block humanitarian responses, not through the single US–Russian confrontation of the past, but in the form of a complex web of trade-offs played out in the UN Security Council. The USA actively considered military intervention in Darfur, but China stood in the way because of its oil interests. British Ministers wanted to apply pressure on the Sudanese leaders through the International Criminal Court (ICC), but the USA did not want to give the Court legitimacy. No-one can be sure if the reasons given in public for a political stance are the real reasons. Speculation abounds. Aid workers live amid constantly shifting perceptions of themselves, the West, and the nature of humanitarianism.

To add to all this, the 'global war on terror' (GWOT) now dominates the political landscape. NATO's intervention in Kosovo was described by the British Prime Minister as a 'humanitarian

war'; the aim was to bring an end to unacceptable and unnecessary human suffering. Political factors were certainly involved, but humanitarianism was also a leading motive – although, as the Prime Minister observed at the time, it made a difference that the issues were played out within Europe, rather than in some distant part of the globe. But after 11 September 2001, Western security has come to dominate all other agendas, moving aid and humanitarianism even further towards the core of politics. The threat has been linked variously to Islamic peoples, unstable States, and poverty. In the eyes of politicians, humanitarianism has now become a means to another end (that of Western security), rather than an end in itself.

Outwardly, aid agencies have been extremely successful over the past decade. Budgets have increased dramatically, and the agencies have been welcomed into policy discussions at the highest levels. They have been both embarrassed and gratified to find themselves regarded as part of the political establishment, and assumed to be allies in the GWOT.

Greater resources have allowed more time for research, reflection, training, and improvement in systems. On the ground there is a sense of greater professionalism, and more confidence in knowing what needs to be done, at least in terms of techniques and standards. But aid workers also have a number of serious concerns, especially concerning their relationships with local partners and people. Issues of accountability remain unresolved and uncertain. As Western politics draws humanitarianism closer to itself, the distance from people in need seems to increase. Tensions play out within the aid agencies between different levels of decision making.

Current trends mean that although they have more resources, humanitarians are less in control of their work than they were in the past. This points aid agencies towards a more ambitious or 'maximalist' view. We should aim higher. We should not only address immediate needs but also tackle the causes of vulnerability and insecurity, even though these are likely to be political in character.

Needs versus resources

The fact that makes me most uncomfortable today is that, despite many individual successes, the system as a whole is not functioning effectively in terms of its basic purpose. The most fundamental principle of humanitarianism, stated in both the Red Cross Code (IFRC 1994) and the Sphere Charter (The Sphere Project 2004), is that the response must be based on needs, not on any other factor such as political interests, cultural affinity, or availability of resources. This is known as the 'humanitarian imperative'. But looking around the world, we can see at a glance that agencies' responses are not based solely on an assessment of needs. They strongly reflect political and cultural factors. The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is thought to have caused as many as four million deaths in the last few years (WHO 2005), but it barely features in the global portfolio of many of the largest agencies, whereas Iraq, which scarcely qualifies as a humanitarian disaster at all, consumes far greater attention.

The Asian tsunami of 26 December 2004 evoked a massive public response and has since totally dominated the budgets and activities of many aid agencies; but in comparison with other ongoing challenges to humanitarian agencies, such as conditions in Sudan and the Congo, the needs of the tsunami survivors are not exceptional. The most senior and experienced staff, and the advocacy experts, tend to focus on high-profile areas rather than those where the need is greatest. Field staff are drawn from other programmes to deal with the challenge of spending huge sums of aid donations in high-profile areas within a reasonable period of time. The opportunity cost of the tsunami disaster has been considerable.

Whereas each aid worker may gain satisfaction from doing a good job in her or his own location and scrupulously following the 'humanitarian imperative', the system as a whole is not in compliance. Global responses bear little relationship to global needs. It would be hard

to prove that this never happened in the past, but a series of papers produced by aid agencies suggests that there is a trend towards greater discrepancy (Christian Aid 2004; Cosgrave 2004; Oxfam GB 2003). Although the point has been registered, the agencies have not emphasised it in their publications and comments on the issue. This is surprising, since the failure of the entire humanitarian system to follow its most fundamental principle is surely a matter of considerable importance.

Perhaps the agencies lack confidence that they can change the way in which their funding works. They rely on the Western public for donations, and they feel that they cannot influence the emotive way in which people respond to one disaster and ignore another. Similarly, political preferences are likely to follow national interests, especially security. But the agencies' silence suggests a lack of resolve to challenge either the institutional donors or the public. At worst it gives rise to a suspicion that they simply want to maximise resources, regardless of whether those resources can be used in a principled manner. For example, aid agencies in the UK could challenge the British government for not allocating aid according to need, as required by the Public Service Agreement of DFID (the Department for International Development). Certainly, this would amount to 'rocking the boat' and might lead to worsening relations with a major provider of resources. But if the boat is far off course, raised voices may be the only way of attracting the attention of the captain.

After a certain point, a few agencies decided to stop accepting public funds for the tsunami disaster. Some advised their donors and supporters to give to other, more needy, causes. But without concerted action by the agencies, donors simply switched their gifts to another organisation that was considered less accommodating. Without concerted action, individual agencies could not succeed in raising the issue in a sensible and thought-provoking way. In the end, competition seemed to be the overriding factor. No doubt competition has its value in spurring the agencies to greater efforts, but there should be a limit to competition when the final result is such serious distortion of humanitarian principles.

In order to raise the profile of this issue, it would be useful to have a system for monitoring the allocation of resources in relation to needs. The mechanism most widely used at present is the UN's Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP), whereby the percentage of an appeal that is being met by donors is used as an indication of whether needs are being met. However, the system itself is deeply flawed (Darcy and Hoffman 2003) and is based not on an assessment of needs but on almost random bids by UN agencies and others. This provides only the crudest possible indicator of the relationship between global needs and responses. Such is the importance of the issue that aid agencies should devote much more energy to devising a method for establishing a reliable measure of needs and responses on a global basis – a simple map of the humanitarian system in operation. This could become a tool in managing the global humanitarian system in a more effective and strategic way.

Neutrality

There is a widespread expectation that aid agencies will not take sides in conflict. This principle was effective during the Cold War in allowing aid agencies to operate freely in conflict situations, despite the confrontation of the superpowers. For example, agencies working in Ethiopia under the regime of Haile Mengistu were not to be accused of being pro-Russian, nor were those who worked in the rebel areas to be accused of being pro-American. Nevertheless it would be wrong to suppose that certain prejudices and loyalties did not exert an influence. Agencies working through the *Mujahidin* in Afghanistan were well aware that they were participating in a US strategy to make the Russians leave. But many of them saw this as an unfortunate side issue. They argued that they were responding to need and would have been willing to help people on

the Russian side if opportunity arose. There were also, however, a few aid workers, and some agencies, that saw it as a legitimate purpose to drive out the Russians.

In much of Central America there was no room for neutrality even during the Cold War. As Martha Thompson describes in relation to El Salvador,

> *There was no middle ground. Debate and dissent were erased, as was the concept of neutrality. If an institution defined neutrality as independence from the government, it became suspect. When civilians stayed in a war-zone, even if they did not take up arms, they were regarded as guerrillas. In counter-insurgency, where the state must control everything, 'non-government' means 'anti-government'.* (Thompson 1996: 327)

The GWOT has affected aid workers deeply and resulted in a wider confusion between humanitarian and political objectives. There was little pretence of impartiality or neutrality when aid agencies followed the Western forces that defeated the *Taliban* in Afghanistan. Humanitarian actors were placed firmly under military control through provincial mechanisms, and the overall aid strategy was derived from politico-military perspectives. Similarly in Iraq, aid agencies were coordinated through a system run by the Western military. It was practically impossible to operate without collaborating with the armed forces. US leaders made it clear in both cases that they regarded aid agencies as their allies – with special responsibility for 'hearts and minds'.

This follows a long-term trend towards 'coherence' between Western political, military, and aid strategies. In the UK, the government's grip on aid has tightened. The maverick former Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, did not survive the war on Iraq. Considerable government attention has been given to weak or 'failed' States, deemed to be potential sources of terrorism. The solution is thought to be a combination of military, political, and aid inputs. Accordingly, DFID's resources have been 'pooled' with those of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in order to facilitate 'joined-up government'. DFID has to follow the lead of general government policy, rather than taking a distinctively humanitarian or developmental perspective.

By implication, agencies that accept DFID funding may find that, especially in sensitive conflict situations, the decision about their grant has been filtered by political and military strategists, besides aid managers. By taking such funds, they are in effect accepting political direction. Does this matter? The Western public has expressed no negative feeling about this phenomenon; indeed some may welcome the news that their charities are being more 'patriotic'. The volume of humanitarian aid continues to increase, and agencies benefit from a synergy between political interest and aid programmes. It creates profile for their work. The system may not suit the aid worker on the ground, but it is successful in generating resources for itself.

In the wider perspective, neutrality is only one form of humanitarianism, and perhaps a peculiarly British one. The common model in the USA is the 'Wilsonian' agency, following the view of Woodrow Wilson, the US President at the end of the First World War. Such agencies are basically an extension of the State into charitable activity. They readily accept a responsibility to reflect the interests of their own country, acknowledging that they depend primarily on their fellow citizens for donations. Reflecting the views of donors is therefore seen as a form of accountability. By contrast, the tendency in the UK has been to try to base decisions on moral principle, to change opinions, and to challenge the State. This school of thought is reflected in the 'Dunantist' type of agency that abides by Red Cross principles, including that of neutrality.

Recent critiques of humanitarianism have mainly come from a Dunantist perspective. Michael Ignatieff (1998) and David Rieff (2003) have advocated a return to humanitarian detachment. But most aid workers seem to find this impracticable. In the words of one senior

OGB policy maker, the Dunantist position has been 'blown out of the water'.[2] In practice there has been a shift, at least by the bigger agencies, towards more 'Wilsonian' stances. This has tended to leave the more Dunantist agencies such as Médecins Sans Frontières in 'niche' positions, often behaving differently from the majority.

All this seems to suggest that humanitarianism is not an absolute principle, but instead a cultural phenomenon that may be closely linked to Western values, perceptions, and politics. Observers around the world may always have seen it in such a light, but now aid workers are beginning to see themselves not as maverick idealists but as part of a Western cultural system. That may be difficult to accept, but, as Southern NGOs become more assertive, there will be no escape.

One opportunity that this trend creates is the chance to consider other forms of humanitarian response. Why do people in non-Western countries not create agencies like CARE and Oxfam? Are they doing something else? Once we start to recognise that our own (Western) form of humanitarianism is not the only one, we begin to look more carefully at phenomena such as *zakat*, the Islamic requirement to give a significant proportion of income and assets to others in order to create a more equitable society. We may notice that human suffering is prevented in the 'failed State' of Somalia because thousands of Somalis who have left their home country send funds back through social structures that have evolved to perform the function of banks. Their actions achieve humanitarian results, even if they bear little resemblance to classic models.

Humanitarianism is not, as we may have believed, the new religion that needed to be promoted around the world, but rather one of many religions, each with its own positive and negative factors. This reflection should make Western agencies more wary of proselytising, and more responsive to their local societies and counterparts.

Neutrality is culturally and historically determined. During the Cold War there was a degree of scepticism about government positions, and a sense that 'ordinary people' could stand up for peace and humanity, despite political animosities. The GWOT has accorded to governments a greater legitimacy for their international behaviour, especially where they justify their actions on grounds of national security. The public are less inclined to support neutrality if they think that it might reduce their own protection. There is a suspicion that terrorists may evolve from precisely the kinds of anarchic and poverty-stricken environment in which the aid agencies operate. Hence there is less willingness to let them do what they think is best. If aid agencies have to be accountable to donors as well as to beneficiaries, as required by the Red Cross Code, they cannot be neutral.

If the abandonment of neutrality leads to a closer engagement with other cultures and perspectives, it may be to the good. If it means simply following the Western consensus, there will be times when humanitarianism will not be true to itself, most notably in making the response proportionate to the needs. My concern is that agencies may be a little too concerned about their own size and will tend to avoid tackling difficult issues because they fear that they might lose public support and hence slide down the rankings. This is not a good enough reason for compromises on the principle of neutrality.

In practice, perception is just as important as principle. If agencies diverge too far from the neutrality principle, they will become targets of those who want to make a target of the West. The individual agency has no escape from this problem. The people who attack or block the road may not know the difference between one agency and another, or the difference between private agencies and the UN. It is common in Russia and the Former Soviet Republics, for example, for every agency to be called 'The Red Cross'. Potential enemies judge the system, rather than the agency. This may be another reason why it is time for agencies to do the same.

Today's humanitarianism is essentially pragmatic. It succeeds through the diversity of approaches, rather than through having a single form that suits all situations. If CARE is unable to work in one place, maybe Oxfam can. And if Oxfam is blocked, maybe MSF or a local organisation can still deliver assistance. The big agencies may need to accept that they cannot be everywhere, and that they must take greater responsibility for the success of the system as a whole, rather than for the success of their own agency only: in other words, they need to demonstrate more altruism and less selfishness.

If the political environment has caused a shift in the humanitarian system, how does this come across to people 'on the ground'? This is not simply a matter of political connections and loss of neutrality. Other changes have happened in the past decade, arising from pressures within the system itself.

Standards and codes

The increase in humanitarian budgets has led to an expansion and proliferation of relief agencies. This reflects a shift in the focus of Western attention from development to security. From the late 1980s, Oxfam began to realise that competition between agencies could lead to lower standards. The organisation was particularly concerned about the way in which some agencies were drawing attention to themselves, rather than to the issues and problems. Whereas a low profile had often been necessary during the Cold War, publicity now became the way to achieve success, through fundraising and media attention. At the same time, journalists came under increasing pressures to deliver reports based on less research and lower travel costs. They became more reliant on the aid agencies, and the agencies became more willing to become the focus of the story.

We began to consider what really set apart 'good' practice from 'bad'. The issues were clearly wider than the media and the competition for profile. What constituted 'quality'? With decades of experience accumulated by the older agencies, it seemed time to try to codify what they had learned and use it to influence the new agencies that were constantly forming. This process led to the Red Cross Code of Conduct, published in 1994.[3] The Code took what is now described as a 'developmentalist' position: 'saving lives' was taken for granted as the immediate need, but not seen as the sole objective of emergency relief. Local capacity was to be supported, and future vulnerabilities should be reduced. There should be consultation with local people, of course, but the real mark of quality was that those affected by a crisis should be involved in decision making. The Code also specified the meaning of impartiality – that there should be no discrimination on grounds of race, sex, age, caste, and so on. The Code pushed agencies to go further than they would otherwise go towards a 'maximalist' position.

The Code became a popular 'badge' for aid agencies. Because there were no compliance criteria, anyone could sign up to it. So everyone and anyone did, including security companies.[4] The big mistake was not to set up any mechanism for monitoring compliance, for interpreting the Code, and for making it widely known among decision makers and practitioners. As a result it had little practical impact and was almost immediately overtaken by one of the defining events of twentieth-century humanitarianism: the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The process that led to the formulation of the Code was later restarted, but strongly influenced by the specifics of the Rwanda experience.

The genocide exposed many weaknesses in the humanitarian system. It was a shock to everyone, insiders as well as outsiders. The media had taken little interest in this small and uneventful francophone country in central Africa. Aid agencies were present but had shown little awareness of the tensions building up in the region, and no clue that such a dire event was being

planned. Many of their activities over the preceding years probably made things worse, by strengthening an oppressive leadership (Uvin 1998). Even after the genocide began, agencies did little to bring it to the attention of the world until too late.[5] Because of geopolitical factors, notably US unwillingness to mount another military operation in Africa after the Somalia debacle, the Western powers ignored the killing, and the UN proved incompetent even in passing on messages and warnings (Melvern 2000).

To add to this appalling catalogue of failure, the response of the aid agencies was not only too late but also chaotic and competitive. Hundreds of organisations poured into the camps in eastern Zaïre. Small organisations with no significant experience 'took charge' of relief camps and were given mandates by the UN that they could not fulfil. People died unnecessarily because of the incompetence of the relief operation. Aid workers suffered the psychological strain of ministering to the killers. In some cases they had not been warned that this would be the case: they believed that they were going to help the innocent survivors. In the refugee camps they could not help noticing that aid was finding its way into the hands of the leaders among the killers, or *génocidaires*, and enabling them to regroup and carry out further attacks. The aid workers pondered on 'man's inhumanity to man'. Some decided that they lacked the motivation for further humanitarian work.

Faced with such an unparalleled crisis, the agencies came together to produce a joint evaluation (Borton *et al*. 1996). This documented the failures in detail and included the suggestion of minimum standards in humanitarian action. This recommendation was vigorously taken up as a way of ensuring that some good would emerge from all the failures. The outcome was the Sphere Charter (The Sphere Project 2004), reasserting the 'humanitarian imperative', and the Sphere Standards, intended to ensure that agencies could be held accountable against specified levels of good practice. Sphere was intended also to ensure that donors should provide adequate resources for humanitarian operations.

Sphere has undoubtedly had a profound influence on humanitarian agencies, but its impact has fallen short of its loftiest aims. Donors have never committed themselves to ensuring that Sphere Standards will be met, and they have been able to shrug off responsibility for failure by blaming each other. The emphasis on relief responses and technical standards has tended to reinforce a 'minimalist' approach focused on saving lives, rather than tackling the causes of problems and dealing with them in a sustainable way.

Aid workers often express appreciation to Sphere for helping them to know where they stand. But while Sphere has had a positive effect on the morale of Western aid workers, it has had unintended negative effects on local organisations. The desire to exclude undesirable Western agencies has led to exclusion of local ones that may lack the resources to respond at the level prescribed by Sphere but do have other valuable qualities. A further problem is that, while Sphere Standards are readily applicable if people are displaced into camps, they are far less easily applied in other situations. After the 2001 Gujarat earthquake, for example, many agencies decided that Sphere Standards should not be applied (DEC 2001).

But perhaps the greatest impact of Sphere, derived from the Rwanda experience, has been a tendency to separate humanitarian relief from development. It has thus generated a 'back to basics' or 'minimalist' school of thought which has tended to undermine 'developmentalist' positions as set out in the Red Cross Code. Sphere tends to limit the response to 'saving lives', emphasising basic professional processes, such as assessment, monitoring, and evaluation. It strongly asserts the 'rights' of individuals but weakens the claim of local organisations that, under Red Cross principles, might claim support for capacity building and a role in the long-term reduction of vulnerability.

One reason for this is that Sphere was to some extent a reaction to the failure of development workers to predict or address the Rwanda genocide. This came on top of a series of cases in

which development staff had resisted pressure to switch over to humanitarian responses (Vaux 2002, especially chapters on Ethiopia and Sudan). Because of internal departmental divisions in the aid agencies, the issue often revolved around the willingness of existing programme staff to hand over decision-making power and resources. Sphere tended to equalise the status of the humanitarian and development branches within the agencies, leaving senior managers to take the strategic decisions. This in turn has arguably made the agencies more susceptible to public and political pressures in their home constituency.

The 'back to basics' approach ran counter to an increasing awareness among aid workers that even the simplest forms of relief were subject to manipulation and political influence, especially in situations of conflict. David Keen, for example, had demonstrated that humanitarian aid to Sudan was blocked by the deliberate strategies of merchants who wanted to profit from higher food prices and distress-sales of animals (Keen 1994). He showed that this was a widespread phenomenon that could be characterised as 'the benefits of famine' (Keen 1994:2). Through the 1990s a series of studies showed how aid was habitually manipulated by those involved in conflict (Le Billon 2000).

This led to the awkward conclusion that there was no form of aid that was simply 'saving lives'. There were always hidden side effects, including the possibility that aid was fuelling or prolonging war. Faced also with the awareness that Western powers were often deeply involved in the military and political aspects of conflict, the agencies began to wonder if they could sustain a policy of simply counting the people who needed help and providing the necessary inputs under Sphere Standards. Added to this, the aid agencies' own public-policy departments were drawing attention to Western economic factors such as oil interests and trade restrictions that might also count as factors causing conflict and other humanitarian disasters.

It was clear that the Western powers could achieve almost anything if they had the will to do so. This led some aid workers in dire situations to question whether their activities were simply designed to make the situation bearable so that the international community was not forced into taking more drastic action. They had noted that the slaughter in the Balkans was ended only after the Srebrenica massacre. Against such a backdrop, it seemed unethical to continue with a focus on delivering a certain volume of water and food that contained a certain number of calories.

The desire to understand and integrate an understanding of conflict into the aid strategy remains one of the most contentious areas of humanitarian policy. 'Minimalists' argue that it is impossible to reach a full understanding and so it may be better not to try. 'Maximalists' argue that agencies have a responsibility to ensure that relief aid does not increase the likelihood of conflict. Underlying this debate is a fundamental ambiguity inherent in the notion of 'saving lives'. Does it mean providing the necessary bodily inputs, or does it mean protection against security threats? The awkward reality is that providing relief aid, as in the refugee camps after the Rwanda genocide, can create new threats to human life.

My own view is influenced by the experience of meeting people in conflict zones who say that security protection is much more important to them than anything else. They are ready to suffer lack of food and even starvation, rather than face violence against themselves and their families. One of the starkest lessons for me was in the 1980s, when Ethiopian peasants continued to support a war to overthrow a hated regime, even though they knew that the result would be famine. I have been haunted by calls from many refugees to 'stop the war'.

Of course, I cannot stop the war, but I feel an obligation to do as much as I can in that direction. That is why advocacy about the causes and solutions to war has always been important. But it is not enough. Today's protracted conflicts arise from profound crises of governance, economic factors, and social relations. They are not ended simply by peace talks, but depend

upon the transformation of all these factors. Half the wars that were thought to have ended in the past decade have since resumed (World Bank 2004). Humanitarian aid should play a role not only in saving lives today but also in saving lives tomorrow – and that means contributing to a just society. Issues such as participation, consultation, gender equity, and respect for minorities are not just 'quality' aspects of a humanitarian response. They may be its essence, if they contribute to peace.

The support of Western powers has given aid agencies greater power, and with that comes greater responsibility. A 'minimalist' position may be safe, but is it an adequate response to the challenges of Darfur or Congo? Would it be acceptable in Colombia to heal the wounded and ignore the geopolitical battle raging among drug producers and traffickers, US interests, national politics, and local elites? Civil-society organisations in Colombia have repeatedly made it clear that it is not acceptable.

For the past three years I have been engaged with others[6] in developing methods of conflict analysis that can be used to direct aid-agency strategies. Aid agencies have been mainly influenced by the work of peace-building organisations. Various 'do no harm' principles, checklists, and guides are widely available (see, for instance, Africa Peace Forum *et al*. 2004). These suggest a range of 'good practice' standards for working in conflict situations. One limitation of this approach is that it does not alter the agency's overall strategy. It does not say whether it should focus on advocacy or direct response, or whether livelihood needs should be addressed as well as physical needs. Nor does it give a 'road map' for reducing conflict.

Second, the 'do-no-harm' approach does not address the specifics of each conflict. The approach is based on general principles and lessons learned – but the critical issue in understanding conflict is to understand that particular case. It is the political economy of war that really matters, and this varies considerably. There is a need for a method that begins without preconceptions, maps out the issues relating to conflict, and then helps aid agencies to decide between the strategic options available.

There is now a degree of consensus about such 'strategic' methodologies. The approach pioneered by Jonathan Goodhand for DFID has been adapted for use by UNDP[7] and is very similar to the method used by the World Bank.[8] Until quite recently the approach to analysing conflict was to send in a team of experts, but their reports were found to have little impact on decision making. This led to demands for more participatory methods, basing the analysis on the outcome of workshops for aid-agency staff, key stakeholders, and a range of other informants and commentators. The result may not be a polished report, but the participants are likely to be strongly committed to it, and at the very least different perceptions will have been shared in a way that may encourage team building. In addition to formal inputs to strategy, this approach also brings benefits in terms of each individual's ability to make decisions that are based on a wider understanding of the relationship between the agency's programme and the conflict.

A further refinement, pioneered with Tearfund in Darfur (although see also Riak 2000), includes a wider stakeholder analysis before the workshop, especially a consultation with some of the affected people. Using Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) methods, Tearfund examined the capacities and vulnerabilities of the affected people, and integrated the findings of this research into the workshop process. The result was a strategy in which aid and conflict were no longer separated: positive and negative interactions, as well as perceptions, were understood. The workshop also provided impetus to Tearfund's international advocacy and suggested new channels for peace building. A single set of workshops is unlikely to change the overall course of events in Sudan; but, applied on a wider scale among aid agencies, it could arguably make a considerable difference. It is a way to resolve the age-old problem of coordination.

Agencies including Tearfund and ActionAid are now beginning to wonder whether the same sort of analysis should also be applied to so-called 'natural' disasters (which generally involve

'man-made' factors: security, political, economic, and social). Whereas richer people only very occasionally suffer the immediate effects of 'natural' disasters, poor people have to live in dangerous places and take further risks in order to survive. Whereas richer people have sources of support such as insurance, poorer people are prone to real disaster. Their lives are fundamentally insecure even in 'normal' times, just as they are in times of conflict. In many poorer countries, conflict is a regular threat, along with rain failure and flood. The distinction between the two types of threat does not hold, especially in relation to the poorest and most vulnerable people. This points the way towards 'Human Security Analysis', in which security is taken to include all kinds of threat to life and livelihood.

The reaction to the Rwanda disaster has now run its course. Humanitarian actors now have less to fear from development colleagues. For more than a decade, resources have flowed in their direction to the point where they can well afford to go beyond the minimum of 'saving lives'. They may need to embrace elements of developmentalism. Uneasy about the political pressures applied on them by Western governments and local elites, aid workers now need some kind of protection from manipulation and mistake. This seems most likely to come from deeper understanding and deeper engagement.

National and international NGOs

The tsunami disaster of 2004 indicates that national NGOs have not followed the trend towards minimalism. Most are rooted in particular situations, or dedicated to particular long-term issues concerned with improving society. Disasters are incidents along the way, rather than the sole focus of attention. Western assertiveness and the 'global war on terror' have put pressure on the principles of these agencies, and they have passed this pressure on to national NGOs, with the added factor of Sphere Standards.

Over many years the aid agencies have created and supported cadres of national NGOs, many of which might now be regarded as taking 'developmentalist' positions. But this is not simply a matter of ideological fads. Inevitably, local people play a far greater role in shaping national NGOs than they do in influencing Western aid agencies.

Western aid agencies such as CARE and World Vision are now transnationals which include large national NGOs, although the flow of resources leaves the underlying power relationship basically unchanged. The Red Cross movement has worked through its own national societies for a very long time, but until recently 'the Federation' (the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which acts as a secretariat to national societies) was able to take a fatherly control of the overall process.[9] But in its response to the tsunami in Sri Lanka and India, the Federation has found itself severely constrained by the policies and limitations imposed by national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, which have demanded respect for their sovereignty to the extent of excluding international responses.

The loss of any semblance of neutrality has had particularly strong effects in Asia, in areas where there are large Muslim populations and a sense of chafing under Western hegemony. India aspires to be a member of the UN Security Council. Malaysia has been openly critical of the West. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and partiality towards Israel, have sent political shockwaves across the continent.

After the tsunami disaster, NGOs in India and Sri Lanka openly criticised Western agencies for not knowing enough about the situations in which they work. In India, local NGOs express concern that international agencies have intensified inequalities. In Sri Lanka there is a fear that Western aid could increase pressures that might lead to a renewal of fighting. As this criticism mounts, there is a temptation for aid agencies to retreat into a focus on systems and 'good

practice', including Sphere Standards. Others, such as ActionAid, have pursued a path of decentralisation. In its tsunami response, Oxfam International (OI) was caught in a difficult position, without a national OI counterpart in India, and faced with highly assertive national NGOs. It chose to channel much of its resources directly to local NGOs and community-based organisations, by-passing more prominent organisations.

In general, aid agencies have reached an accommodation with their donor public and governments, but this involves some loss of principle in relation both to neutrality and the 'humanitarian imperative' and has left them open to the suspicion that they are acting as tools, willing or unwilling, of Western interests. For the more assertive national NGOs this is now a sensitive and important issue. They feel that they have a right to question Western agencies and, because those agencies are compromised, seek a more equal balance of power.

In much of Latin America the issue has long been settled through the concept of 'solidarity': the role of the Western NGO is to support, not to decide. This was partly a reaction to the perceived illegitimacy of US political interests in the region during the Cold War. Now a parallel process can be seen in the Middle East and parts of Asia. Western NGOs today are under pressure to establish a 'solidarity' relationship. But this goes against both the 'Wilsonian' pressure to align with Western governments and the Sphere-based pressure to pursue standards set in the West. There is room for compromise: some national NGOs may become more sympathetic to an agenda of 'global security' and give greater recognition to Sphere, but in much of Asia the issue is in the balance.

One danger is that the process will lead to the emergence of elite national NGOs, empowered by their control over Western resources. It is not yet clear whether smaller NGOs will be able to exert further downward pressure and make the whole system more democratic. If they did, then it is likely that the prevailing policies and principles might need to be revised. The perceptions of people in need are likely to be different from those of people who have never experienced poverty or disaster. Different cultural attitudes would emerge and shape a new and genuinely global humanitarianism.

As an indication of what might happen, consider SEWA in India, a union of more than half a million working women. Because decisions are democratic, the leaders' perspectives have shifted towards a sharper focus on livelihoods in humanitarian disasters. The members of SEWA argue that relief inputs are of little value and often continue for far too long when people want to take back charge of their own lives. They contrast the helplessness generated by dependence on relief supplies with the sense of confidence that they gain from pursuing their own livelihoods and supporting their families. SEWA has accordingly lobbied the government to establish stand-by arrangements to support livelihoods within days after a disaster.

Such trends are far less noticeable in sub-Saharan Africa, where most NGOs lack the assertiveness of their Latin American and Asian counterparts. The humanitarian response in Darfur is dominated by white faces, cohorts of foreign 'experts' with little experience of Sudan, and operational styles of response.[10] The 800 international agency staff hold the more senior positions in relation to the 5000 local staff.

I wonder whether this lack of assertiveness on the African side reflects a similar lack of assertiveness in the political dimension, with exaggerated respect for 'the big man', whatever his faults? It is easy to envisage that Brazil, India, or Indonesia will one day manage their own humanitarian responses, with or without national societies funded by Western counterparts. In China this is already the case. But it is not so easy to see such a future in many African countries, where NGOs remain fragmented and submissive, regimes change but corruption and conflict continue, and bad governance keeps people in permanent destitution, with or without democracy. The rest of the world shows some progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. Africa does not, except in a few specific cases.

Conclusions

Western aid workers today have less control over their actions than formerly, because they are under increasing pressure from assertive Western governments, especially after the declaration of 'war on terror'. The Western public is generally supportive of this state of affairs. Aid agencies can make general calls for action and for 'political will', but they have been reluctant to press for the humanitarian agenda to take precedence over the security agenda. As a result, the allocation of resources for humanitarian needs is highly biased towards areas that pose security-related concerns for the West. The 'minimalist' approach of focusing simply on saving lives makes this easy. Agencies accept the focus given to them by Western powers, and then ask in relation to specific cases how lives can be saved. The agencies, the public, and Western governments collude in a distortion of humanitarian ideals. Aid workers in the field face increasing scepticism from local organisations and local staff, and in some cases greater security risks.

Information becomes distorted to suit the system. The media, governments, and agencies focus on the places where they already operate, and on issues that they are already addressing. It becomes ever more difficult to shift attention towards areas where needs are greater but where there is less funding and less media attention, despite perhaps greater hardship. So far the aid agencies have avoided taking responsibility for the overall impact of humanitarianism, preferring to focus on specific cases. A process of monitoring and publicising the relationship between humanitarian needs and responses would be a good start.

Aid agencies should also move on from the 'minimalist' perspectives of the post-Rwanda period. They have the capacity and resources to be far more ambitious and to accept greater responsibility. In the case of conflict they should ensure that every action has the most beneficial outcomes and in other disasters, such as the Asian tsunami, they should ensure that they do not only meet immediate needs but also reduce vulnerability for the future. In simple terms, it may be time to balance the Red Cross Code more equally with the Sphere approach.

But a renewal of the humanitarian principle will require more than this. It will require a more collective approach among the agencies and greater willingness to challenge public opinion and the self-interest of Western donors. They may need to rely more heavily on their local partners and their partners' perspectives. This implies decentralisation and much greater democracy in the long chain of relationships between giver and receiver. There is evidence of such trends. Agencies are more transnational than they were, and local partners more assertive. But there is still a very long way to go.

Notes

1. Unless indicated, 'Oxfam' is used to designate any of the national affiliates of Oxfam International. Oxfam GB is referred to as OGB.
2. Paul Smith-Lomas, then OGB Humanitarian Director, personal interview 2004.
3. Available at www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct/code.asp (retrieved 6 October 2005).
4. Armor Group, for example, became a signatory to the Code.
5. With a few honourable exceptions, OGB among them (Mackintosh 1997).
6. Notably Jonathan Goodhand at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.
7. Conflict-related Development Analysis. More information can be found via UNDP's Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery at www.undp.org/bcpr/ (retrieved 6 October 2005).
8. Conflict Analysis Framework. More information can be found via the World Bank's Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit at http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/ESSD/sdvext.nsf/67ByDocName/ConflictAnalysis (retrieved 6 October 2005).

9. These remarks are based largely on personal observation during visits to India and Sri Lanka in May 2005.
10. My own observation from visiting in October 2004. See also Herson 2005.

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