

Part Two: Introduction

Peace and reconstruction: agency and agencies

Deborah Eade

Part Two of this Reader brings together selected papers from other issues of *Development in Practice* and elsewhere, focusing principally on the non-governmental agency sector – national and international NGOs and local civil society organisations – and on the political agency of the ‘victims’ of conflict, particularly women, in shaping their societies during and after armed hostilities. We have therefore chosen contributions that illustrate some dimension of these issues, drawing on different geographical range where appropriate, in ways that resonate with and complement the articles in Part One of this volume.

Several of the contributors to Part One, most notably Lesley Abdela, Chris Corrin, and Angela Mackay, illustrate the serious limitations of externally brokered peace and reconstruction processes as well as the shortcomings of most of the aid interventions made at some point along the way. Negative media coverage of relief programmes lies at one influential end of the spectrum, and magisterial accounts such as that of Peter Uvin’s (1998) analysis of failed development assistance in Rwanda at the other. These criticisms are valid and necessary. Historically, the aid community has been intermittently chastened by certain watershed experiences, the 1994 atrocities in Rwanda and their aftermath being an obvious recent example. The Biafra war in the 1960s, the tragedy of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in the 1970s, the war-induced famines in the Horn of Africa in the 1980s and the ‘low-intensity conflict’ or military dictatorships afflicting much of Latin America and the Caribbean during that same decade, the sheer brutality of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the Balkans in the 1990s, and the regrettable fall-out of the ‘war on terror’ in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq are other memorable instances where the aid community as a whole has been obliged to review its own principles and practices, and in a sense nail certain political colours to the mast. If the problem during the Cold War was for NGOs to assert independence of

government policies, the challenge now is to provide humanitarian assistance in ways that do not fuel the conflict or compromise a society's capacity to come through the crisis. Old ideas about the 'relief–reconstruction–development continuum' have been blown apart by the nature of contemporary conflict. Mark Duffield, Professor of Development, Democratisation, and Conflict at the University of Leeds and a long-standing analyst of international development assistance, uses terms such as 'liberal peace' and 'durable disorder' (in ironic contrast to the 'durable solutions' sought by the aid industry) in his critique of the growing convergence of the United Nations, NGOs, military establishments, and private companies in the 'securitisation' of international assistance (Duffield 2001). Post-development writers such as Arturo Escobar might argue that the aid agencies have come very belatedly, if at all, to see that the entire paradigm is flawed.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that unprecedented strides have been made both by official aid agencies (which are accountable to, but, we must remember, can be no better than, the governments they represent) and by NGOs (whose accountability is altogether rather fuzzy, albeit with a hard centre). Indeed, it is the whole accountability question that has most galvanised the NGO community in relation to humanitarian relief work: are NGOs more accountable to their donors and their wider domestic constituencies or to the intended beneficiaries of their interventions? Is it possible to be equally accountable to both? If so, how can 'downward accountability' be improved? What rights do beneficiaries have, and how can they exercise these rights? And how might their ways of working need to shift in order for NGOs to ensure that their relief and post-conflict interventions are as accountable to women as to men?

There are no simple 'one-stop' answers to these questions, obviously, but inter-agency standard-setting initiatives such as that of The Sphere Project (2004) and the efforts of organisations such as the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP – www.alnap.org) indicate a real interest among NGOs to learn from their mistakes, improve co-ordination, and raise professional standards in humanitarian endeavour. The Sphere Project's establishment of a set of minimum standards and a code of conduct for NGO relief programmes is an excellent example of the sector policing itself, holding its members accountable to an acceptable level of performance while also providing individual NGOs with significant moral backing from their peers when they are faced with tough decisions.

Hugo Slim and **Mary B. Anderson** have written extensively on humanitarianism and armed conflict, and their work is characterised by an engagement in the ethical dimensions of ‘on-the-ground’ interventions in situations where the implications of these tough decisions are seldom clear-cut. Both of them complement their own research work with serving as advisers to a number of major relief agencies, including Oxfam America, Oxfam GB, the Red Cross Movement, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Here, Slim maps out some of the definitional frameworks relating to humanitarian operations, which are just as relevant to local peace builders as to aid workers and international peacekeepers. Terms such as ‘humanitarian imperative’, ‘neutrality’, and ‘impartiality’ are often invoked loosely and in potentially harmful ways, while ‘innocence-based solidarity’ makes simplistic (and to some extent patronising) assumptions about non-combatants – in particular women, children, and infirm and elderly people. Of course, civilians will have complex loyalties especially if the conflict involves their own community. To confuse vulnerability and ‘innocence’, and to use the latter as a criterion by which to judge who most merits assistance, is not only crude, but also implies that to have political agency renders a person less deserving of aid. Equally problematic is to deny the political agency of an individual or group of people, which, as other contributors to this volume illustrate, happens so readily when women are regarded primarily as mothers (and so responsible for other dependants) and/or as helpless victims (and so dependent on aid). One way of avoiding moral traps of this kind, Slim argues, is for aid agencies to be guided by international humanitarian law as a basis for their action.

Anderson illustrates the ambivalence of the ‘beneficiaries’ of relief assistance towards their ‘benefactors’ – grateful for help, but critical of (and sometimes angry about) the way in which it is given. It may be better to give than to receive, but that does not make it right to make inappropriate gifts. She does not draw the demagogic conclusion that all local criticism of international assistance is right, but rather that there is a need to ‘acknowledge tensions between giver and receiver as inevitable’. Two of her key recommendations – identifying areas of equality and inequality, and accepting a clear division of labour within the donor–recipient relationship – would force all parties to deal more honestly with the power relations inherent in the aid chain. Doing this, and in ways that ensure that women’s interests are fully respected, would make profound demands on everyone involved and ultimately

shift not only the way in which aid is delivered, but also the way in which it is conceptualised. In their article, **Martha Thompson** and **Deborah Eade**¹ describe a very different way of working, based on their experience with Salvadoran refugee and displaced populations throughout the 1980s. The role of civil society in the form of popular organisations and grassroots mobilisation during the war in El Salvador has been well documented. Here, the authors draw out some critical policy and practice lessons from how Salvadoran peasant women developed their own ‘protection capacities’ and leadership potential, even in the face of their aggressors. The behaviour of these women challenged conventional aid-agency assumptions about the political agency of poor and uneducated people. Time has shown how unique this experience has proved to be. While it is not suggested that any such experience could be replicated or transposed from one setting to another, the authors believe that some aspects of it could be useful to contemporary thinking about the protection of civilian populations in general.

The papers by **Jenny Pearce** and **Glenda Caine** are based on their presentations at a 1996 symposium co-hosted by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) and Oxfam GB’s South Africa office, entitled *Building Bridges in Southern Africa: Conflict, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in Times of Change*. We include them here not for their case-study value, as the historical specificities have obviously been superseded (albeit less so than might have been wished), but because of the insights they bring to the debate. Writing about three Latin American countries that experienced prolonged civil conflict (El Salvador, Peru, and Nicaragua), Pearce contrasts the absence of war with ‘positive peace’, stressing that the ways in which power relations – including gender – are configured at the end of any conflict will affect post-war reconstruction and the likelihood of sustainable peace. Many of the countries experiencing actual or latent conflicts have never experienced ‘development’, and cannot therefore ‘return to democracy’ – democratic institutions need to be grounded in local realities and must therefore evolve over time. However, Pearce’s experience is that external agencies tend to focus not on local capacities but on ‘*their* interventions (for instance, what *they* can do to articulate relief and development, what *they* can do to prevent conflict and build peace)’, and that male aid professionals generally have a poor appreciation of the impact of gender relations on ‘the ability of traumatised, poor, and ill-educated populations to play their full role in the post-conflict situation’. The truth of this observation is borne out

by Suzanne Williams, and resonates with the experiences recounted by Corrin and Abdela.

Caine offers a brief description of peace training work undertaken in the KwaZulu Natal region of South Africa, an area with a long history of political violence in a country 'with a culture in which violence is commonly used as an acceptable method of problem-solving'. She too emphasises that sustainable peace work cannot be undertaken by 'outsiders' to the conflict, although a trusted external broker may help the antagonists to start communicating. Although Caine does not explicitly refer to gender-based aggression, violence against women in South Africa has if anything worsened in the post-apartheid era; and the practical lessons she draws are relevant to any society or social group seeking to develop non-conflictual responses to the perceived (or actual) threat of violence. These lessons are poignantly exemplified in the dialogue between **Sumaya Farhat-Naser** and **Gila Svirsky**², veteran feminist peace campaigners and co-founders of the Jerusalem Link for Women, an organisation comprising Bat Shalom in West Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Center for Women in East Jerusalem. Their commitment to working through their differences in order to build a culture of peace is an inspiration, especially in view of the complex political, psychological, cultural, and logistical obstacles to be faced. Both women also faced criticism from forces opposed to their efforts, and even from within their respective organisations. Establishing and maintaining trust and 'active listening' in such extreme circumstances calls for exceptional personal courage. That young Israeli and Palestinian feminists are now leading efforts to create spaces within which women from different cultural communities can come together, as described here by **Rola Hamed**, therefore deserves to be better known and to enjoy some of the protection that can derive from international attention.

The need to identify and then help women to build on their existing capacities to work for 'active peace' is highlighted by **Myriam Gervais**, writing about post-reconstruction Rwanda. Although aid agencies are undoubtedly sincere in wanting to enhance women's security (personal, economic, and socio-political), the impact of their interventions is often hampered by an inadequate understanding of the ways in which issues of poverty, gender, and security intersect. In the ultimate analysis, there is no substitute for a detailed understanding of the local situation, something which again stresses the limited role that outsiders can or should seek to play in peace

building activities. Finally, **Suzanne Williams**³ argues in her contribution that to address gender power relations in the context of a war-torn society not only entails entering a contested terrain within that society, but also among and within the various intervening agencies, including international NGOs. Drawing on her own wide-ranging experience on working on issues of gender, development, and violence within Oxfam GB, Williams uses the metaphor of the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ to describe different structures and management cultures that can basically co-exist in a large aid agency, but which often clash ‘in the highly charged context of emergencies and post-conflict interventions, [generating] tensions over priorities and resources, value, and reward’. Her basic argument is that organisational imperatives are conceptualised and implemented in highly gendered ways, and that only a comprehensive commitment to gender equity throughout every aspect of that organisation’s work will enable it really to begin to address such tensions. In other words, without this deep institutional commitment and the concomitant openness to changing their own ways of thinking and working, greater professionalisation and technical standard setting, vital though they are, will only take aid agencies so far in engendering their accountability processes. To echo Haleh Afshar’s concluding comment in her introduction to Part One of this Reader, there is still some way to go before theory and practice inform each other so as to ensure that women’s actual and potential contributions during war and in peace building are realised to the full.

Notes

- 1 This article was commissioned for a special issue of the journal *Social Development Issues* on Women in Conflict in Crisis: New Issues in an Insecure World (*Social Development Issues* 24(3): 50–8, 2002). We are grateful to the editors, Mary Ellen Kondrat, María Juliá, and Cathy Rakowski, and to the Inter-University Consortium for International Social Development, for allowing us to reproduce this article.
- 2 We are grateful to Zed Books for allowing us to reprint this chapter from Perry and Schenck (2001:133–54).
- 3 We are grateful to Lawrence & Wishart for allowing us to reprint this chapter from Cockburn and Zarkov (2002).

References

- Cockburn, Cynthia and Dubravka Zarkov (eds.) (2002) *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, Masculinities and International Peacekeeping*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Duffield, Mark (2001) *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merger of Development and Security*, London: Zed Books.
- Perry, Susan and Celeste Schenck (eds.) (2001) *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development Across Cultures*, London: Zed Books.
- The Sphere Project (2004, revised edn.) *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*, Geneva: The Sphere Project. (The English-language text of the revised edition and the 2000 edition in translation are available free of charge at www.sphereproject.org.)
- Uvin, Peter (1998) *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*, Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.