

NGOs, disasters, and advocacy: caught between the Prophet and the Shepherd Boy

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Conflict and disasters haunted the 1990s, challenging the complacency of a world which, official development assistance figures suggest, is increasingly bereft of any kind of internationalist ideal. Complex Humanitarian Emergencies (CHEs), famines, and civil strife have forced themselves on to the media agenda, and then on to that of the politicians, thus creating a more dangerous and unstable environment for NGOs. From Bosnia to Rwanda and beyond, those same NGOs have been successively wrong-footed by the policy analysis and advocacy implications of each emergency. Too often, aid agencies are essentially responding to the last emergency, and so fall short of the mark.

The implications of the increase in internal conflicts have not been lost on the relief capability of the NGOs involved, nor on theoretical thinking – which, thanks to writers such as Hugo Slim and Mark Duffield, has largely been transformed. The flowering of work designed to research conflict, and new methodologies in reconciliation have also seen some aspects of NGO adaptability at its best. But, as this paper will argue, in the field of advocacy, NGOs have failed to reconcile the implications of CHEs with the underlying obligations of humanitarianism.

NGOs have become trapped by conflicting fears, each apparently equally valid and historically real. There is the spectre of Rwanda and the failure to raise the alarm over a situation that resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people, and to this day still deeply traumatises survivors, as well as NGO workers who were involved. After Rwanda, a new concern for early warning led aid agencies to enter a field of policy analysis designed to create the potential for early action.¹ This became known as *preventive advocacy*: the articulation of a potential or

imminent disaster with the intention that policy makers, whether local or international, will act to avert a crisis. This was the NGO community seeking to act as Old Testament Prophet, standing up to proclaim the potential for disaster should the world fail to change its ways.²

This new approach was given its first real test in 1996. By the late summer of that year, some agencies, notably Oxfam GB and World Vision, were already predicting a serious escalation in the conflict in eastern Zaïre – with potentially serious consequences for civilians. Large numbers of Hutu refugees within reach of the Rwandan border, plus the deteriorating situation within Africa's largest State, seemed to suggest that preventive advocacy was justified. In the weeks that followed, NGOs grew increasingly concerned about the potential fate of hundreds of thousands of refugees, cut off in remote areas or confined to camps that were receiving no supplies. The prospect of wholesale massacres seemed real: at best, acts of indiscriminate revenge against Hutus trapped in isolated refugee camps; at worst, the death by neglect or disease of civilians and *interahamwe* militia alike.

Oxfam GB, World Vision, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and others called for the world to intervene to secure safe access for humanitarian workers to these refugees. The international community, its new-found interventionist tendencies tested by Bosnia and Somalia, seemed reluctant to concur.³ In the heat of the advocacy drive, NGO opinion split – with the Save the Children Fund (SCF) in the UK declaring intervention unfeasible and unwise. Alex de Waal was equally sceptical, although he pointed more to the apparent over-dramatisation of events by NGOs in order to raise their own profile, influence, and cash.⁴

The charge that NGOs had exaggerated in order to fuel public appeals was inevitably difficult to refute: stories of impending genocide had failed to materialise (though massacres did occur later), leading to a sense that the public had been misled. Some in the NGO community began to point to the dangers of preventive advocacy; fears were raised which were also ultimately disproved, i.e. that NGO credibility would be lost, which would make advocacy of any kind more difficult. By 1998, when the famine in Sudan was coming to light, this concern was being given full voice: for instance, Mark Bowden of SCF explained to the press the dangers of raising the alarm 'before the facts are fully known'.⁵ NGOs were warned not to be the Shepherd Boy, crying wolf too often until finally unable to raise any alarm at all.

This is the continuing dilemma for all advocacy-oriented NGOs. Is it preferable for aid agencies to honour their prophetic calling and risk

their hard-earned credibility, or should NGOs instead be wary of calling wolf too often? Written from the perspective of an advocacy practitioner, this paper considers the conflicting pressures on the one hand to scale up, and on the other hand to limit advocacy during disasters. Any discussion of this rapidly growing area of activity must also address the need to evaluate the motives of NGOs and the impact of what they achieve: whenever advocacy is an issue, questions of accountability, veracity, and legitimacy are never far from the surface. The paper ends with a plea to NGOs to view their credibility as a resource that *should* be risked, where necessary, as part of the overall humanitarian ethic of saving lives. The dangers of appearing self-serving and misleading are shown to be real, but ultimately the potential to change dire events is too important to be surrendered lightly.

Advocacy and disasters

We are increasingly told that advocacy and awareness-raising are the future of NGOs (particularly Northern NGOs), although precise definitions are rarely offered. The rising numbers of NGOs that are adopting advocacy as an approach, coupled with the diversity of views within the development community, have created considerable room for divergence. It is not surprising, therefore, that any reference to advocacy automatically raises numerous – perfectly appropriate – questions along the lines of: *what is the aim of advocacy, on whose behalf is it undertaken, and with what legitimacy?*

Advocacy is in theory related to one of the higher ideals of the NGO world: the search for justice. At a more prosaic level, advocacy is simply a tool or set of tools – mechanisms by which NGOs try to push their own concerns on to the agendas of others. Most NGOs would state that this tool is used to support Southern communities, whether through specific requests for action at the local level, or through the call for changes to the macro-context which shapes the lives of the poor. Like all tools, advocacy can be dangerous as well as useful, both for an NGO's own staff and for the poor whom it is trying to help. This is especially so in a disaster setting, where background analysis can be rushed, and the agency may be completely unfamiliar with the context.

Indeed, for much of the 1990s, pressures on NGOs to be seen to be involved as well as informed (not least the pressures of fundraising) led to a considerable increase in NGO comment on each new geopolitical problem which arose. De Waal (1994:2) neatly summarised the situation:

In recent years, international relief organisations ... have become increasingly significant political actors, both in the African countries where they work, and in western countries where they undertake publicity, lobbying and advocacy. They have expanded their mandate to encompass human rights and conflict resolution. The call for foreign military intervention is perhaps the most striking example of 'humanitarianism unbound': liberated from the Cold War straightjacket, international relief organisations in strategically unimportant countries like Somalia and Rwanda can make an extraordinarily bold call, apparently unimpeded by limits on their mandate and expertise, or by accountability. In an ever wider arena, relief agencies are now empowered to make important political judgements, implicit and explicit, which go far beyond their traditional role.

Hugo Slim has also written of the crisis in values affecting NGOs, a crisis that had become particularly stark in those situations where saving lives might not be enough: 'when wider human rights abuses endanger that life in the first place'. Slim (1997:15-16) notes that:

In their choice of position, more and more NGOs and UN forces are adopting a robust form of impartiality which allows them not just to dish out relief in proportion to needs, but also to dish out criticism (advocacy) or military bombardment in proportion to human rights wrong-doing. This hardened impartiality may be the NGO posture of choice in the future, but it will have operational implications and no doubt be met by an equally hard response on occasion.

The retreat from advocacy

The current crisis of confidence among NGOs regarding this more 'robust' position has been largely a result of their attempt to rein in the excesses identified by de Waal. Critics have been helped both by NGO naïvety in geopolitical matters and by the reality that preventive advocacy can easily be seen as (or become) an attempt to play up a crisis as part of an appeal for funds. Valid criticism has also arisen from the temptation for each agency to comment on every conflict, regardless of experience, qualifications, or sometimes even presence. This paper argues that the negative reactions to these dynamics, both internal and external, are healthy, but create their own dangers if they are pressed too far. If NGOs'

motives are not always pure, neither are they always bad. The need for preventive advocacy remains.

The primary concern here is that the current loss of confidence may cause a retreat from preventive advocacy (i.e. those actions taken to raise awareness in time to avert the fulfilment of the worst-case scenario). CHEs are not static; they are in reality a sequence of events forming an often lengthy process.⁶ Within this context, external action usually arrives late in the day. It is this problem which early warning and preventive advocacy have the potential to change (see Keen and Wilson in Macrae and Zwi 1994).

This paper thus calls for renewed commitment to undertake policy work in terms of complex emergencies, albeit with increased professional rigour and accountability. Perhaps one of Slim's most thought-provoking recent works (Slim 1998) is particularly apt for NGO advocacy workers who are considering the future role of preventive advocacy. He offers a call to humanitarian organisations to step back from 'excessively' institutionalising the humanitarian principle, i.e. the desire, in the formulation of ICRC, 'to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found ... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for human beings', which lies at the root of our work. He sees this institutionalising trend as a priestly, ritualistic role, in contrast with the prophetic urge to confront 'society with a truth and [which] is concerned with personal, social, and political transformation'.

The prophetic function of humanitarianism, urging the world to face its least appealing characteristics, cannot be done simply on the basis of currying favour with the media⁷ or maintaining harmony among NGOs. It is here that Slim's work speaks acutely to those in the advocacy field. To take his analogy further, we should remember that prophets are rarely popular in their own time. Indeed, Slim comes close to reminding advocacy workers to be wary of the potential conflict between popularity and prophecy:

The humanitarian prophet will better be a prophet who can move at the very centre of events and penetrate the very heart of the institutions concerned. But she or he must still be a prophet. She must still challenge and call. He must not be calmed into straight priesthood by those who would see him cordoned off again to pursue the rituals of faith alone. (Slim 1998:2)

Preventive advocacy: a risk worth taking?

Preventive advocacy lies at the heart of this prophetic function and has been an increasing feature of NGO campaigns. The roots of this trend lie firmly in changes in the global context, which have affected conflicts as well as food security. Concern for the latter area produced one of the first overviews of the realities and 'barriers' involved, whether political, institutional, or logistical (Buchanan-Smith and Davies (1995), especially Chapter 2 and pp.19-23). Indeed, preventive advocacy at its best is an NGO's primary means of overcoming the problem that these authors identify, i.e. inaction in the face of available and credible early-warning information – inaction that George and Holl (1997) termed the 'warning-response gap'.

Preventive advocacy is, therefore, heavily dependent upon early-warning studies. For complex emergencies, often rooted in conflict, the concept of early warning has given rise to a mini-industry of forecasters and analysts; new specialists seeking to identify the next bout of civil strife before it occurs. Despite such developments, the most reliable information available to most NGOs remains the local knowledge and understanding of their own local counterparts in the South, who are able to read the signs of poor harvests, rising tensions, and governmental change. It is usually where such local partners are absent, i.e. where agencies lack ongoing programmes, that the NGO community has faltered in its operational and advocacy responses.

Articulating the fears and concerns raised by such local partners in the hope of securing international or local action is, as Slim suggests, something which can often be done within the corridors and meeting rooms of foreign ministry and UN buildings. The increased access of NGOs to governmental, multilateral, and UN actors is encouraging. But this lobbying approach, focused mainly on OECD governments, is not always enough. Reality dictates that making OECD governments listen can sometimes require NGOs first to change the agenda of the general public. Using the media to put pressure on governments is nothing new; but, where preventive advocacy is concerned, it is an inherently risky approach.

This kind of public preventive advocacy involves putting an NGO's name on the line, and with it to some degree the reputation of the aid-agency sector. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is due to this need to mobilise the public through the press that many of the underlying issues of legitimacy and accountability break through to the surface of the

discussion. Risks to credibility are compounded by the potential for advocacy efforts to be hijacked for the sake of premature fundraising appeals. Advocacy standards can become easily blurred; the need for the option of articulating the worst-case scenario can lead to prediction being presented as fact.

Even those who are deeply committed to risk-taking preventive advocacy must recognise these dangers fully. In the heat of the situation, advocacy staff, like their relief colleagues, can be exasperated by the fine hairs that are dissected in the discussion of what statements are, or are not, acceptable. But standards matter in advocacy, just as they do in relief work. Advocacy workers, like all NGO staff, have to recognise that there is a fundamental obligation of due diligence owed by every humanitarian worker towards the people whom they aim to assist. Humanitarianism does include the need to put pressure on policy makers to bring about change, but change based on our best available analysis of the needs and aspirations of the poor, not on an eye-catching and opportunist guess. Acknowledging the question of standards means that words are important. Thus, advocacy must mean weighing public statements and risking our credibility strategically, not negligently.

Preventive advocacy: unleashing the spectre

Perhaps the most revealing debate about this question of standards has revolved around the use of the emotive word *famine*. This was an issue that became one of the least edifying parts of the debate surrounding the 1998 emergency in Sudan. 'Famine' is a powerful word; it is right to protect its force and not use it for every food shortage that comes along. Nevertheless, agencies that are observing realities on the ground must also be able to make clear the dangers, and to use language which captures the potential scope of the tragedy taking place. The failure of agencies to agree a definition is unhelpful. For SCF, famine appears to include population movement – which would rule out some of the great famines of history – whereas for MSF it is linked to a distinct geographical area.

Each agency must consider its criteria and measure its desire to articulate any fears against its onus of responsibility (particularly the need for confidence in their understanding of the issues and also of their motives for engagement). Even so, clarifying the nature of famine may be long overdue. NGOs are aware of academic work – whether Sen (1981), Dyson (1991), or Swift (1989) – on causes and characteristics. Perhaps we have now reached the point at which we must come to a consensus

on the technical definition of the point at which a humanitarian crisis becomes a famine.⁸

In mid-1998, the pressure from some observers to refrain from talking of famine in Sudan without proven data was reminiscent of earlier criticism of warnings regarding North Korea. In reality, after considering the issue of due diligence, the risk must sometimes be taken, and the spectre unleashed without full empirical proof. For all those engaged in relief advocacy, Becker's work (1996) makes salutary reading. Becker discusses the famine in China between 1958 and 1962 – an event virtually unreported at the time. Lessons for advocacy work might also be drawn from studying the Great Bengal famine or even that of Ethiopia in the early 1970s.

Early-warning advocacy must be responsible and diligent, but it cannot live by a burden of absolute proof. If such an approach were taken, the concept would die. Instead, it needs to survive on the basis of a commitment by NGOs to seek out the best information available and to divorce advocacy and awareness-raising from the fundraising impulse. The experienced hunch, the instincts of partners on the ground, and the risk-taking of Slim's prophetic humanitarianism must be given their due.

Accountability and credibility

Support for risk-taking and a prophetic function in advocacy should not be read as *carte blanche* for the well-meaning mistake. Without a balance of responsibilities, such an argument can degenerate into the simplistic perspective that we 'have to do our best and make the most informed judgement possible'. It is in the interest of NGOs to go beyond such thinking and to establish a broader understanding of advocacy and its risks. Partly this is a question of protecting our credibility. More importantly, however, it is an extension of that critical obligation to donors and the poor alike: the need for accountability, transparency, and impact.

Advocacy has sometimes been less scrutinised in relation to these standards than have other NGO efforts. Yet advocacy, like any area of NGO activity, should live or die by its usefulness to the poor. An emphasis on clear and measurable objectives must be complemented by a willingness to monitor and evaluate results. It is likely that almost any agency could benefit by comparing the evaluation techniques used for development programmes with those designed for advocacy. The infrequency with which NGOs tend to consult either donors, policy

makers, or partners on the effectiveness of their advocacy work raises questions of its own, questions which the rapidly developing nature of CHEs often allows to be quietly left behind. It is, however, precisely during CHEs and concomitant public appeals that transparency and accountability should become an acute NGO concern. Perhaps NGOs might learn from the model set by the evaluation of the media's role in Congo/Zaire (Philo 1997).

Part of the reason that advocacy has too often been able to escape the accountability challenge has been the difficulty of quantifying what is by nature a complex and sometimes reactive chain of events. But in establishing objectives, and devising strategy, clarity can sometimes be brought by introducing an equal concern for the medium term. CHEs happen within a context of global policy. With policy makers gradually learning the lessons of humanitarian disasters of the past, NGOs, as well as the poor, have vested interests in the right lessons being learned in good time. Ongoing work in partnership with organisations such as the UN Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian affairs (OCHA) to create a better context for assistance should not be limited to policy makers alone. NGOs will have a critical role if the constituency for timely interventions is to stretch beyond Washington, London, and the UN Security Council to the wider public in both the North and South.

Credibility for whom?

Those who argue that accuracy must be the predominant factor in any advocacy or awareness-raising work during emergencies do so for a number of reasons. For some it is a question of jealously protecting the power of the NGO message, power which rests on the credibility of the commentator. There can be no doubt that we ignore the need for credibility at our peril: NGOs have no divine right to the ear of the public or of policy makers. Our right to be heard has to be earned. We must also, however, be conscious that credibility can become an end in itself – rather like money, it can be permanently hoarded and never put to good use.

Inevitably there are those who will be quick to point to what they perceive to be scare-mongering and inaccuracy on the part of NGOs; the article by Karl Maier (1998) is a noteworthy example. Potential criticism is inevitable, but it should not silence those NGOs who believe that their own credibility can be used to draw attention to crises that threaten large numbers of civilians. Declaring on CNN that a silent famine

is occurring in North Korea will of essence be unprovable in a country in which information is a preciously guarded resource. The alternative, however, is for NGOs to make a commitment never to seek to raise international concern regarding humanitarian crises in North Korea, Iraq, Burma, or indeed any context in which accurate statistics remain more a hope than expectation.

This paper argues that credibility is simply a resource – something to be marshalled for future use. The protection of NGOs' credibility becomes an offensive luxury when it is placed above the inherent obligation which rests on all humanitarian NGOs to save lives. In replying to Maier (1998), Stewart Wallis of Oxfam GB stated that it is on the issue of *how* aid agencies make choices in facing the ethical dilemmas of disasters that they should be judged. The public positioning of agencies is equally a question of choosing between perceived obligations, duties, and expectations – of which few would question that the profile and income of the NGO itself should be considered least. Credibility must occasionally be put on the line if the humanitarian principle is to be real. Perhaps Bryer and Cairns (1997:370) offer a view of more over-riding goals:

... we argue that we all have humanitarian responsibilities. The real individual in the real internal conflict has a claim on us all to uphold the rights enshrined in humanitarian law. The claim is also on humanitarian agencies ... Thus, though Oxfam does not have a role in directly protecting civilians from violence, it does have an obligation to report violations of humanitarian law to the State parties to the Geneva Conventions, and an ethical duty to advocate for those States to provide the necessary protection.

This is not to suggest that NGOs should conform to an ideal vision of selfless compassion, free of self-seeking motives. But competitive forces emerge fully only once the media are involved – indeed, a recognised emergency can at worst become the aid-agency equivalent of a sharks' feeding frenzy, each one attempting to take its share of public support. Competitiveness should not be confused with the genuine humanitarian urge to raise awareness. Neither should the protection of credibility become the NGO community's new peer pressure to silence those with whom we disagree. While recognising that credibility is a prerequisite for our right to be heard, we must accept that advocacy inherently means risking reputations. They are usually, after all, our only collateral.

Preventive advocacy and motives for raising the alarm

The newly re-organised Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) in the UK, which combines NGOs and the media, faced its first significant test with the conflict-induced crisis in the Sudan in early summer 1998. The DEC prevaricated for weeks before eventually being pushed into an appeal by the pointed criticism of television journalists filming in feeding centres. The lasting impression for many was of a degree of inter-agency competitiveness that was strange in a group intended to co-ordinate efforts during crisis. Accusations of agencies briefing the press both against other agencies and against the DEC itself were followed by suggestions from the British Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, that the motives of the agencies concerned were to a large degree financial.

There is nothing new about the issue of motives and competitiveness in situations in which the public are known to give generously. Indeed, de Waal (1997) develops the theme from his earlier work at some length, seeing the agencies' reaction to potential massacres in 1996 not as a reaction to NGO self-criticism in the aftermath of Rwanda, but rather as being 'anchored in the institutional imperatives of the humanitarian international', stating that '[t]he humanitarian agencies needed money' (p.204). His suggestion that a 'humanitarian Gresham's Law' will lead debased humanitarianism to drive out the 'authentic' version is premised on the reality that aid agencies are indeed competitive beasts. A succinct summary of some of the pressures comes from Storey (1997: 391):

Part of the answer must lie in the institutional position of NGOs in terms of competitive fundraising: once a disaster (in this case, massive outflows of people) achieved international attention (through the media), all NGOs had to be seen to respond. Failure to do so would have lost an individual NGO credibility and profile at home, even if it believed that such an intervention was misguided or not a priority. One NGO worker stated that, for reasons of publicity surrounding the cholera outbreak in the camps of Zaire, it was a case, for the NGO, of 'be there or die'.

The criticisms made by Clare Short in relation to Sudan were different perhaps only in their implication that the competition for funds was somehow at the expense of, or incompatible with, proper education and

advocacy aimed at the UK public on the issues at stake. Although the two activities need not be mutually exclusive, there is a real danger involved. De Waal's argument about competitiveness is true, but only to a degree. The idea that fundraising drives organisational agendas is not new, but it remains an over-simplification of the internal dynamics involved; particularly the relationships between fundraisers and desk officers (see also Suzuki 1998). In reality, the drive to raise funds during emergencies is both market- and field-driven; responding to emergencies is expensive, as is the rehabilitation phase that follows – for which funds are far harder to raise.

External critics such as de Waal provide an essential corrective to NGOs, but can too easily fall victim to the temptation to have it all ways. Had NGOs remained silent in the late summer of 1996, and had massacres ensued, would external observers have commended the agencies for their restraint? Previous experience suggests not.⁹ Equally the move to a multi-mandated, highly vocal NGO environment – neatly summarised by de Waal – is without question a poor substitute for an authentic voice for the poor. NGOs have their own agendas and suffer from many faults. Even so, the pronouncements of NGOs during disasters, and the partnerships with the media which they forge, may also be the only way to press for the issue of saving lives to be added to the policy agenda. The recommendations may be flawed – and unfortunately there are no easy ways to guarantee NGOs wisdom. Nevertheless, pressure for action to prevent avoidable fatalities creates a concern that is both invaluable and life-saving.

Conclusion: the impetus to advocacy

This paper has argued that in the field of NGO advocacy and awareness-raising, the humanitarian ethic is not entirely without meaning – ‘even’ during disasters. Aid agencies do not exist to raise money, although cynics can easily believe otherwise and will find support for their view in every appeal and all home-country expenditure. But in reality, few Northern aid agencies do not connect their ultimate purpose to the improvement of lives in the South. In emergency-relief contexts, the humanitarian ethic increasingly means a willingness to deal with complex external demands, rigorous monitoring, and physical danger. The deaths of ICRC workers in Chechnya served to underline the altered reality of relief assistance in a world in which NGOs are no longer considered to be neutrals.

It is important to recognise inherent problems and dangers. This is a complex area and a major contributory factor in the unrealistic expectations facing today's relief workers, who must now provide policy analysis as well as managing interventions on the ground. Recognition of the dangers, however, does not diminish the usefulness of the tool. Advocacy does have the potential to bring the attention of policy makers to bear on an issue, and ultimately to secure action. It is, therefore, not a tool to be given up easily. Rather, it is, as Storey (1997) has pointed out in relation to former Zaire, a question of NGOs needing to examine carefully both the level of understanding that underpins their statements and their motives for engaging in a public debate.

The internal drive within NGOs is to respond to a crisis as it is seen on the ground. In an ideologically driven industry, heavy with its own ideas of correctness, the concept of being led from the South is a powerful force. Hence, the original attempts to persuade the DEC to appeal on Sudan originated not in aid-agency fundraising departments, but with those desk officers who were receiving field reports. Indeed, World Vision, the first agency to raise the situation with the DEC and the provider of most of the footage for the appeal, was aware that, under the complex DEC funding rules, its own share of any joint appeal would be less than from launching an advertised appeal of its own.

The importance of recognising the place of the humanitarian ethic within aid-agency responses to disaster is partly, therefore, a need to reflect the real links between headquarters staff and people on the ground. Equally, the humanitarian ethic, and the impetus from the field, should be the driving force behind the advocacy work (including media awareness-raising) which may be essential if early warning is to be made real. As an industry, NGOs should safeguard (even if for some it is a question of 'tolerating') preventive advocacy, whenever such advocacy is based both on the best information available and on a genuine desire to save lives.

A pressing burden of responsibility on NGOs that are involved in relief work is, therefore, to view advocacy as going beyond the immediate and local. Advocacy strategies should be coherent and medium-term in their scope, and so based on a fuller appreciation of successive international responses to emergencies than can be provided by a single incident. SCF has provided a useful example of the thinking that is needed (Macrae and Zwi 1994). Within this medium-term global framework, the individual reality of each situation can be discussed against the backdrop of a more telling context. In this way, we can learn to see how the experience of

Somalia and Liberia can have fatal consequences of inaction for those living and dying in the Great Lakes region. The commitment to relief as an ongoing advocacy issue rather than a series of rapidly developed *ad hoc* messages also offers some hope of addressing the reality that:

... the humanitarian response – at varying levels of generosity – has been the only meaningful expression of most governments’ concern about internal conflicts. As the Rwanda evaluation put it, we see a ‘policy vacuum’ in which aid policy becomes not part of a coherent international response, but almost the entire response. Aid policy replaces foreign policy towards those countries in which donor governments perceive little geo-political interest. Indeed, the deepest problem of humanitarian aid in internal conflicts is that it may let the ‘international community’ off the hook of its responsibilities to uphold international law.
(Bryer and Cairns 1997:370)

NGOs remain a central voice in the battle to seriously address the world’s response to CHEs. New foreign-policy initiatives and any willingness to take rapid action to avert humanitarian disaster remain dependent both on the work of the media and on NGOs’ ability to interpret events. The potential not only to save lives in the immediate term, but also to affect long-term thinking on how best to respond in other situations, makes the contribution of NGOs to the discussion a critical part of our humanitarian work. We cannot, therefore, shun the risks involved in such preventive interventions; but neither can we afford to avoid the responsibilities entailed in such engagement.

Notes

1 For some of the thinking behind these moves, see Rupesinghe (1994; 1995) and NCDO (1997).

2 In London the trend became a coalition as International Alert co-ordinated a group of 15 agencies which sought specifically to ensure that genocide such as that which was perpetrated in Rwanda could not happen so easily again.

3 The pressure, however, did

ultimately have an effect. International public opinion moved slowly towards the NGO position, and a succession of military planning options was put in place, providing time for Western powers to use their influence instead.

4 De Waal later described his 20 October 1996 *Observer* piece as ‘somewhat cynical’. See also de Waal 1997: 205. For criticism of NGO advocacy at the time, see Alex de Waal: ‘No bloodless miracle’ in the *Guardian*, 18 November 1996.

5 Mark Bowden, as reported by Jeremy Laurance in 'Is there really a famine in Sudan?', *The Independent*, 7 May 1998.

6 See the chapters by Joanna Macrae and Anthony Zwi and by David Keen and Ken Wilson in Macrae and Zwi (eds.) (1994).

7 For an interesting analysis of some of the dynamics involved, see Philo (1997).

8 Cuny with Hill (1999: 37) offers a table of famine indicators that include prolonged drought; onset of a natural disaster (floods, insects, infestation, etc.); increase in the price of staples; rise in price ratio of staple grain to prevailing wages; increase in lending rates in the informal sector; increase in sales of livestock and decrease in average sale price; increased distress sales; increase in deaths among livestock; unusual sales of possessions such as jewellery, ornaments, etc.; seed shortage or increased cost of seeds; widespread sales of land at abnormally low prices; increased hoarding of grains by dealers; consumption of animals by pastoralists; and consumption of famine foods.

9 For a discussion of the de-contextualisation of disasters and some of the wider related issues, see Middleton and O'Keefe (1998).

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