Relief agencies and moral standing in war: principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and solidarity

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In Dante’s ‘Inferno’ there is a special place of torment reserved for those who have been neutral in this life. Their sin is so particular that they do not even merit a space in hell. Instead, they are confined to the outer part, or vestibule, of hell and separated from the rest of the damned by the river Acheron. The precise sin of this group of people is that of moral indecision and vacillation. Throughout their lives they never made a stand for something they believed. True to form, Dante inflicts upon them a torment which neatly fits their crime. They are destined to rush forever behind a banner which ‘whirls with aimless speed as though it would never take a stand’, while at the same time they are chased and stung by swarms of hornets.

Many relief workers probably feel that they have already experienced the particular anguish of Dante’s punishment. On frequent occasions, the international humanitarian system might be accurately described by Dante’s image: a great crowd of international agencies rushing frantically behind the whirling banner of concern brandished by the international community, which seldom takes a definitive moral stand and plants its banner firmly in the ground. Indeed, the urgent and relentless flapping of UN and NGO flags from thousands of fast-moving white vehicles around the world today seems uncannily reminiscent of Dante’s vision of the vestibule of hell. And even if relief workers and peace-keepers have not yet experienced such hell, there are those today who might be tempted to think that such a fate should certainly await them when the day of reckoning arrives. The organisation African Rights, in particular, has severely criticised the ‘neutralism’ of humanitarianism and what it considers to be the absurdity of current relief-agency claims to humanitarian neutrality in political emergencies and war (African Rights, 1994:24-8). Yet in classical humanitarianism, neutrality is prized as one of the four essential operational principles alongside humanity, impartiality, and independence.

So why has neutrality become a dirty word? Is it really a sin? Or do Dante and African Rights understand the word differently from conventional humanitarian practitioners? Is neutrality inevitably unprincipled, or is it in fact the operational means to highly principled ends? Is true humanitarian neutrality really impossible, when any humanitarian action inevitably plays to the advantage of one side or another? A passionate debate now rages about the moral positioning of humanitarian agencies and peace-keeping forces. And as most relief agencies and UN forces alike abandon the idea of neutrality, they are clinging with renewed vigour to the other traditional humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality, or going beyond traditional humanitarian principles by justifying their position in terms of solidarity, or by giving more refined interpretations of impartiality.

The debate surrounding humanitarian neutrality and its fellow humanitarian principles is a debate about the moral stance or position of third parties in other people’s wars. Where should an NGO, international agency, or UN force stand in a violent dispute between various groups? The issue of positioning concerns relief organisations not only at a corporate level, but also at an individual level. In order to operate in the midst of war, a relief agency needs to make its organisational position in that conflict known to the combatants. But at a personal level, it is also essential for staff morale that each individual has a strong sense of his or her individual position in relation to the prevailing violence. Playing a third-party role in a context of violence and injustice is personally taxing, and is one of the greatest challenges facing relief workers and UN soldiers in today’s emergencies. The ability to do so with a sense of
moral conviction and international legality is crucial to the morale of relief and development workers and also to the non-combatant civilians they seek to help.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the moral implications of the operations of relief agencies, acting as third parties in war-time. The paper begins by identifying the essential problem of moral stance and organisational positioning as one of locating humanitarian values within a context of organised inhumanity. The main part of the paper then examines current usage of the terms humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and solidarity as they are used to define humanitarian positions. The paper then briefly considers the psychological implications for relief workers of operating as non-combatant third parties in war, emphasising the importance of clear positioning to counter what I have termed 'by-stander anxiety'. Finally, the paper recognises that a range of different positions is both inevitable and desirable in a given conflict; but it concludes by recommending concerted support for international humanitarian law (IHL) and its possible reform as the best way to focus the current debate about the place of humanitarianism in war.

Standing for humanitarian values

Relief agencies have problems with their identity and position in today's wars, because they are trying to do something which is intrinsically difficult: they invariably find themselves trying to represent the values of humanity and peace within societies which are currently dominated by the values of inhumanity and violence. More often than not, therefore, they are swimming against the current of that society, or certainly of its leadership. They are representatives of values which are often seen as a threat by leaders and peoples committed to violence and war. If humanitarian values are given too much consideration in situations of war or political violence, political and military leaders fear that they might undermine their followers' will to fight, or provide succour to their enemy. Nevertheless, it is part of the paradox of human nature that humanitarian values can be present in war and since time immemorial have usually co-existed with violence to some degree. Where there is organised violence, there is often mercy too. But the intricacies of the Geneva Conventions which were put together after World War II show how even the most united and victorious military and political leaders prefer humanitarian values to be rigidly controlled to prevent them from becoming an excessive threat to the war effort.

The task of representing humane values to various combatant parties will always place a humanitarian third party in a difficult position. In most cases, the values represented by the humanitarian will be greeted with distinct ambivalence. On the one hand, they may be recognised and even strangely cherished in some quarters of the warring parties and their societies: many humanitarians can recount a story about a gentle warrior whose cooperation was critical to saving many lives. On the other hand, they will also be treated with the utmost suspicion by crucial sections of any warring party, and perceived as a threat to the violence they are embarked upon. More cynically, but equally routinely, humanitarianism will be seized upon as something which can be abused to bolster the adversaries' own war efforts. The organisation and its individuals who dare to represent the values of humanity in war will thus usually meet a mixed response, with their values being seen simultaneously by different groups as ones to cherish, to attack, or to abuse.

While it has always been difficult to represent and position humanitarian values in war, the proliferation of relief and development agencies working in today's wars now seems to make that positioning even more difficult. One of the main reasons why humanitarian principles have been so difficult to clarify and affirm in the last five years must be that there are now so many different organisations trying to assert themselves as 'humanitarian'. The proliferation of NGOs in particular (which has been an inevitable consequence of Western donor policy in recent years) has led to wide differences in the ethical maturity and political sophistication of various organisations which are all competing to work in the same emergency. Anyone surveying the swarm of NGOs delivering primarily governmental humanitarian assistance in many of today's emergencies would be unwise to accept them all as equally principled and professional. With so
many different organisations trying to establish a humanitarian position within today's wars, and with all of them using the same tired humanitarian language to do so, it is hardly surprising that the humanitarian scene has become overcrowded, its messages garbled and its stance somewhat undignified.

So what concepts are relief agencies using today to distinguish their third-party, humanitarian position in war? Many of the more mature have done some hard thinking about the principles of their position and the nature of their stance in today's conflicts. But despite their commitment to such thinking, attempts at a real breakthrough in the development of an over-arching principle for their position have achieved very little. To a large degree this is because different agencies have different views on where they stand. As a result, the new NGO codes and principles still lack the kind of clarity, brevity, and irresistible persuasiveness which might impress militiamen at checkpoints or convince a beleaguered government enduring the attacks of a rebel army.4 The established humanitarian principles and conventional language which relief agencies have traditionally used to formulate their humanitarian stance are sounding distinctly hollow, confused, and even hypocritical in the mouths of today's multitude of international civilian and military organisations which operate with a humanitarian mandate. More precise understanding and usage of these terms might make for clearer positions. In the meantime, it is perhaps small wonder that the precise meaning of words like 'impartiality' has evaporated in recent years in a world where, in the same emergency, a Red Cross nurse can use the term to describe her medical programme and a UN commander can use the same word to describe air strikes.

Humanity, neutrality, and impartiality

Relief agencies traditionally assert their humanitarian position with the three key terms of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality. These three guiding principles (which also herald the opening of UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 (1991), which attempted to define humanitarian assistance in the 'new world order' after the Cold War) are of course lifted straight from the top three of the Red Cross and Crescent Movement’s seven guiding principles as formalised in 1965.5 Indeed, most humanitarian language which emerges from the mouths of NGOs and UN forces is in fact little more than the rebounding and frequently distorted echo of the language and principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement — an echo which, as we have seen, sounds particularly incongruous when it issues from the mouths of stridently political NGOs or heavily armed UN soldiers. Nevertheless, these three ideals are currently being actively reaffirmed in various forms in an effort to make them work again for today's civil wars, and for the new range of international third-party organisations which seek to find a role within these wars. The confusion seems to arise because different agencies are using the same language to describe different positions or no positions.

Humanity and its heresies

The first principle, that of humanity, apparently remains the least controversial, and is the principle most easily asserted by relief agencies, international politicians, and UN forces alike. However, much of the agreement on the principle of humanity seems to cluster around a somewhat heretical understanding of this principle. There are perhaps two particular heresies in play: first, a reductionist one which commodifies humanitarianism and relates it solely to material help; and secondly, an aggrandising one which tends towards making humanitarianism non-negotiable in war. The former is a heresy of substance (what), and the latter a heresy of approach (how).

The core of the Red Cross and Red Crescent definition of humanity is the desire 'to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found ... to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being'. Here is enshrined the classical definition of humanity. Although brief, it embodies a sense of humanity in all its fullness, showing the humanitarian quest to be much more than a purely physical pursuit aimed only at saving life. Rather, the actual meaning of humanity transcends mere physical existence to embrace 'respect for the human being'. This phrase is essential, because it extends the purview of humanitarianism to rights (such as religious freedom and fair trial) which are well beyond the simple right to life,
and are clearly spelled out in the Geneva Conventions. As Pictet points out, the humanitarian ideal of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement actually extends to a person’s ‘life, liberty and happiness— in other words everything which constitutes his [sic] existence’ (Pictet, 1979:26).

The first heresy which is so evident in current usage of the principle of humanity caricatures humanitarianism as an essentially materialistic concern for physical welfare, manifested in the provision of a range of commodities such as food, water, shelter, and medicine. This commodification of humanitarianism and its subsequent reduction to a package of ‘humanitarian assistance’ is a serious heresy which undermines wider humanitarian values. To interpret humanitarianism as an essentially minimalist endeavour relating to simple human survival is a misreading of its first principle. The Geneva Conventions are full of civil and political rights, as well as rights relating to simple physical survival. Restricting humanitarian concerns to relief commodities precludes many other vital aspects of the Geneva Conventions which relate to Pictet’s notions of liberty and happiness. Without recognising humanitarianism’s concern for all types of rights, humanitarian reductionists actually minimise the rights of those they seek to help. Recognition of this heresy may well be liberating and serve to free people from a conundrum which is more imagined than real. NGOs in particular seem to have convinced themselves that a humanitarian position and a human-rights position are somehow at odds with each other. This is obviously not the case: a truly humanitarian position on the plight of civilian populations in war, as articulated in the IV Geneva Convention, is firmly position in the full spectrum of human rights. Tragically, much time and ink may have been wasted in recent years, trying to find a way of reconciling human rights and humanitarianism, when in fact they were never divided in the first place.

The second heresy is exemplified in some new language. Instead of the simple principle of humanity, most relief agencies have now adopted the more cumbersome (and perhaps sinister) term ‘the humanitarian imperative’. This is presumably in the hope that by giving the principle of humanity an imperative gloss and making it unreservedly a moral absolute, the phrase will present humanitarianism as a non-negotiable, almost genetic and biological force, so always over-riding the position of the warring factions. In addition, the humanitarian imperative usually seems to relate solely to ‘humanitarian assistance’— the minimum package of relief commodities which donor governments are prepared to allow as emergency aid and which typifies the first heresy.

Very much in the Gallic humanitarian tradition, this second heresy gives humanitarianism a non-negotiable aspect. This is at odds with the spirit of classical humanitarianism, which has always recognised that it must negotiate its place in violence, assuming the right of human beings to wage war, but seeking to limit the effects of that war with the consent of the warring parties. The Geneva Conventions recognise that warring parties have rights as well as obligations in agreeing how humanitarianism should be realised in war. By implying that the rights are all on the side of the relief agencies and the victims of war, current interpretations of ‘the humanitarian imperative’ may optimistically (and even illegally) imply the automatic presence of relief agencies in war and undermine the very serious negotiation which needs to take place between warring leaders and humanitarians to ensure that humanitarian action is fair.

Perhaps the worst aspect of the non-negotiable heresy is that it is so unrealistic. In reality, unless assistance is delivered by force, humanitarianism will always be negotiable. While it is highly likely that altruism in its most universal form is innate to human nature and even an important aspect in the survival and evolution of all species, there is also no doubt that it is usually in fierce competition with human traits which tend towards inhumanity, like fear, oppression, self-determination, enmity, hatred, aggression and violence. There is, therefore, something rather simplistic and imperious about the new phrase ‘the humanitarian imperative’. It displays some humanitarians’ exaggerated sense of their own importance within a people’s vision of their own conflict, suggesting that the new wave of humanitarian ideologues have failed to grasp that conflicting societies are usually deadly serious about their right to wage war. In contrast, less grandiose humanitarians who have experience of representing humanitarian values in war realise that they are usually pleading for a minority position, and one which has to be nurtured when it cannot be imposed.
Finally, it is also worth noting what might be an inconsistency rather than a heresy in the current use of the principle of humanity and its new imperative. Many relief agencies, like the politicians whom they frequently criticise, tend to be extremely selective about the various humanitarian ‘imperatives’ around the world. In an Orwellian fashion, it seems that all crises that threaten the lives of civilians are imperative, but some are more imperative than others. The more imperative emergencies are of course usually determined by the Realpolitik imperatives of relief agencies’ donor governments, and by the financial or promotional imperatives of competing relief agencies. Thus behind the rhetoric there is an element of bluster and even hypocrisy when relief agencies talk about ‘the humanitarian imperative’. Dropping the new term and reverting to the more extensive and more dignified original principle of humanity might be wise.

The temptation to abandon neutrality

Of the three classical principles which seek to underpin a humanitarian position, neutrality is the one from which most agencies and all military peacekeeping doctrine are in retreat. As suggested above, there is now a majority view that neutrality is either undesirable, because it is equated with being unprincipled, or is simply unachievable in practice, because relief aid is so frequently manipulated. However, the recent pariah status of neutrality in the humanitarian’s lexicon seems to stem from a widespread misunderstanding of the term. As Denise Plattner has pointed out, although it is much talked about, there is no definition of neutral humanitarian assistance, and her 11 criteria go far to determine the parameters of what such a definition might encompass (Plattner, 1996).

In its strict sense, humanitarian neutrality is not the neutralism of Dante and African Rights. Truly neutral relief workers and peacemakers are not indifferent, unprincipled, and vacillating creatures destined for the vestibule of hell. On the contrary, they have a determined commitment to particular ideals. They have already taken a stand, and for them neutrality is ultimately the operational means to achieve their humanitarian ideals within an environment which is essentially hostile to those ideals. For the ICRC and for other relief agencies which choose such a position, neutrality is thus a pragmatic operational posture. Far from being unprincipled or amoral, it allows them to implement their ideals, within the limits prescribed by international humanitarian law.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent definition of neutrality is enshrined in its third fundamental principle:

*In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.*

Within this principle, Pictet has emphasised the important distinction between military neutrality and ideological neutrality (Pictet, 1979: 54–9). Being neutral means taking no part in military operations and no part in ideological battles. Drawing on the work of scholars who have defined the constituent parts of State neutrality, and on Pictet’s commentary on ICRC neutrality, Plattner agrees that the three key ingredients to a neutral position are abstention, prevention, and impartiality. For an organisation, as for a State, ‘abstention’ means no involvement in military or ideological activity. ‘Prevention’ obliges the organisation to ensure that neither party is able to use the organisation to its advantage. ‘Impartiality’ requires the organisation to apply equal terms to the warring parties in its dealings with them (Plattner, 1996:164). As such, Plattner concludes that ‘neutrality may therefore be understood as a duty to abstain from any act which, in a conflict situation, might be interpreted as furthering the interests of one party to the conflict or jeopardising those of the other’ (ibid., p. 165).

While perhaps approving this definition in theory, seasoned relief workers and peacekeepers will of course seize quickly on the word ‘interpreted’. As they know only too well, in the extremely contested arena of war and political emergencies, the devil is in the interpretation of actions and events. Perception is everything and varies from faction to faction in conditions where one group’s legitimate relief is seen by another group as an obvious contribution to the war effort of the enemy. African Rights is thus correct in condemning the ‘tendency to believe that neutrality need only be asserted to be proved’ (African Rights, 1994: 24). In reality it has to be proved by rigorous adherence to the principles of abstention, prevention, and impartiality, and by constant negotiation, thorough appraisal of the conditions of the
Relief agencies and moral standing in war

respective parties, and continual recourse to the precepts of the Geneva Conventions.

Apart from the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which still rigorously uphold it, few other agencies still draw on the concept of neutrality to stake out their position in war. One determined exception is UNICEF and its Operation Lifeline in South Sudan (OLS), which has worked hard to draw up and disseminate a set of humanitarian principles. In doing so, they have firmly embraced the principle of neutrality:

_The guiding principle of Operation Lifeline is that of humanitarian neutrality—an independent status for humanitarian work beyond political or military considerations._ (Levine, 1995)

The many NGOs which have rejected the notion of neutrality have done so for two main reasons. First, as Plattner points out, they feel that it often imposes an unacceptable silence upon them in the face of grievous violations of human rights (Plattner, 1996: 169-70). What Pictet has described as the inevitable ‘reserve’ required of the neutral (Pictet, 1979:53) is considered to be too high a price to pay for NGOs who mandate themselves as advocates of human rights and social justice. Secondly, abiding by neutrality’s commitment to prevention and abstention seems increasingly unfeasible in the light of what we now know about the manipulation of relief supplies, and the fact that combatants and civilians are intrinsically mixed in today’s civil wars. For example, in the same article in which UNICEF argues for neutrality, the apparent paradox of its position is made clear. Within a matter of a few column inches, it also eloquently makes the case for why such neutrality is not so simple and is perceived by many as impossible to achieve in today’s wars:

_The military are not a distinct group, separated from the civilian population, but are fathers, brothers, sons frequently returning to their homes. Clearly, in such circumstances, women and children who have received aid from OLS agencies are not going to refuse to feed their own family members._ (Levine, 1995)

Despite these problems, UNICEF is one of the very few agencies which is trying to observe and apply the principle of neutrality in its work. But while neutrality may be right for some organisations, it is certainly not right for all of them. Some are bound to find it offensive to the mandates they give themselves. Also, as African Rights points out, the majority of organisations will find that they simply do not have the means—in terms of diplomatic and political contacts, finances or professional competence—to negotiate and secure a rigorous position of neutrality in their relief work (African Rights, 1994:24). Nevertheless, these factors do not mean that neutrality in itself is not possible, nor that it is an unprincipled means of operating. In the right hands and in pursuit of the right ideals recognised in international humanitarian law, neutrality is an extremely valuable principle. Relief agencies need to decide if they are going to abide by it or not. If they are, they should ensure that they acquire the appropriate skills. If they are not, they should not discredit the principle simply on the grounds that it is at odds with their own mandate and capabilities.

**Embracing impartiality**

Because of their difficulties with neutrality, most NGOs have abandoned the concept and embraced its close relation, impartiality. In common with most other NGOs, ACORD (a European NGO consortium with extensive and considered experience of working in political emergencies and war in Africa) has determinedly reasserted the principle of impartiality over that of neutrality as the guiding ethic of its operations in war:

_Whereas neutrality dictated that ACORD could take no position of any kind in a conflict, impartiality means upholding accepted human values irrespective of the allegiance of those involved._

While ACORD rejects neutrality, it affirms the notion of impartiality. But it has misunderstood the principle of neutrality. For, as we have seen, neutrality may stop an organisation from taking sides (militarily or ideologically) and protect it from public criticism, but it does not prevent an organisation from having a principled position, based on firm ideals. The classical definition of impartiality, taken from the Red Cross and Red Crescent principles, is that an organisation

makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

As Pictet (1979:37-43) and others have pointed out, the principle of impartiality is therefore
built on the twin pillars of non-discrimination of person and proportionality of need. In other words, the similarity of all people but the differences in their needs should at all times determine the judgements of the impartial humanitarian, in the light of the objective precepts of humanitarian law.

The attraction of impartiality over neutrality for most NGOs and UN forces is that the concept permits the impartial person to be judgemental — albeit not gratuitously so, but in line with agreed values. Pictet caricatures the difference between neutrality and impartiality thus: ‘the neutral man [sic] refuses to make a judgement, whereas the one who is impartial judges a situation in accordance with pre-established rules’ (1979: 53). NGO policy has pounced on the objectivity of impartiality and its potential for being judgemental. For advocacy-driven NGOs and robust peacekeepers alike, impartiality seems to offer the most scope for justifying a strategy of speaking out or shooting out, while also maintaining humanitarian values.

The Medecins Sans Frontieres movement (MSF) has sought to emphasise that impartiality need not be passive or condone human-rights violations, by adhering to a more refined expression of the principle: the notion of ‘active impartiality’. The active dimension of MSF’s impartiality refers to the fact that they will speak out and condemn any party in a conflict which they see as breaching human rights or humanitarian law. The development of this harder interpretation of impartiality is, therefore, determinedly not neutral and abstentionist. Public criticism will be made against people or groups on the basis of what they do, but not on the basis of who they are. Impartiality in this context relates to the various factions or parties involved, but rejects the idea of abstention in the face of human-rights abuses. The idea of active impartiality might therefore be summed up as impartiality to persons, but partiality to their actions.

**Leaning towards solidarity**

A fourth concept is gaining increasing currency within debates about humanitarian positioning: it is that of ‘solidarity’. This represents the stance of those who wish to abandon both neutrality and impartiality. African Rights and others have suggested that, in many political emergencies and wars, the notion of solidarity might be the most appropriate guiding principle around which relief agencies could align their operational position. In its paper *Humanitarianism Unbound*, African Rights states that ‘It is arguable that solidarity is the most important principle of all’, adding that ‘what solidarity operations have in common is a political goal shared with the people’ (African Rights, 1994: 26, 27). The writer defines ‘genuine solidarity in relief work’ as including four main components:

1) Human rights objectivity and the pursuit of justice. This means a commitment to pursuing an agenda based on a set of rights. 2) Consultation with and accountability to the people with whom solidarity is expressed. 3) Shared risk and suffering with the people. 4) Concrete action in support of the people and their cause. This may include providing relief and/or political or human rights lobby and advocacy. (African Rights, 1994:27)

The idea of solidarity obviously involves taking sides. Such a concept may be anathema to many people who give to and work for NGOs, and it is certainly in opposition to classical humanitarian principles. But in both Christian moral theology and development work based on social justice, there is an important tradition of taking sides. Albert Nolan, a Dominican veteran of the South African liberation struggle, is a leading advocate of this position:

> In some conflicts one side is right and the other side is wrong ... In such cases a policy of seeking consensus and not taking sides would be quite wrong. Christians are not supposed to try and reconcile good and evil, justice and injustice; we are supposed to do away with evil, injustice and sin.

Such a solidarity-based approach is obviously easier when the sides are clearly drawn, when right and wrong are as distinct as night and day, and when the wronged can be easily distinguished from the wrong. But such clarity is not always the case in today’s internal wars, and the principle of solidarity can seldom be applied with confidence in many conflicts. Solidarity is a principle which was right for those who backed long-established (and often non-violent) resistance movements like the civil-rights movement in the USA or the liberation movements in South Africa and Eastern Europe. It is also one which should always be actively applied in genocide as in Rwanda. But in wars like those in Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, the ‘good’ sides are not so clearly identifiable. At a practical level, the application
of solidarity faces problems too. The tenuous nature of the chain of command in today's wars can compromise the principle of taking sides. Political and military leaders (whether intentionally or not) often have little control over those who carry out atrocities in their name, meaning that solidarity can all too easily become solidarity with excessive and uncoordinated violence.

In an attempt to avoid these pitfalls, a certain element of humanitarian discourse has adapted the notion of solidarity and claimed solidarity not with those who are 'right', but with those who are somehow regarded as 'innocent'. In this analysis (which might be called 'innocence-based solidarity'), the lowest common denominator of innocence is usually drawn along lines of sex and age. So women, children, and the elderly are perceived as 'the innocent' and as 'vulnerable groups' who merit the solidarity of relief agencies. But, as the above quotation from UNICEF makes clear, such a position is often simplistic and ill-informed. This kind of innocence-based solidarity is thus equally precarious as a general principle of humanitarian action. And Levine's lament about current humanitarian action is apt when considering the conflict between classical humanitarianism and its detractors: 'we have not worked out what it means to be neutral in a conflict yet in solidarity with all its victims'.

Moral stance and personal morale

Beyond the desire to clarify humanitarian principles, there is another reason why a clear sense of the moral positioning of third-party organisations in war is so important: its effect on staff morale. Being a third party to the wanton cruelty and violence in so many of today's civil wars is personally testing for individual relief workers. Even with the clearest sense of purpose, an individual can feel all the recriminations of being a by-stander in the face of appalling atrocities. Experiencing the violence and destruction around them in places like Rwanda, Bosnia, and Liberia, it is usual for most relief workers to experience a gamut of emotions which range from pity and compassion through powerlessness, frustration, and fear, to anger and outright hostility to all concerned. It is common for several of these emotions to be experienced simultaneously in an individual. It seems equally common for individuals to swing from one end of the spectrum to another at different intervals. At the hostile end of the spectrum, it becomes possible to categorise a whole people as somehow deranged and sub-human.

Humanitarians seldom do anything obvious to stop the causes of the violence around them. Their impact is usually only palliative; at best they become some small beacon of alternative humane values in the midst of inhumanity. Because of this frequent inability to stop the violence around them, many humanitarians and peace-keepers have to deal with what might be termed 'by-stander anxiety'. It is this anxiety which perhaps underlies the concerns of NGOs in particular to be dissatisfied with classical humanitarianism and move towards notions of active impartiality and solidarity. Although not necessarily the case, public silence is feared as the hallmark of the by-stander, and so advocacy becomes all-important to NGOs.

In such a context, it becomes extremely important for relief workers to know where their particular organisation stands and what position it is taking as a third party. Their own personal contribution must make sense as a moral and active one within the violence around them, and such activity must be clearly explained in terms of whichever principle — neutrality, impartiality, or solidarity — their organisation has chosen to pursue. In this way, the individual can interpret his or her role within the violence beyond that of a by-stander, consciously countering the invidious feelings of by-stander anxiety with a definite vision and understanding of his or her position.

Behind the words

To sum up, the semantic manoeuvring around humanitarian principles which currently preoccupies humanitarian policy-makers is symptomatic of the confusion which arises when so many different types of third-party organisation seek to clarify their moral position in political emergencies and war today. Not surprisingly, however, the variety of shifting positions and their mutating vocabulary create confusion, and the humanitarian community
still seeks a decisive moral banner under which to go about its business. The result is that the notions of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality, which traditionally underpinned classical humanitarianism, are being stretched or abandoned and so risk being undermined in a process in which they come to mean different things to different people.

Yet behind the word-play there is a definite determination to preserve the old values of humanitarianism, while applying them within the byzantine politics (local and international) of today's emergencies. Most of the different attempts to reframe humanitarian principles seem to have three main ideals in common: a commitment to the principle of humanity — albeit it in a minimal form; a desire to speak out (or shoot out) in the face of human-rights abuses; and a guarantee of third-party immunity for humanitarian agencies. The current word-play of most relief agencies shows them attempting to combine these three ideals into a single position. Relief agencies are eager to assure themselves and others that they subscribe to a morality beyond the sanctity of human life alone. However, as has been argued, such an anxiety is based on an unnecessarily minimalist interpretation of the principle of humanity. In reality, the principle of humanity as respect for the whole human person and as developed in the Geneva Conventions easily embraces the wider moral concerns of NGOs. Instead of agonising over new mission statements and giving added nuance to old principles, many relief agencies should perhaps spend more time reading the Geneva Conventions (particularly the IV Convention) and adopt them as the best possible bulwark of their position in war. It is to their shame that the number of NGOs and their staff who are familiar with the Geneva Conventions, and who refer to them in their work, is pitifully few.

With so many agencies (civilian and military) now operating in and around humanitarian programmes, a range of positions from classical neutrality to solidarity is to be expected and desired in any given emergency. But every agency is responsible for making its position clear for the sake of the credibility of the important principles involved, as well as for morale of the suffering community in question and the individual relief workers working with them. The challenge is to clarify humanitarian terms and the principles to which they refer, so preserving their legitimacy and effectiveness in war. The best way to do this is to work together with the laws and principles we have already — most notably the IV Geneva Convention — and so to concentrate our efforts on thinking how to improve what we have. Gathering round the banner of international humanitarian law in this way should bring a double boon: first it will provide a united front and common forum for action and thinking on humanity in war; and secondly, by taking so principled and obvious a stand, we might just avoid the vestibule of hell.

References


Notes

1 This is a shortened version of a paper which also explored the moral stance of UN Peacekeeping Forces and which will be published as a chapter in Aspects of Peacekeeping, edited by Stuart Gordon (London: Frank Cass, forthcoming 1998).
3 See Jean Guillermand, 'The historical foundations of humanitarian action, part I: The religious influence', International Review of the Red Cross No. 298, 1994, and also 'Part II: Humanism and philosophical thought' No. 299.
4 See, for example, the Code of Conduct for the Red Cross Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, Geneva 1994; the Providence Principles from Brown University, 1991; and the Mohonk Criteria for Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies, World Conference on Religion and Peace, 1994.
5 The seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement were proclaimed by the Twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross in Vienna 1965.
Relief agencies and moral standing in war

They are Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality.

6 See, for example, the Code of Conduct, op. cit.

7 Gallic debate on humanitarianism has tended to be particularly strident in recent decades, evolving around the notion of 'sans frontières' and its conviction in the droit d'ingérence. While such robust relief ideology has its place alongside military intervention, it lacks a certain subtlety in situations where forceful intervention is not available or not necessary and where negotiation is inevitable and desirable.

8 See for example Article 23, IV Geneva Convention.


13In the extensive literature on the Jewish Holocaust, the word 'by-stander' has emerged as one of the most damning. The particularly odious image of a by-stander thus seems to make it an appropriate term to express relief workers' fears.

14Effective action is not always to be equated with speaking out. Much can be achieved in silence. Indeed, discretion and secrecy may be the optimal strategy in many particular situations.

The author

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The humanitarian responsibilities of the United Nations Security Council: ensuring the security of the people

Juan Somavia

Introduction

The question of the humanitarian responsibilities of the Security Council is for me a natural sequel to the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, of which I was Chair. It concerns the challenge of putting people at the centre of development and international cooperation, this time in a different sphere of action within the United Nations (UN). Humanitarian tasks and development objectives continually intersect and reinforce each other. They are not sequential, but different dimensions of an integrated understanding of how to promote the security of people. A comprehensive and integrated view of these questions goes far beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, I shall limit myself to matters that the Council should deal with more urgently.

Conceptual framework, definitions, and key issues

The UN Charter confers on the Security Council prime responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Until recently, this has been understood basically to mean disputes among States with international consequences. Yet these two concepts — peace and security, the very conceptual foundations for the UN’s mission — are undergoing a radical change in the way they are perceived.

Peace, as we know, is much more than the mere absence of war. It has come to mean harmony within as well as among nations. Countries which are not actively ‘at war’ with other countries are not necessarily at peace with themselves. In an era when individual people and communities struggle to hold their own against seemingly insuperable odds, peace increasingly means more than the absence of threats and discrimination. It means freedom from fear and want. For people everywhere, the heart of peace is peace within our own hearts, within our families, our schools, our workplaces, our communities. Peace has acquired a human dimension far larger than the original State-centred notion of the UN Charter; and we have learned that its absence at the local and national levels can have multiple international implications.

The concept of security is also evolving. Today it means inclusion, cohesion, and integration — a sense of belonging to a society and a prevailing order within and among nations that is predicated on fairness and respect for differences and human dignity. The only legitimate (and lasting) security is security rooted in the well-being of people. We have all observed that you can have a secure State — in the traditional sense — full of insecure people who face poverty, destitution, and threats to their integrity. The security of people has thus emerged as a complementary and distinct notion from that of the security of the State.

Another important evolution has been the growing presence on the Security Council agenda of internal conflicts in which the ‘parties to a dispute’ are not sovereign States but rather groups or factions within a State, sometimes mere warlords, most of whom do not represent an entity with the attributes of a State as defined by the traditional norms of international law.

The first ten years of the Security Council’s activities were marked by State conflicts arising out of Cold War situations, the initial tensions of the decolonisation process, threats of external aggression, and traditional frontier-disputes among countries. In each, the humanitarian dimension existed but was not a central feature of the dispute.

In the last ten years, by contrast, the agenda of the Security Council has been fraught with civil wars in which the threat to civilian lives
The humanitarian responsibilities of the United Nations Security Council

looms paramount. Suffice it to mention Namibia, Cambodia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Afghanistan, Georgia, Angola, Mozambique, and Liberia — as well as Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Former Yugoslavia — to know what we mean. In these types of conflict, it is increasingly civilians (unarmed and unprotected) who are the principal victims. During World War I, five per cent of all casualties were civilians; in Cambodia and Rwanda, almost 95 per cent were.

Further, it is understood that the Security Council operates under the aegis of the basic principles of international law, a central tenet of which is non-interference in the internal affairs of States. Yet, if the Council is to be effective in promoting solutions and agreements to end this type of conflict, it inevitably becomes deeply involved in the internal affairs of the society in question. Moreover, if the crisis is serious enough, there are, understandably, strong public calls for the Council to 'do something' to prevent death and destruction.

Recently, the Security Council has repeatedly been told: 'Look at the horrible tragedies that are going on in the world. Do something about them!' But the whole tradition of diplomacy leads elsewhere. It is difficult to apply classical diplomacy to these new conflicts.

The evolution of the concepts of peace and security — against the backdrop of mainly internal conflicts posing grave threats to civilians, and an international public opinion that demands action — raises new issues that require the Council to re-examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of existing instruments and traditional diplomatic courses of action. This suggests that a stronger link must develop between the UN, the Security Council, and organisations like Oxfam which are on the ground, doing humanitarian work, touching those societies, looking into the eyes of the people in danger, learning who they are and what is going on, who the factions are, and what relations people have with their leaders — much of which never gets to the table of the Security Council.

A window on civil society

Maintaining peace and security must take into account the underlying causes of conflict, often development-related, as well as the expressions of power-struggles among leaders and factions. The nature of preventive diplomacy, conflict-resolution, peace-making, and peace-building, however, is still too State-centric. Together, governments and civil society must evolve a more dynamic concept and praxis, within which non-government actors play a key role. The notion of what some of us call 'preventive development' is crucial: conflicts often have their origins in socio-economic conditions, but are too often dealt with as if they were exclusively political problems. We need to link analysis of the development causes to the actual political processes under way. We can also build upon the lessons learned from experiences of conflict-resolution efforts at the inter-personal level and within divided communities, which are sometimes more relevant than classical dispute-resolution tools.

The tendency to think of peace and security in State-centric terms also fails to take into account the multiple social and economic factors which underpin the security of people, or the vital need to safeguard and support individual actors in civil society, whose energy and mutual confidence are essential to maintaining peace and security in the long term.

A critical feature of the last decade is the civil-society movement, which is burgeoning all over the world. The impact of non-government actors of immense variety — representatives of trade unions, churches, voluntary groups, and grassroots organisations — has been tremendous. It is now generally acknowledged that together they have helped to shape our contemporary definitions of sustainable development, population, gender, and human rights, and in their characteristically practical style they have pushed governments to develop the means to translate these concepts into action.

But they are also centrally involved in humanitarian relief, thus helping to increase the chances of conflict-resolution. The essentially internal dimensions of contemporary crisis — and the increasingly central role played by non-government actors in forging a culture of sustainable peace — have brought NGOs and other non-government actors much closer than before to the analysis and action of international political affairs. This is happening de facto, but, in my view, it is insufficiently recognised by the Security Council. Consequently, the experience of humanitarian organisations is being under-used.

The Council's method of work and mandate are sufficiently broad to incorporate, in an appropriate way, inputs from civil-society organisations within its scope of operations. However, these elements are less than broadly
From conflict to peace in a changing world

interpreted — and much less than flexibly applied. Indeed, while acknowledging the highly sensitive nature of the Council’s work, more widespread consultation and transparent decision-making is necessary, not only to enhance accountability vis-à-vis the General Assembly, member governments, and public opinion, but also to provide a broader basis of information, experience, and professional advice for its decision-making.

Given that so many non-government actors are now involved in assisting, safeguarding, and enhancing the security of people threatened by conflict, it is only logical that their role should be fully acknowledged and that they should be enabled (safely and successfully) to make their specific humanitarian contribution. It is thus in practical terms that I wish to consider the Security Council here.

I am convinced that the Security Council itself could be better organised to this end. Here, I would refer to several provocative suggestions set forth in an excellent report entitled The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwandan Experience. It contains a number of practical suggestions, highlighting a re-invigorated role for the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), as well as the role of regional organisations and NGOs, the military, the judiciary, and the media, which are well worth considering.

The consultations could evolve from existing contacts with humanitarian NGOs undertaken by the DHA, and have an informal character.

Security of humanitarian relief

What forms of protection exist for the non-government community in situations of armed conflict and in complex emergencies threatening the lives of large numbers of civilians?

As we have seen, with the end of the Cold War, the UN has become increasingly involved in resolving conflict within States in crisis. Calls upon the UN to take a proactive role in responding to complex emergencies have increased apace. In this context, the safety on the ground of UN and non-UN personnel alike has become a pressing issue. Staff of Oxfam and other NGOs have fallen victim to brutal attacks and harassment over the past year. In addition to the Oxfam worker recently killed in Angola, three Red Cross workers were murdered in Burundi in June 1996. The irony is that, while their loss was mourned among many in the non-government community, it provoked nowhere near the response that the loss of uniformed military personnel has elicited in connection with UN peace-building operations elsewhere.

Indeed, sometimes governments appear more willing to sacrifice the lives of relief workers than they do those of their own troops: the former serve out of the conviction that their presence builds peace; the latter accept participation in the dangers of conflict as part of their terms of service. Yet it is often non-uniformed relief and development workers who are on the front-lines of conflicts in which some governments are reluctant to commit their own troops.

This situation is quite incredible: one group are the professionals — instructed and trained to deal with danger — and yet, for various internal political reasons, governments are unwilling to place them at risk. The other group are there out of conviction, out of their beliefs and values, and are prepared to face the dangers and difficulties. Yet relief and development workers operate with far fewer resources or forms of protection, and stay long after the active fighting has ceased — often remaining until security in its fullest sense is assured, or until it is patently impossible for them to stay.

Some would argue that relief and development workers have become de facto
advance troops in conflicts where States parties have no real political intent or practical means to guarantee their safety — let alone to achieve peace. Others allege that the political and humanitarian dimensions of complex emergencies are poorly understood, and that lack of coherent assessment, priority-setting, and field operations on the part of the international community not only prolongs the agony of people living in countries in crisis, but puts at risk those trying to help them.

The Security Council itself, in light of the tragedies which have unfolded over the course of the past five years in Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia, Burundi, Georgia, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia and elsewhere, has begun to refer explicitly in its decisions to the role of non-government humanitarian actors in peace-building and emergency situations. A recent statement on Somalia by the President of the Security Council reflects this trend: The Security Council considers the uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian assistance to be a crucial factor in the overall security and stability of Somalia. I consider this to be a very significant political recognition of the role that humanitarian agencies are playing in situations of conflict.

Humanitarian concerns have indeed become central to the calculus of whether and how the UN's continued (official) presence in a country can advance the peace-building process. On Liberia, statements by the President have been equally direct, noting that, as of early April 1996, 'factional fighting, the harassment and abuse of the civilian population and humanitarian and relief workers' had increased to the point that the country's political leaders 'risk[ed] losing the support of the international community'.

The challenge is to develop a series of interlocking legal and logical safeguards that are shored up by the political will of countries to enforce them, and operationalised through a coherent UN system that functions in tandem with regional, national, and local institutions. The ultimate responsibility for peace, however, rests with those in power in a given country. I deliberately avoid the use of the word 'government', for often those in power have not necessarily been elected, nor do they conduct themselves with any sense of civic obligation towards majority rule, or the capacity to govern effectively. Their claim to legitimacy often rests on nothing more than having gained physical control of the capital city and seat of government through force. Pressure can nonetheless be brought to bear upon those in power: pressure not only to resolve a conflict, but to respect the humanity of individuals engaged in building the foundations of a sustainable peace, whether formally in partnership with the UN or independently.

I also believe that the Council should consider the compelling issue of strengthened legal provisions for the protection of humanitarian workers. This is an extremely complex issue, but we know that law is only as vigorous as its application. We must address the challenges of implementing international humanitarian law (IHL). Discourse on this subject has occupied policy-makers and academics for the better part of the past century; however, I raise it here because of the compelling nature — indeed, the urgency — of the subject, given the proliferation of highly complex conflicts in which the principal disputants appear increasingly dismissive of these fundamental anchors of global order. Given, too, the multiplicity of agents involved in relief work, we must find new ways to strengthen the legal safeguards available.

There is a lacuna in international law today, where non-government workers act more or less autonomously in a conflict situation, unprotected. All there is at present is a UN convention that safeguards those who perform humanitarian work done in agreement and under the aegis of the framework of the UN — but no-one else.

Oxfam and others in civil society might press for the creation of a separate convention which explicitly protects non-government personnel and others affiliated to UN relief efforts — whether or not they operate directly under the umbrella of UN control. I believe we should explore what kinds of protection and enforcement should be guaranteed by such a convention. Who would adjudicate it? and how could reporting and related enforcement be expeditiously and effectively ensured?

What can be done to strengthen the mechanisms for the implementation of IHL? As we know, signatory States are enjoined, under the Geneva Conventions, to respect core provisions concerning the protection of the sick and wounded, prisoners of war, and civilians. Through a mix of injunctions and prohibitions on contracting parties, the Conventions seek to protect 'undefended localities' from attack, while at the same time forbidding murder,
From conflict to peace in a changing world

...torture, collective punishment, and hostage-taking — all of which are woefully common in contemporary conflict.

However, as argued in Oxfam's September 1995 position paper prepared on the occasion of the UN's 50th Anniversary (provocatively entitled 'A Failed Opportunity?'), international humanitarian law, including the Geneva Conventions, is upheld in very few modern conflicts ... the debate about addressing the problem concentrates more on limiting the rights of States, rather than seeking to enforce the rights of individuals.

This is a very apt assessment.

The fact that sanctions on States in breach of the Conventions are extremely problematic has led some to suggest that individual reprisals are preferable. The recent tribunals established to address war crimes in the Former Yugoslavia and genocide in Rwanda, respectively, offer a useful example of mechanisms for punishing individuals who violate the rules of IHL. It is encouraging to recognise that people throughout the world are saying: 'enough — an end to impunity'. Think about the difference in our collective consciousness from the days of Pol Pot — and the genocide of millions in Cambodia, where there were no tribunals — and our efforts today.

However, the operational (and financial) challenges faced by these tribunals is sobering. And even if an individual approach is pursued, there are blank spots in the Geneva Conventions; for example, they do not cover 'gender crimes', like large-scale and individual rape as a method of torture and intimidation.

Herein, States can and must exercise their responsibility to ensure that IHL is respected and rights observed. The difficulty in bringing to justice the Serbian leaders Karadzic and Mladic, together with less visible Croatian and Bosnian personnel indicted, is a clear example: a painful reminder of the separation between the notion that becomes law, and the capacity to make the law become reality.

Above all, the importance of international NGO contributions to humanitarian efforts cannot and should not be allowed to substitute for political will on the part of governments. Neither reforms in the organisation of the Security Council and its consultative mechanisms, nor the creation of additional legal protections for humanitarian workers, can substitute for what governments and governments alone can do. Governments have the responsibility to use their political clout, military capability, financial means, and diplomatic capacity to help to solve these conflicts. The increasing role of humanitarian agencies is no excuse for their inaction. Highlighting the role of NGOs should serve to reinforce the responsibility of governments in this field.

Making sanctions more humane and effective

How does the international community engage itself in addressing the consequences of sanctions for civilians? The consequences of conflict include large numbers of refugees and displaced persons; famines and shortages of food and water; prisoners of war and combatants missing in action; violations of human rights; genocide and gross breaches of international humanitarian law; and also the effects of economic sanctions.

With limitations, there exist international mechanisms to address some of these consequences: among them, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the World Food Programme (WFP); the Geneva Conventions; the human-rights mechanisms of the UN system; and the international criminal tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, as well as the Commission of Inquiry for Burundi.

By contrast, economic sanctions are a rough, blunt, and extremely unsophisticated measure. We need to develop policies and instruments to make sanctions more humane and, at the same time, more effective. Both the underlying concepts and the implementation mechanisms need to be reviewed, taking into account the fact that in some instances (such as in South Africa and Burundi) some local and regional actors themselves felt that sanctions were necessary.

I am not asserting that sanctions are a priori illegitimate. On the contrary, the foundation of every national legal system is the notion that breaking the law incurs a sanction. So it should be for the international system. There is no quarrel over the principle; that is why the Security Council has the authority to apply sanctions. The problem lies in the effects of applying these measures in practice.

A close read of the UN Charter reveals that sanctions essentially aim to condition the behaviour of a State which poses a threat to...
international peace and security — not to punish or otherwise exact retribution, and even less to contribute to a crisis for the civilians of the nation affected. Sanctions must be based on fundamental respect for human dignity. Indeed, the aim is to bring a State that has violated justice into good working relations within the community of nations, to cite one thoughtful interpretation.

Chapter VII of the Charter thus empowers the Security Council to use both military and non-military measures to maintain or restore international peace and security. Article 41 outlines the nature of non-military sanctions — specifying that the Council may call upon the member States of the UN to apply ‘complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communications, and the severance of diplomatic relations’ in order to give effect to the Council’s decision.

Yet the conceptual basis for sanctions is flawed, in that they are premised on implicitly democratic assumptions, but are normally leveraged upon more or less authoritarian regimes. It is assumed that the people in a targeted country who will first feel the negative impact of sanctions are sufficiently empowered to pressure the government to cease the aggression or offence which triggered the sanctions. This is seldom the case in an undemocratic setting. Moreover, Johan Galtung and others have argued that sanctions can disempower and weaken the opponents of a regime by offering a common, external enemy against which to rally collective opposition — thereby distracting attention from domestic problems.

Sanctions normally fail to affect the lives of the leaders of such regimes; instead they hit the most vulnerable the hardest; in that sense, they are highly disproportionate. While ‘humanitarian exceptions’ can be made to allow the targeted country to receive or purchase medical or food supplies, for example, there are no set guidelines for regulating when and how humanitarian assistance is to be provided.

Iraq is a good case in point. After the Gulf War, wide-ranging sanctions were applied by the Security Council in 1991, including a humanitarian exception. At the same time, a trade embargo was imposed. Iraq’s means to make use of the exception became severely limited, and the government did not give priority to food and medicine in the use of its internal resources. When data from FAO, WHO, UNICEF, and private organisations began to reveal the terrible consequences for ordinary people, the Security Council approved in 1995 the now well-known Resolution 986, which permitted the sale of oil for food and medicine. In 1996, an agreement was reached between the Secretary-General and the Government of Iraq to implement this resolution.

This situation begs the obvious question: did the Security Council have to wait until 1995, and Iraq postpone its response until 1996, to alleviate the suffering of the more destitute of the Iraqi people? Shouldn’t the ‘oil for food and medicine’ agreement have been a part of the initial sanctions resolution? Were all the deaths and infirmities necessary? What political purpose of the international community was served by them?

Furthermore, practice has shown that the targeted government will prefer to use any resources available to prop up its own power through military spending, and disbursements for the elites and the groups and factions that give it political support. The well-being of the general population (which, under authoritarian conditions, has little ability to react) has not proven to be accorded priority. Iraq is a textbook case. So is the Former Yugoslavia, which chose to use existing resources to wage a regional war and support its regime and its Serbian allies, while under-reporting the impact of sanctions on civilians, so as to avoid international pressure and scrutiny.

Ultimately, sanctions as currently practised produce large-scale insecurity for ordinary people, the opposite of their intended effect. The Security Council should address the issue promptly. The principal objective would be to make sanctions regimes both more effective and more humane.

As a first step, the Council should adopt a resolution approving a set of humanitarian norms, standards, and practices applicable to any sanctions regime to be established in the future. Such guidelines should bear in mind that humanitarian requirements may differ according to the stage of development, geography, natural resources, and other features of the affected society.

A clear position by the Council would have a number of advantages. It would avoid double standards and be a practical response to a real problem which the Council was facing, and should be flexible enough to encompass
From conflict to peace in a changing world

different realities. Its end result would be to ensure that the Security Council would act in such a way as to ensure that civilians did not suffer the consequences of sanctions regimes. This approach goes much further than the General Assembly’s normal method of dealing with the matter (namely, by stating that ‘unintended adverse side effects on the civilian population should be minimised’ by appropriate humanitarian exceptions).

It is disingenuous to talk of ‘unintended side effects’, when everybody knows that the sector most affected by sanctions, as presently applied, is precisely the civilian population. There is nothing surprising or unintended about it. That is how economic sanctions actually operate in practice. We are all perfectly aware of it.

A clear position by the Security Council could address or provide a framework that would achieve the following:

- **Establish that the purpose of sanctions is to modify the behaviour of any party, not only a government, that is threatening international peace and security, not to punish or otherwise exact retribution and even less to impose hardships on the population at large. Sanctions regimes should be commensurate with these objectives, and proportionality should be a guiding criterion.**

- **Ensure that sanctions are primarily addressed to the leaders in conflict, by targeting them on the military and civilian structures that support the regime, and on the factions, groups, and warlords that are parties to a civil-war type of conflict. The impact of sanctions could be shifted from the people at large to the leaders in particular, through measures related to bank accounts, commercial interests, stocks and properties in foreign countries, and applications for residence status and visas.**

Indeed, the broader challenge is to develop effective sanctions which wholly avoid punishing civilians. One example is to place sanctions on transit rights, along with selective air and sea boycotts (except for transport of essential humanitarian goods). Other examples might be to pose limits on representation in inter-government forums; or cancel military cooperation agreements, including training and representation abroad. Yet another involves the refusal to provide arms to sanctioned regimes — including the shipment of arms already sold or promised. To date, the practical effect of arms embargoes has simply been to raise the price of arms. We must move towards commitment on the part of arms-producing countries to improve significantly the monitoring of arms transfers — in effect, to police their own dealings rigorously.

- **Include a provision for humanitarian exceptions in any sanctions regime, together with the means to make it effective. No exception will work if there are no national or international resources to draw upon. The processing of requests under the exception should be much more expeditious and contain some elements of automaticity for UN agencies, the ICRC, and reputable humanitarian NGOs. A review and evaluation of the work of the Council’s sanctions committees in relation to the impacts on civilians should be undertaken. In general, methods and procedures should be expedited.**

- **Undertake a regular evaluation by the Council of the potential and actual humanitarian effects of sanctions on the country. Rigorous criteria must be developed for judging their impact, particularly on the most marginalised and vulnerable members of society. The UN Secretary-General should also make available the following mechanisms:**
  a. Prior to imposing sanctions, an appraisal of their potential effects on ordinary people, and suggested measures to avoid them.
  b. After the entry into force of the sanctions regime, a regular evaluation of its impact on civilians and the changes necessary to counter negative impacts.
  c. To carry out such assessments and/or evaluations, the assistance of concerned international and financial institutions, relevant inter-government and regional organisations, and NGOs, should be sought.

To this end, appropriate systems must be developed for regular, unimpeded monitoring, evaluation, and dissemination of data concerning the social and economic impact of sanctions. When a crisis affecting the ordinary population is about to arise within a targeted country, it is essential that such situations be brought immediately to the attention of the Security Council, and that specific corrective steps be outlined; uniformity of assessment criteria and of sanctions rulings is vital.

- **In conflict-ridden societies, humanitarian activities are often under way before sanctions were applied. The right of the general population to bodily integrity and subsistence goods should not be violated. Thus, the authorities of the**
The humanitarian responsibilities of the United Nations Security Council

targeted country and of the different factions and parties to the conflict must commit themselves to ensuring a continuous, impartial, and expeditious delivery of humanitarian assistance. This includes the following:

a. Access to the necessary information required by UN and non-government humanitarian agencies.

b. No action to obstruct the day-to-day activities of relief workers.

c. Guarantees of the security of humanitarian personnel, their offices, homes, and operational sites.

d. Unimpeded access to conflict areas, and the use of ports, airfields, roads and other infrastructure.

The sanctions regime should consider strict measures to ensure compliance with the above.

- More generally, sanctions regimes should have clear objectives for regular review, and precise conditions for being lifted. These could entail clear warnings that sanctions are likely to be applied as a consequence of specific actions; specifying an agreed time-frame for evaluating the extension, modification, or lifting of the sanctions; and outlining provisions for progressive, partial, or early lifting (including the precise steps required from the target country).

Conclusions

Even with strengthened protections on paper for humanitarian workers, and even with the involvement of humanitarian agencies in measures to ensure that sanctions do not become 'the enemy of the good', the Security Council is ultimately a tool of governments. It can play a strong humanitarian role only at their behest.

Without the political will truly to avoid conflict, or to make the hard sacrifices necessary to preserve peace and promote long-lasting security, there is little guarantee that humanitarianism will not become deeply mired in its own inherent contradictions. For much of humanitarian 'relief' today appears even to its most ardent supporters to be a sticking plaster over the scars of years of social and economic decay, which have festered to the point that open wounds confront us with the raw reality of women, children, and the elderly alike becoming the targets of snipers — along with the people seeking to assist them.

What can we do to stem the tide of brutality and impunity? How can we heal the wounds of conflict that tear apart even societies which appear to be 'at peace'? Taking note and calling upon our governments to make human concerns central to statecraft is the first and most important step. Only when we are truly able to ensure the security of people will the Security Council itself have succeeded in its mission.

Well beyond the Council's immediate reach are the societies of its member States — indeed, all members of the family of nations. The challenge is to find ways to enthuse civil society with a renewed understanding of the contemporary means to pursue peace and security — beyond the sometimes cynical and narrowly political aims of 'diplomacy' as traditionally practised.

Among the most committed people working to achieve these aims are, in fact, individuals such as Jimmy Carter, Julius Nyerere, and Oscar Arias — all of whom have actively participated in politics at the highest level, none of whom has lost sight of the humanism which must be at the heart of humanitarianism.

If I end by mentioning outstanding personalities, it is because there is no substitute for the commitment of individual human beings within government and civil society who want to make a difference, who are prepared to act on the basis of values and vision that are rooted in the belief that human beings can ultimately find solutions to seemingly insoluble problems.

Cynics would have us believe that there is no space for values in the globalised world of today — cynics who, in the words of Oscar Wilde, 'know the price of everything and the value of nothing'. Yet we know from historical experience that humanitarian agencies in the past have always had to swim against the current, in a never-ending struggle to promote and protect the dignity of people. We know that we will not give in to the moral indifference of our days and that our ethical convictions and political decision to act are far from being exhausted. We are many and enough with the passion to make our world a better place to live.

Notes

1 This is a slightly edited version of the Gilbert Murray Memorial Lecture delivered at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford on 26 June 1996. Professor Gilbert Murray was a
founder of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) in 1942. In 1957, a lecture fund was established in his memory.


This report was prepared collectively by, among others, 19 OECD multilateral donor agencies; nine multilateral and UN agencies, representatives of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, representatives of major NGO networks worldwide, as well as expert advisers from regional diplomatic and policy circles. Among the many policy recommendations advanced in the report, I would emphasise the idea that the Security Council ['should] establish a specialised humanitarian sub-committee [whose purpose] would be to inform fully the Council of developments and concerns regarding humanitarian dimensions of complex emergencies linked to conflict, and to make appropriate recommendations thereupon. It could be sent up as a Joint Committee with ECOSOC under Article 65.


9 Many of the suggestions below are mentioned in a ‘non-paper’ on the humanitarian impact of sanctions, circulated among the members of the Security Council (S/1995/300) in April 1996, and in corresponding individual country responses. See also a Report of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (XIV meeting, 19 April 1996), prepared in conjunction with the DHA (Geneva).
10 Ibid, see footnote 2.

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For better? For worse? Humanitarian aid in conflict

David Bryer and Edmund Cairns

Introduction

The future of humanitarian aid is now perhaps more in question than at any time since 1945. The providers question whether the abuse of their aid outweighs its benefits; while the donors, at least the official ones, reduce their funding. Yet the need for aid continues; the number of people who suffer needlessly for lack of it rises. Here, we consider some of the practical difficulties and ethical choices involved in judging the 'net impact' of aid that is provided in armed conflicts, where its abuse has become a certainty. It is not offered as Oxfam's last word on the subject, but as the perception of two individuals who are keenly aware that the state of modern war is likely to demand difficult choices of Oxfam and other aid agencies for years to come.²

Some of the difficulties in providing aid are created by the nature of most contemporary internal conflicts. Some are created by the providers themselves. But we shall argue that it is a failure of will on the part of both the combatants and of most governments to protect civilians that lies at the heart of most of the difficulties in providing humanitarian aid. A solution needs all of us, from the staff of humanitarian agencies to the Permanent Members of the Security Council, to recognise that we have responsibilities under international humanitarian law (IHL) to uphold the rights which civilians in internal conflicts can justly claim. Aid agencies could do more to fulfil their responsibility to implement minimal standards of humanitarian performance; and governments could do more to fulfil theirs. Few Northern governments yet show much will to do so; part of the reason is that any major 'engagement' that involves the delivery of significant resources is still largely seen in the North by those on the right as top-down redistribution. The case for 'internationalism' — the sense that we all have a responsibility to other human beings anywhere in the world — is seldom seen as a parallel responsibility to those who are already helping themselves and others.

We shall suggest that a focus upon what civilians in conflicts are doing for themselves and others, the responsibilities which they fulfil themselves, will present a more accurate portrayal of the world in which aid agencies work. This should perhaps be the analytical basis for a more effective attempt to persuade donor publics and politicians of the merits of supporting people who live in countries that they regard as being of little geo-economic importance.

Aid and rights

Observing the state of humanitarian aid in internal conflicts in the second half of the 1990s, we can say that two things are clear: that humanitarian aid remains vital; and that the difficulties faced in providing it are largely caused by the disregard of combatants and the 'international community' for much of the applicable international law.

Humanitarian aid remains essential to save lives and to help people to enjoy the most basic rights to shelter, water, and enough to eat. It may also help people to survive for long enough to enjoy their equally important rights to health and education, equal opportunity, and a say in their future. Since 1995, Oxfam has described its work as support for all people to enjoy ten such 'basic rights'; this stance depends on Oxfam's moral conviction that all human beings are entitled to these rights.

But it is also important that these rights are all, more or less perfectly, reflected in
international law. International human-rights law sets out the indivisible rights of individuals and groups, both economic and social, and civil and political. (That the violation of both sets or ‘generations’ of rights has much to do with increasing the risk of conflict is beyond the scope of this article.) In the case of armed conflicts, they are set down in IHL — the Geneva Conventions — and refugee law; and, as we shall outline, these most crucial rights for civilians cannot be legally suspended in any circumstance. It is part of the rationale for IHL to set down the absolute minimal rights which all civilians have, even when conflicts destroy their normal means of ensuring them.

Such destruction may leave people in need of emergency assistance to claim those moral and legal rights to water, food, and so on. Humanitarian agencies respond to such needs, using their competences to help uphold people’s basic rights. Their performance is neither perfect nor consistent, but it is beyond doubt that tens of thousands of lives are saved every year, and an enormous amount of human suffering is avoided, by the combined efforts of humanitarian agencies. Despite serious criticisms, the 1996 official evaluation of the international response to the genocide in Rwanda, set up by a number of OECD governments, underlined how vital humanitarian aid had been. In Bosnia too, the aid effort was successful, despite the chaos and tragedy of the war.

**Rights to material assistance and to protection**

Seeing humanitarian aid in terms of international law — as well as the moral belief in rights or broad humanitarian principles — offers two advantages. For non-government organisations (NGOs), it shows that they are not above or outside the law. They choose to operate in a situation governed by international law and are therefore responsible for upholding those parts of it that are relevant to them. If NGOs are to be more accountable, they must be so on the basis of a universally accepted yardstick, which is what the law provides. In the final part of this article, we shall outline how relief practitioners in Oxfam and other NGOs are working to define precise standards of performance that draw on the broad precepts of international law.

Oxfam presents its work in terms of law and the rights it guarantees, in order to debate the ethical choices in providing aid, rather than to encourage a false contest between ‘human rights’ and ‘humanitarianism’. Human-rights law and IHL alike include rights both to protection and to material assistance. Both are vital, and to recognise this is to lay the basis for making the tough choices about how to achieve them in practice. A real woman in a real conflict needs food as well as some means to stop combatants shelling her. If the combatants are taking some of the food aid, and perhaps even selling it to buy guns, there comes a time when the humanitarian agencies who provide that food aid must ask themselves whether it is doing more harm than good.

**Legal responsibilities**

Before making such choices, we must be clear what the relevant legal rights are. The right to protection is universal and absolute, because Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions sets down the minimum rights for civilians in conflicts ‘not of an international character’. They should be ‘treated humanely’ and protected from ‘violence to life and person ... [and] outrages to personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment’.

The Conventions’ Second Protocol, agreed in 1977, relates entirely to ‘non-international’ conflicts. It reiterates these rights and, in Article 4, includes specific prohibitions, including injunctions against rape and threats to commit any prohibited act; and, in Article 13, against ‘acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population’. Article 14 then sets out an unconditional prohibition on deliberate starvation and on the destruction of food, agricultural areas, crops, livestock, and water supplies. On these points, both the individual’s right to protection and the combatant’s obligation not to violate it are equally absolute.

The Second Protocol covers all civilians who are not taking ‘a direct part in hostilities’. In most armed conflicts, while they may have a strong ethnic loyalty or other allegiance, the great majority of civilians take no such part. Civilians have played an indirect part in hostilities throughout recorded history, but have not on that account been considered
For better? For worse? Humanitarian aid in conflict

legitimate targets of war. It would be quite wrong, for example, to afford less protection to civilians within an enclave or camp, on the grounds that combatants are also there.

Nevertheless, IHL recognises a balance between the rights of civilians and the military purpose of the combatants, including the provisions on forced displacement. More positively, there has been a recent trend on the ‘right to assistance’ in customary law to tilt the balance more in favour of the civilian. Though the Second Protocol left access for humanitarian supplies conditional upon the consent of the relevant State, the series of Security Council resolutions on this subject, beginning with those on Iraq in 1991, shows that accepted practice is developing towards effectively placing the rights of civilians above all else. Though tragically far from being consistently applied, this trend is much to be welcomed.

The rights which can therefore be claimed under IHL cover both protection from violence — to personal and physical security — and to humanitarian relief. Many NGOs have long shared this twin ambition, recognising that aid alone is not enough. The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief states clearly that Oxfam’s ‘fundamental principle for dealing with emergency situations is the safeguarding of human life. This involves protection and assistance ...’ (original italics). That principle remains as strong as ever. What may have increased is the awareness that war presents painful choices between the two. Strategies to provide assistance may undermine rather than support strategies for protection.

Negative impact

Humanitarian aid can prolong internal conflicts, and thereby cause a level of human suffering which, in some circumstances, is greater than the suffering which the aid is directly relieving. Mary B Anderson’s work at the Local Capacities for Peace Project has identified some of the ways in which aid can have such negative, as well as positive, ‘by-products’. One example of negative impact which has been influential in NGO thinking was when factional fighting in the Liberian capital, Monrovia, escalated in April 1996. The subsequent looting by warlords of more than 400 aid vehicles and millions of dollars of equipment and relief goods led several NGOs to agree to minimise their assistance until guarantees to respect civilians’ right to humanitarian assistance were forthcoming. The looting had not only blocked aid to people in need, but also contributed to the war, because vehicles and radio equipment were used, among other things, for military purposes.

Twelve international NGOs, including Oxfam, thus decided to limit their work, using only locally available equipment, with no new resources going into Liberia which could fuel what had become known as its ‘war economy’. However, the NGOs still sought to respond where the lack of aid would have threatened human life. Consequently, in September 1996 in the face of new evidence of starvation, Oxfam set up a feeding programme which sought to meet urgent needs, while keeping to the principle of ‘minimum inputs’ (of lootable goods) in order to achieve ‘maximum impact’ (for the vulnerable population).

Oxfam decided not to provide dry rations, which were felt to be more susceptible to abuse by the Liberian factions, despite the fact that the feeding programme might have reached more people if it had done so. Doing nothing to encourage further violence against these civilians was judged to outweigh the provision of relief to the greatest number.

Liberia is not atypical. Similar military strategies — to use aid both as a reward for combatants and as a resource for the war — have been present in most other internal conflicts. In November 1996, when the génocidaires of Rwanda’s former army, militia, and extremist political parties were routed, they left documents confirming that Opération Insecticide — the plan to complete the 1994 genocide through insurgency and the re-invasion of Rwanda — was well advanced. That Opération would have been fed in part by international humanitarian aid to the 1.2 million refugees controlled by the once and future killers. In Somalia in the early 1990s, the rents and payments for the so-called ‘technicals’ — the package of vehicles and armed guards which aid agencies bought — provided hard currency for arms, while the factions fought over food aid and water points.

In Bosnia from 1993 to 1995, aid for the ‘safe areas’ was clearly an obstacle to the military strategy of the Bosnian Serbs, and of benefit to the Bosnian government. Nearly every able-bodied man was mobilised. While much of Oxfam’s aid could have been of no conceivable
benefit to the combatants, it would be unrealistic to think that none of the supplies, which were directed largely to the 'safe area' of Tuzla, went to the fighters. For instance, UNICEF said that 30 per cent of the aid to Sarajevo was siphoned off by the Bosnian Serbs besieging the city, as payment for allowing it through — inevitably, since aid was the only thing with which the UN had to negotiate.

Oxfam and other aid agencies in Bosnia were accused both of indirectly feeding the government forces and thereby maintaining the war, and of prolonging the suffering of the civilian population by, for a time, sustaining the 'safe areas'. Would it have been better to help those people being 'cleansed' to flee more quickly, as UNHCR did in other parts of Bosnia?

**Net impact**

It would be wrong to say that the abuse of humanitarian aid necessarily means that agencies should provide none. The question is whether such abuse means that the net impact of that aid enables civilians to receive their material necessities and be protected from violence. Overall in Liberia, and perhaps in Somalia, the answer is on one side. In Bosnia and in Zaire, it was probably on the other.

An earlier case of Oxfam's deciding not to provide aid in an internal conflict was when it chose not to work with the Cambodian refugees on the Thai border in 1979, because it judged that the diversion of aid, including to the Khmer Rouge, was unacceptably high; and because the refugee crisis was in some ways being deliberately maintained for political purposes. What became the unintended consequence of international aid to Rwandan refugees in Zaire — the sustaining of a military force determined to regain lost power — was, in the case of aid to the Cambodian border, the strategic objective of the US administration and allied governments.

Yet Oxfam's expertise in the provision of water and sanitation might have improved the conditions for the 'hostage' refugees, had it supplemented the heavily criticised water-trucking operation run by the UN from Thailand. At the same time, the withholding of most official international aid from Cambodia, including even the most direct emergency aid between 1979 and 1981, meant that NGOs became involved in unusual major programmes. Oxfam's water engineers were put to work renewing the water system of Phnom Penh, the capital city.7

There can be positive as well as negative side-effects of humanitarian aid. Being an obstacle to 'ethnic cleansing' was not the objective of Oxfam's aid to Tuzla — but Oxfam would not mind admitting that this may have been a consequence, and in that sense its presence in the region was not precisely 'neutral'. Speaking in Tuzla a few days after Srebrenica fell in July 1995, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, said that 'ethnic cleansing' was the purpose, not just the result, of the Bosnian conflict. Humanitarian aid should always be driven by the impartial assessment of need, unbiased by either the host government or its opponents, and regardless of the race, creed, nationality, or politics of the intended recipient. But this does not mean that humanitarian agencies can be 'neutral' about whether atrocities are good or bad; sometimes they should say that the combatants who commit them are the main cause of the suffering which they seek to relieve.

The real victims of internal conflicts are not helped by addressing the question of the 'net impact' of aid from either of two extreme viewpoints: either that 'human rights', narrowly defined, are superior to the right to humanitarian aid, or that no ethical consideration should ever outweigh the normal obligation of humanitarian agencies to deliver aid to those in need. The Rwanda evaluation was heavily critical of some of the plethora of NGOs who were at one time present in Goma, often uncoordinated with each other or with the UN system; a number of them do not seem even to have asked themselves the question. Though media criticisms of NGOs are not always just, we welcome the fact that aid agencies must now work in a world which no longer sees us as doing a simple job beyond reproach. Every agency must be able to demonstrate that it is not working in a particular conflict simply to gain the profile to raise funds from official donors or publics who generously respond to media coverage.

**Conditional aid**

The impartial provision of aid does not mean providing aid to everyone or without conditions. The 1951 Refugee Convention excludes from its protection those guilty of serious crimes,8 and the 1949 Geneva
Conventions draw the clear distinction between combatants and non-combatants; accordingly we see no obligation to provide relief for those who have been convicted by a proper judicial process of grave abuses of human rights, or who are likely to use that aid to commit atrocities.

Hence, many NGOs sought from 1994 to persuade Zaire and the 'international community' to separate the genuine Rwandan refugees in eastern Zaire from the minority among them who were suspected of having participated in the genocide. That the call went unheeded left hundreds of thousands of refugees as virtual captives of the extremists, until the action of Tutsi rebels at the end of 1996; even now, the Hutu militia keep a hold over many.

In southern Sudan, NGOs have been closely observing how UNICEF and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) have agreed and are implementing so-called 'ground rules' to protect both aid and civilians from some of the worst ravages of the long-running war. Drawing on the Geneva Conventions and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, they essentially say that aid will be delivered through the SPLM's relief wing only if the combatants meet the condition of upholding the pertinent international law. Though some have criticised this 'conditionally' of emergency aid, it is difficult to see how else aid agencies in southern Sudan can seriously judge the 'net impact' of their work, and strive to reduce the abuse.

Though the 1996 review of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) was heralded as a model for ethical behaviour in other wars, some aid agencies have feared that the practice has not been as effective as the theory. It is perhaps obvious that at times of high military tension combatants are less willing to abide by the rules; but the rules agreed here seem to have had some effect in making fighters more conscious of the rights of civilians to protection, and perhaps greater impact in making them more conscious that aid should not be diverted for fighting their war.

In these ways, aid agencies do make a distinction between those who do and do not deserve aid, based ultimately on whether they too are fulfilling their responsibilities under international law, which in their most direct form prohibit any attack on the 'security and welfare of others'. They recognise that the vast majority of individuals in emergencies are fulfilling this responsibility and doing much more: in fact they provide relief, as the local health workers of the Comité de Crise did in Goma in eastern Zaire, and often prove the most effective agents of reconciliation. They see the purpose of humanitarian aid as being more than merely meeting immediate needs, but also supporting people in being socially responsible.

Beyond these most direct ethical choices, others have also arisen in many contemporary conflicts. Can aid agencies reach those who are in most need, or only those whom the combatants allow them to? Can they provide the type of aid most needed, or only that which the combatants permit? UNHCR devoted 70 per cent of its trucking capacity in Bosnia to food aid, not because that was the right proportion in terms of humanitarian need, but because other relief inputs — water pipes, fertiliser, seeds — were less tolerated by the combatants who controlled access.

When aid agencies cannot operate without the protection of UN peace-keepers or others, do the benefits they bring outweigh the disadvantages? With such UN military protection, they lose much of their claim to impartiality. In Somalia this was hardly surprising, given the partial actions of UNOSOM. But even in Bosnia, where UNPROFOR could perhaps be criticised for being too impartial, it and nearly all the aid agencies were perceived at times as partisan. The reality is that each party to a conflict may seek to manipulate humanitarian aid for its own ends. So does UN protection, and working in internal conflicts at all, actually demand unacceptable risks from humanitarian workers?

Mary Anderson's work on how aid can support or undermine local peace-making initiatives also broadens the direct ethical choice. Her Local Capacities for Peace Project seeks to bring NGOs and donors together to find ways to provide aid in conflicts in ways that help local people to 'disengage and find alternatives' to the violence. Anderson offers aid agencies structured questions to help them decide whether a particular input is more likely to support those who have a stake in continued war, or those who are struggling to end it.

**Declining moral standards in armed conflict**

These difficult choices arise from two linked developments. The first is the failure by the parties to virtually all current internal armed conflicts to respect the rights and obligations
contained in international humanitarian and human-rights law. The suffering in modern wars is their prime responsibility, a point repeatedly made in Oxfam's accounts of the wars in which it has worked, from Cambodia to Rwanda. An Oxfam book on Rwanda, published six months after the genocide began, argued: 'Those extremists who sought to sabotage the Arusha Accords ... bear prime responsibility ... However, the international community, and in particular the most powerful states of the United Nations, have, through their complacency and inaction, contributed to the slaughter.' Indeed, the second major trend is that such criticism of the 'international community' could be made in most recent conflicts.

None of this is meant as a shocking revelation. We all know it, but it is important to recognise it before we can seek any improvement. However, in the behaviour of combatants, and of States outside the regions in conflict, we see a decline in what has been judged as decent.

Among the 30 or so current armed conflicts (the exact number depending on how these are defined), none is being waged between States. An equally important fact, perhaps, is the trend in the purpose of many internal conflicts, to which Sadako Ogata referred in Bosnia. Though terrorisation of civilians has been an aspect of war since ancient times, the strategic purpose of most internal conflicts until very recently appeared to be the removal of the government for the alleged benefit of the whole population. For this reason, the Viet Cong fought the South Vietnamese Government, and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) eventually overthrew the Ethiopian Derg. This did not stop Mengistu exacerbating the Ethiopian famine of 1984–85, but what did survive was some semblance of respect for civilians in the territories controlled by opposing sides. This made it possible to negotiate access for humanitarian aid to cross the front lines, and for the same agencies who had major operations in Addis Ababa to run large cross-border programmes from Sudan with the humanitarian wings of the Tigrayan and Eritrean rebel movements; each side being aware of and even giving tacit approval to the NGO actions.

Is there today even the semblance of that respect for the status of immunity which the Geneva Conventions are meant to guarantee for civilians? Is it because the purpose of many current internal conflicts appears not to be to change the government within an accepted State, but to carve out a new State or quasi-State on behalf of only one ethnic group — and/or to 'cleanse' the State of all but members of that group? That this is usually done for the benefit of a comparatively small elite within the ethnic group only makes it worse.

No one template explains all modern conflicts. The pursuit of power remains the goal of some wars, and the pursuit of profit in others, such as the 'war economies' of Liberia or Cambodia. But it is in this environment of 'total war' against the 'other' that aid agencies have been working in central Africa, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Combatants have no respect for civilians, because they are not 'theirs'. Their objective is to remove them from a territory, and the way to achieve that is precisely to violate IHL by any means from killing, to the destruction of property and livelihoods, to rape: the specific suffering of women is another characteristic of most contemporary conflicts.

International response

Sadly, it is not only the combatants in internal conflicts who show an unhealthy disrespect for the consistent fulfilment of civilians' rights. So too have many governments of neighbouring countries, and even of the countries which contribute the bulk of humanitarian aid and dominate the response of the multilateral agencies to 'complex emergencies'. Humanitarian aid is used, in the words of the European Commission speaking at the June 1996 EU Summit, as a 'fig leaf, behind which governments can hide their inaction in seeking other means to protect civilians and build sustainable peace. The Polish journalist Konstant Gerbert, who has covered the Bosnian conflict since its beginning, said in June 1996 that 'humanitarian aid has been a solution to a problem created by humanitarian aid'. It is at least arguable that the conflict could have been resolved before most of its 200,000 victims had died, had the members of the EU and the US government resolved on firm diplomatic and security measures.

A critical analysis of the series of EU and UN diplomatic efforts which took place until the fall of Srebrenica is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that they did not succeed either
in ending the conflict or in protecting civilians. In summer 1995, a different strategy was adopted; this did work, at least for a while. Part of the failure of the international effort from 1992, when the conflict moved to Bosnia after its independence referendum, until 1995 was that the humanitarian operation was presented as the overriding purpose. Its inviolability was frequently invoked as an excuse not to adopt the use of force.

In the 1990s, 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-economic 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.

Humanitarian aid is essential, both to save lives and to provide minimal welfare for the most vulnerable. Funding for emergency assistance is money well spent, and in almost all internal conflicts has been too little to save as many lives as might have been saved. But humanitarian aid does not protect people from violence; it is not alone the solution to the flouting of humanitarian law.

Towards a stake in peace

What would it take to help fill the 'policy vacuum'? What, for example, would constitute better development assistance? We suggest that it would mean aid focused upon those countries (and the regions within them) where tensions are greatest, targeting those who may find a stake in the 'war economy' if they cannot find one in peace, ensuring that inputs support those who seek peace not war, and learning the lessons of what kind of development cooperation actually works.

If people are denied access to legitimate livelihoods, and to peaceful means to challenge that denial, they may have an incentive to support violence. The OECD's 1997 report on how development cooperation could better support 'structural stability' rightly points to the need to reduce poverty, to support equitable development and the legal and political means for peaceful change. Since only a small proportion of official development assistance (ODA) is currently devoted to these purposes, a significant improvement in how it is used to reduce the risks of war could be gained within existing resources.

For donors to do as much as possible to improve stability will, however, also require a reversal in the decline in official development spending, which at US$58.2 billion in 1995 was at its lowest level since 1970. But increased development aid should not be at the expense of humanitarian relief, which still accounts for only nine per cent of official aid. If governments take their global responsibilities seriously, there is no alternative to an increased investment in aid which, if it helps to prevent future conflicts, will be repaid many times over in savings on peace-keeping or receiving refugees.

A coherent policy to help to prevent internal conflicts would also see the better use of human-rights conditionality on the use of development funds. Why did the EU halt its development programme to the former Rwandan Government in late 1993, on the grounds of accounting problems, even when it was aware of appalling abuses of human rights and government plans for further violence?

Still more importantly, international financial and trading policies should take account of their effects on reducing or increasing poverty, and thereby reducing or increasing the risk that people on the economic margins of their societies will see their future stake in a 'war economy'. Was it with foresight that the debt burden on Algeria was not reduced until 1995, by when the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Barcelona signalled recognition of the threat of increased violence, which was spreading beyond Algeria's borders? Would it not have been wise to do this before the Front Islamique du Salut triumphed in the quickly annulled 1992 elections?

Acting more preventively should also apply to the deployment of peace-keepers, modelled upon the success of the operation in Macedonia. Once more, it is fair to ask what would have happened if UNAMIR in Rwanda had in 1993 had both the mandate and strength to act on their intelligence of plans for what was described (by an informer to Force Commander Romeo Dallaire) as 'extermination'. A former Political Director of the British Foreign Office wondered in December 1996 whether some of
the slaughter in Bosnia might have been avoided, had the outside world stepped in more decisively in January 1992, when Croatia’s ‘protected areas’ were declared, and three months before the war spread to Bosnia.¹⁵

That there are costs incurred by accepting direct military protection for humanitarian aid does not mean that it is not sometimes needed. We see far less enthusiasm by governments for the still more important task, when necessary, of protecting the civilians who claim humanitarian aid. It is clear from what was done by Dallaire and some members of UNAMIR at the height of Rwanda’s genocide that, even in the most ghastly circumstances, lives can be saved; with more resources, the UN could have saved more lives.

How such protection is achieved, and how much can be achieved, depends on each conflict. What is vital is that UN peace-keepers must have the resources and political will from their own governments and from the UN Security Council to do all that they can. What cannot be acceptable is to promise civilians that they will be protected and then not do it. As UNHCR’s Karin Landgren wrote in the *International Journal of Refugee Law,*¹⁶ every example of ‘safe areas’, under different names, from Iraqi Kurdistan from 1991, to Bosnia between 1993 and 1995, to *Operation Turquoise* in south-west Rwanda in 1994, has had only limited success in reaching the intended goal of protecting all the inhabitants. None has been backed by the will of governments to make that protection effective.

Protection, particularly in a fragile embryonic peace, does not always require soldiers or soldiers alone. As the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement outlined in the case of Bosnia, there should be more use of police from donor countries, and support for building the capacity of impartial local police forces. Less happily, the implementation of Dayton has seen the slow and inadequate funding of the International Police Task Force; responsibility to deal with serious abuses has fallen between the protection functions of the Task Force and its military equivalents, 1-FOR and S-FOR.¹⁷ Perhaps there is as much need for some form of international police capacity as there is for the type of permanent peace-keeping force for which the 25 governments who call themselves the ‘Friends of Rapid Reaction’ have been calling since 1995.

**Containment or resolution of conflicts?**

Are there signs that governments will pursue a more coherent response to internal conflicts? If the new British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, can deliver a foreign policy with a moral mission, as he aims to, it will be a remarkable change from the standard practice of most Western governments in the 1990s. The norm has been a consistent desire to contain conflicts, not to resolve them, nor to provide adequate protection to civilians caught up in them. In most cases, only when conflicts threaten areas within what is perceived as the global economy, or areas of geo-economic interest, has any serious engagement beyond humanitarian aid come about; and that leaves out a lot of the world. UNDP’s 1996 *Human Development Report* estimated that the growth of the global economy had by-passed one-quarter of the world’s population, 1.6 billion of whom are now poorer than they were in 1980.¹⁸

Overall, there also seems to be less tolerance for refugees from internal conflicts. In Europe, we have seen the involuntary return of some refugees to former Yugoslavia, and the harsher treatment of asylum-seekers, in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. In Africa, refugees from Rwanda and Burundi are finding less than the traditional hospitality, and Liberian ‘boat people’ have been turned away from a number of countries. In part, this is because the cost of hosting refugees is not being equitably shared between poor host governments, such as Tanzania, and Northern donors.

**Advocacy against abuse**

Can we see the beginning of a solution? There are problems in providing humanitarian aid that are almost inherent in the nature of current conflicts: for the civilian has become the target, and aid has become one of the resources which fuels the conflict. There are also problems which come from the competitive nature of many humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies. But we have argued that much of the problem comes from the failure of governments around the world to undertake a wide range of conflict-prevention policies, and to protect civilians who are affected by conflict — instead using humanitarian aid, vital as it is, as an excuse for not doing more. Most donor governments
appear to see aid as the whole, not merely a part, of the means to uphold the rights enshrined in international humanitarian law.

This leaves NGOs with the exacerbated difficulty of how to provide aid without its being abused. In our view, many aid agencies would be ethically compromised if they continued to do this without doing everything possible to advocate the types of policy we have mentioned — on behalf, as it were, of the civilians in conflicts who have a moral and legal claim for their right to protection to be upheld. (For agencies with very specific mandates, and for all agencies sometimes, such advocacy may need to be free of publicity.) In some circumstances, such advocacy may be incompatible with the continuation of an NGO's programme in any reasonable degree of safety. Combatants do not like to be told that they are murdering civilians. In such cases, an NGO must judge whether the 'net impact' in protecting civilians' rights is advanced more by its continued presence or by speaking out — even if it requires getting out.

And it is only with such advocacy that NGOs, who are ever more dependent on official donors, can demonstrate their independence and integrity. Even Oxfam, which receives a smaller proportion of its funds from governments than most other major international NGOs — due to the British tradition of private funding, not to our particular virtue! — should always remember this challenge.

Conflicts yet to be

Internal conflicts in the future look set to produce even more unnecessary suffering, and still more compromised aid. NGOs may continue to respond, judging in most cases that their aid produces a net benefit; but they will feel with good reason that they are increasingly used as the main instrument of international engagement with internal conflicts, for the purpose of keeping refugees away from donor countries, and their suffering off the television screens. The British academic Mark Duffield argues that, for donor governments, humanitarian aid now effectively has the prime purpose of propping up an unjust international economic order.19 If those governments regard this as too cynical, it is in their power to pursue what might fill the 'policy vacuum', which could begin both to make the economic order a little fairer and offer more protection to civilians in conflicts.

At present, it seems that most governments do not do this, because they do not perceive that they have to meet the cost of internal conflicts. Would the finance ministries which govern the Bretton Woods institutions prescribe structural adjustment programmes that took more account of their effect on poor people if those same ministries also had to pay the bill for humanitarian aid or peace-keeping, when excessively austere programmes helped to push a country into conflict? Similarly, would private corporations — currently responsible for 60 per cent of capital flows to the 'developing world' — be better employers, and less keen to ally themselves with corrupt and abusive governments, if there was a global tax regime which charged corporations for, say, UN humanitarian operations?

Beyond such specifics, we would 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, because they put themselves forward, in a situation in which international law applies, as providers of some of the things to which that individual has rights. Their responsibility covers their obligations to perform well, and they should be held to account for the consequences of any failure. 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.

One way in which some NGOs are seeking to meet this responsibility is through agreeing minimum standards of shelter, food, water, and health care, perhaps educational and social support, which could provide the basis for a great improvement in the performance, transparency, and accountability of the humanitarian system. The Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) is a network including the International Save the Children Alliance, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Caritas Internationalis, Care International, Médecins Sans Frontieres International, the World Council of Churches (WCC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and Oxfam International. In 1994, it agreed with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) a Code of Conduct for Disaster Relief,
which was welcomed by governments at the 1995 International Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference.

Now, putting into effect the Code's general principles, SCHR is working with the US NGO network, InterAction, and others including official donors, to agree minimum standards, setting out with some precision what every civilian in any emergency has a right to, and therefore what the international humanitarian system has a responsibility to provide.

More than NGOs, IHL also confers responsibilities on governments. If the relevant State in the internal conflict does not accept and implement the claim which a civilian makes on it for protection and assistance, then that person must turn to the wider authority of all States. Legally, all governments and all citizens share a global responsibility.

Why does this seem to have so little reality in the policies of many governments, and in the political debate of the societies which guide them? Is it in part because that debate is dominated by the perception that almost everyone in conflicts is either a killer, a 'warrior refugee', or a helpless victim? What is largely missing is an appreciation that most individuals who are suffering in conflicts take responsibility for their own lives. This is the experience of NGOs, but they have not been very effective at presenting it. If they were, it would be possible to present the responsibilities which we expect from the 'international community' as a parallel response, not a charitable offering, to the willingness of most civilians caught up in conflict to support themselves and other victims.

Notes

1 This article is based on 'Providing Humanitarian Assistance during Internal Conflicts: Dilemmas and Prospects', an address given by David Bryer at an International Peace Academy seminar in Vienna on 23 July 1996.
2 Throughout, 'Oxfam' refers to Oxfam GB, and not necessarily to Oxfam International or its other members.
3 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11) include the rights to enough food, and to the highest attainable standard of health, which is generally interpreted to include access to clean water. The right to water was explicitly included in the Vienna Declaration of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights.
6 Mary B. Anderson (1996): Do No Harm, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Local Capacities for Peace Project.
10 This is one of the seven responsibilities which all people share, matching their rights, according to the report of the Commission on Global Governance (1995): Our Global Neighbourhood, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12 There are 32 current internal conflicts, according to Kumar Rupesinghe (1997): 'What can Britain do to prevent internal conflicts like Bosnia and Rwanda?' in J. Gittings and I. Davis (eds): Britain in the 21st Century: Rethinking Defence and Foreign Policy, Nottingham: Spokesman.
13 This comment was part of a contribution to the 20 June 1996 Florence conference on The Role of Humanitarian Aid in Conflict Prevention, organised by ECHO and the platform of Italian NGOs.
14 The OECD Development Assistance Committee approved guidelines on development assistance to prevent conflicts on 7 May 1997.
15 This comment was part of an on-the-record presentation by Pauline Neville-Jones at the Royal Institute for International Affairs, Chatham House, London on 3 December 1996.
17 NATO's Implementation and Stabilisation Forces.
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Dismantling former Yugoslavia, recolonising Bosnia

Michel Chossudovsky

Introduction

As armed NATO troops enforce the peace in Bosnia, the press and politicians alike continue to portray Western intervention in former Yugoslavia as a noble, if agonisingly belated, response to an outbreak of ethnic massacres and violations of human rights. In the wake of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, the West is eager to touch up its self-portrait as saviour of the southern Slavs, and get on with 'the work of rebuilding' the newly sovereign States.

But, following a pattern set since the onset of the civil war, Western public opinion has been misled. The conventional wisdom, exemplified in the words of former US Ambassador to Yugoslavia Warren Zimmermann, is that the plight of the Balkans is the outcome of an 'aggressive nationalism', the inevitable result of deep-seated ethnic and religious tensions rooted in history. Likewise, much has been made of the 'Balkans power-play' and the clash of political personalities: 'Tudjman and Milosevic are tearing Bosnia-Herzegovina to pieces'.

Lost in the barrage of images and self-serving analyses are the economic and social causes of the conflict. The profound economic crisis which preceded the onset of the civil war has long been forgotten. The strategic interests of Germany and the USA in laying the groundwork for the disintegration of Yugoslavia go unmentioned, as does the role of external creditors and international financial institutions. In the eyes of the global media, Western powers bear no responsibility for the impoverishment and destruction of a nation of 24 million people.

But through their domination of the global financial system, the Western powers, pursuing their collective and individual 'strategic interests', helped from the early 1980s to bring the Yugoslav economy to its knees, thus contributing to incipient ethnic and social conflicts. Now, the efforts of the international financial community are channelled towards 'helping Yugoslavia's war-ravaged successor States'. The international financial institutions are busily collecting former Yugoslavia's external debt from its remnant States, while transforming the Balkans into a safe haven for free enterprise.

With the Bosnian peace settlement holding under NATO guns, the West has unveiled a 'reconstruction' programme which strips that brutalised country of sovereignty to a degree not seen in Europe since the end of World War II. It essentially makes Bosnia a divided territory under NATO military occupation and Western administration.

The shape of things to come

Multi-ethnic, socialist Yugoslavia was once a regional industrial power and economic success. Between 1960 and 1980, annual GDP growth averaged 6.1 per cent, medical care was free, the literacy rate was of the order of 91 per cent, and average life expectancy was 72 years. But after a decade of Western economic administrations and five years of disintegration, war, boycott, and embargo, the economies of the former Yugoslavia are prostrate, their industrial sectors dismantled.

Adopted in several stages since the early 1980s, the reforms imposed by Belgrade's creditors wreaked economic and political havoc, leading to disintegration of the industrial sector and the piece-meal dismantling of Yugoslavia's welfare state. Despite Belgrade's political non-alignment and extensive trading relations with the USA and the then European Community, the Reagan Administration targeted the Yugoslav economy in a 'Secret Sensitive' 1984 National Security Decision Directive (NSDD 133), entitled 'United States Policy
Dismantling former Yugoslavia, recolonising Bosnia towards Yugoslavia’. A censored version of this document, declassified in 1990, largely conformed to the 1982 National Security Decision Directive (NSDD 54) on Eastern Europe. Its objectives included ‘expanded efforts to promote a “quiet revolution” to overthrow Communist governments and parties’, while reintegrating the countries of Eastern Europe into the orbit of the world market.4

Secessionist tendencies that were drawing strength from social and ethnic divisions gained impetus precisely during a period of brutal impoverishment of the Yugoslav population. The first phase of macro-economic reform, initiated in 1980, shortly before the death of Marshall Tito, ‘wreaked economic and political havoc ... Slower growth, the accumulation of foreign debt and especially the cost of servicing it as well as devaluation led to a fall in the standard of living of the average Yugoslav ... The economic crisis threatened political stability ... it also threatened to aggravate simmering ethnic tensions.’5 These reforms, accompanied by the signing of debt-restructuring agreements with official and commercial creditors, also served to weaken the institutions of the federal State, creating political divisions between Belgrade and the governments of the Republics and Autonomous Provinces. ‘The Prime Minister Milka Planic, who was supposed to carry out the programme, had to promise the IMF an immediate increase of the discount rates and much more for the Reaganomics arsenal of measures ...’6

Following the initial phase of macro-economic reform in 1980, industrial growth sank to 2.8 per cent in the 1980–87 period, dropping to zero in 1987–88 and to -10.6 per cent in 1990.7 The economic reforms reached their climax under the pro-US Markovic government. In autumn 1989, just before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the federal Premier travelled to Washington to meet President George Bush. A ‘financial aid package’ had been promised, in exchange for sweeping economic reforms which included a new devalued currency, a wage freeze, a drastic curtailment of government expenditure, and the abrogation of the socially owned enterprises under self-management.9 These reforms, accompanied by the signing of debt-restructuring agreements with official and commercial creditors, also served to weaken the institutions of the federal State, creating political divisions between Belgrade and the governments of the Republics and Autonomous Provinces. ‘The Prime Minister Milka Planic, who was supposed to carry out the programme, had to promise the IMF an immediate increase of the discount rates and much more for the Reaganomics arsenal of measures ...’6

The 1989 enterprise reforms

The 1989 enterprise reforms adopted under Ante Markovic played a central role in steering the industrial sector into bankruptcy. By 1990, the annual rate of growth of GDP had collapsed to -7.5 per cent.11 In 1991, GDP declined by a further 15 per cent and industrial output by 21 per cent.12 The restructuring programme demanded by Belgrade’s creditors was intended to abrogate the system of socially owned enterprises. The 1989 Enterprise Law required the abolition of the Basic Organisations of Associated Labour (BOALs).13 These were socially owned productive units under self-management, with the Workers’ Council constituting the main decision-making body. The 1989 Enterprise Law required the transformation of the BOALs into private capitalist enterprises, with the Workers’ Council replaced by a ‘Social Board’, under the control of the enterprise’s owners, including its creditors.14

The objective was to subject the Yugoslav economy to massive privatisation and the dismantling of the public sector. Who was to carry it out? The Communist Party bureaucracy, most notably its military and
intelligence sector, was canvassed specifically and offered political and economic backing on the condition that wholesale scuttling of social protections for Yugoslavia's workforce was imposed.\textsuperscript{15}

**Overhauling the legal framework**

A number of supporting pieces of legislation were hurriedly put in place, with the assistance of Western lawyers and consultants. A new Banking Law was enacted, with a view to prompting the liquidation of the socially owned Associated Banks. More than half the country's banks were dismantled. The emphasis was on the formation of 'independent profit oriented institutions'.\textsuperscript{16} By 1990, the entire three-tier banking system, consisting of the National Bank of Yugoslavia, the national banks of the eight Republics and Autonomous Provinces, and the commercial banks, had been dismantled under the guidance of the World Bank.\textsuperscript{17} A World Bank Financial Sector Adjustment Loan was being negotiated in 1990, to be adopted by the Belgrade government in 1991.

**The bankruptcy programme**

Industrial enterprises were carefully categorised. Under the IMF/World Bank-sponsored reforms, credit to the industrial sector had been frozen, with a view to speeding up the bankruptcy process. So-called 'exit mechanisms' had been established under the provisions of the 1989 Financial Operations Act.\textsuperscript{18} The latter stipulated that if an enterprise remained insolvent for 30 days running, or for 30 days within a 45-day period, it must hold a meeting with its creditors within the next 15 days in order to arrive at a settlement. This mechanism allowed creditors (including national and foreign banks) routinely to convert their loans into a controlling equity in the insolvent enterprise. Under the Act, the government was not authorised to intervene. If a settlement was not reached, bankruptcy procedures would be initiated, in which case workers would not normally receive severance payments.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1989, according to official sources, 248 firms were steered into bankruptcy or were liquidated, and 89,400 workers had been laid off.\textsuperscript{20} During the first nine months of 1990, directly following the adoption of the IMF programme, another 889 enterprises, with a combined workforce of 525,000 workers, were subjected to bankruptcy procedures.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, in less than two years 'the trigger mechanism' under the Financial Operations Act had led to the laying off of more than 600,000 workers (of a total industrial workforce of about 2.7 million). The largest concentrations of bankrupt firms and lay-offs were in Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo.\textsuperscript{22}

Many socially owned enterprises attempted to avoid bankruptcy through the non-payment of wages. Half a million workers, representing some 20 per cent of the industrial labour force, were not paid during the early months of 1990, in order to meet the demands of creditors under the 'settlement' procedures stipulated in the Law on Financial Organisations. Real earnings were in a free fall and social programmes had collapsed, while unemployment, with the bankruptcies of industrial enterprises, had become rampant, creating an atmosphere of social despair and hopelessness:

*When Mr Markovic finally started his 'programmed privatisation', the republican oligarchies, who all had visions of a 'national renaissance' of their own, instead of choosing between a genuine Yugoslav market and hyperinflation, opted for war, which would disguise the real causes of the economic catastrophe.\textsuperscript{23}*

The IMF-sponsored package of January 1990 contributed unequivocally to increasing enterprise losses, while also pushing many of the large electricity, petroleum refinery, machinery, engineering, and chemical enterprises into bankruptcy. Moreover, with the deregulation of the trade régime, a flood of imported commodities further destabilised domestic production. These imports were financed with borrowed money granted under the IMF package (the various 'quick disbursing loans' from the IMF, the World Bank, and bilateral donors in support of the economic reforms). While the flood of imports was helping to pile up Yugoslavia's external debt, the abrupt increases in interest rates and input prices that had been imposed on national enterprises speeded up the displacement and exclusion of domestic producers from their own national market.

**Shedding 'surplus workers'**

The situation prevailing in the months preceding the secession of Croatia and Slovenia in June 1991 points to the sheer magnitude and brutality of the process of industrial dismantling. The 1989–90 bankruptcy figures...
Dismantling former Yugoslavia, recolonising Bosnia

provide only a partial picture, however, depicting the situation at the outset of the 'bankruptcy programme'. This process has continued unabated throughout the civil war and its aftermath. Similar industrial restructuring programmes were imposed by external creditors on Yugoslavia's successor States.

The World Bank had estimated that there were in September 1990 2,435 'loss-making' enterprises out of a remaining total of 7,531. In other words, these firms — with a combined work-force of more than 1.3 million people — had been categorised as 'insolvent' under the provisions of the Financial Operations Act, requiring the immediate implementation of bankruptcy procedures. Given that 600,000 workers had already been laid off by bankrupt firms before September 1990, these figures suggest that some 1.9 million workers (of a total of 2.7 million) were classified as 'redundant'. These 'insolvent' firms, concentrated in the energy, heavy industry, metal processing, forestry, and textiles sectors, were among the largest industrial enterprises in the country, then representing 49.7 per cent of the total (remaining and employed) industrial workforce.

Political disintegration

Supporting broad strategic interests, the austerity measures had laid the basis for 'the recolonisation' of the Balkans. In the multi-party elections in 1990, with economic policy at the centre of the political debate, the separatist coalitions ousted the Communists in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Slovenia.

Following the decisive victory in Croatia of the rightist Democratic Union under the leadership of Franjo Tudjman, the separation of Croatia received the formal assent of the German Foreign Minister, Hans Dietrich Genscher, who was in almost daily contact with his Croatian counterpart. Germany not only favoured secession, it was also forcing the pace of international diplomacy and pressuring its Western allies to grant recognition to Slovenia and Croatia. The borders of Yugoslavia are reminiscent of World War II, when Croatia (including the territories of Bosnia-Herzegovina) was an Axis satellite under the fascist Ustasa regime: 'German expansion has been accompanied by a rising tide of nationalism and xenophobia ... Germany has been seeking a free hand among its allies to pursue economic dominance in the whole of Mitteleuropa ...'.

Washington, on the other hand, favoured 'a loose unity while encouraging democratic development ... [the US Secretary of State] Baker told [Croatia's President] Franjo Tudjman and [Slovenia's President] Milan Kucan that the United States would not encourage or support unilateral secession ... but if they had to leave, he urged them to leave by a negotiated agreement ...'.

Post-war reconstruction

The economic reforms now being imposed on the 'successor States' are a natural extension and continuation of those previously implemented in federal Yugoslavia. In the tragic aftermath of a brutal and destructive war, the prospects for re-building the newly independent republics appear bleak. Despite a virtual press blackout on the subject, debt re-scheduling is an integral part of the peace process. Former Yugoslavia has been carved up under the close scrutiny of its external creditors, and its foreign debt carefully divided and allocated among the Republics. The privatisation programmes implemented under the donors' supervision have contributed to a further stage of economic dislocation and widespread impoverishment, with GDP declining by as much as 50 per cent between 1990 and 1993.

Moreover, the leaders of the newly sovereign States have fully collaborated with the creditors:

All the current leaders of the former Yugoslav republics were Communist Party functionaries and each in turn cried to meet the demands of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the better to qualify for investment loans and substantial perks for the leadership ... State industry and machinery were looted by functionaries. Equipment showed up in 'private companies' run by family members of the nomenklatura.

Even as the fighting raged, Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia had entered into separate loan negotiations with the Bretton Woods institutions. In Croatia, the Tudjman government signed an agreement with the IMF in 1993. Massive budget cuts mandated under the agreement thwarted Croatia's efforts to mobilise its own productive resources, thus jeopardising post-war reconstruction. The cost of rebuilding Croatia's war-torn economy was estimated at some US$23 billion, requiring an influx of fresh foreign loans. In return for these
loans, the government of Croatia agreed to implement reform measures that were conducive to further plant closures and bankruptcies, driving wages to abysmally low levels. The official unemployment rate increased from 15.5 per cent in 1991 to 19.1 per cent in 1994. Zagreb also instituted a far more stringent bankruptcy law, together with procedures for ‘the dismemberment’ of large State-owned public utility companies. According to its Letter of Intent to the Bretton Woods institutions, the Croatian government had promised to restructure and fully privatise the banking sector, with the assistance of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the World Bank. The latter also demanded a Croatian capital market structured to enhance the penetration of Western institutional investors and brokerage firms.

Under the agreement signed with the IMF in 1993, the government was not permitted to mobilise its own productive resources through fiscal and monetary policy. These were placed firmly under the control of its external creditors. The massive budget cuts demanded under the agreement had forestalled the possibility of post-war reconstruction, which could only now be achieved through the granting of fresh foreign loans. In the absence of ‘debt forgiveness’, Zagreb’s debt burden will continue to increase well into the next century.

Macedonia has followed a similar economic path. In December 1993, the Skopje government agreed to compress real wages and freeze credit in order to obtain a loan under the IMF’s Systemic Transformation Facility (STF). In an unusual twist, multi-billionaire business tycoon George Soros participated in the International Support Group, composed of the government of the Netherlands and the Basel-based Bank of International Settlements. The money provided by the Support Group, however, was not intended for ‘reconstruction’, but to enable Skopje to pay back debt arrears owed to the World Bank.

Moreover, in return for debt-rescheduling, the Branko Crvenkovski government had to agree to the liquidation of remaining ‘insolvent’ enterprises and the lay-off of ‘redundant’ workers — who included the employees of half the industrial enterprises in the country. As Deputy Finance Minister Hari Kostov soberly noted, with interest rates at astronomical levels because of donor-sponsored banking reforms, ‘it was literally impossible to find a company in the country which would be able to (…) to cover [its] costs (…)’.

Overall, the IMF economic therapy for Macedonia constitutes a continuation of the ‘bankruptcy programme’ launched in 1989 within federal Yugoslavia. The most profitable assets are now on sale on the year-old Macedonian stock market, but this auction of socially owned enterprises has led to industrial collapse and rampant unemployment. Yet despite the decimation of the economy and the disintegration of education and health services under the austerity measures, Finance Minister Ljube Trpevski proudly informed the press that ‘the World Bank and the IMF place Macedonia among the most successful countries in regard to current transition reforms’. The Head of the IMF mission to Macedonia, Paul Thomsen, concurs that ‘the results of the stabilisation program [under the STF] were impressive’, giving particular credit and appreciation to ‘the efficient wages policy’ adopted by the Skopje government.

Rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina

Resting on the November 1995 Dayton accords, the USA and the European Union have installed a fully fledged colonial administration in Bosnia. At its head is their appointed High Representative (HR) Carl Bildt, a former Swedish Prime Minister and European representative in the Bosnian peace negotiations. The HR has full executive powers in all civilian matters, with the right to over-rule the governments of both the Bosnian Federation and the Bosnian-Serb Republika Srpska. The HR is to act in close liaison with the Implementation Force (IFOR) Military High Command, and also with donor agencies. To make the point crystal-clear, the Dayton Accords spell out that ‘the High Representative is the final authority in theater regarding interpretation of the agreements’ (Dayton Accord, Agreement on High Representative, articles I and II).

An international civilian police force is under the custody of an expatriate Commissioner appointed by the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali. Irish police official Peter Fitzgerald, with UN policing experience in Namibia, El Salvador, and Cambodia, presides over some 1,700 police from 15 countries, most of whom have never before set foot in the Balkans, and were dispatched to Bosnia after a five-day training programme in Zagreb.
While the West has underscored its support to democracy, the Parliamentary Assembly set up under the 'Constitution' finalised under the Dayton Accords acts largely as a rubber stamp. Behind the democratic façade, actual political power rests in the hands of a 'parallel government', headed by the HR and staffed by expatriate advisers. Moreover, the Constitution agreed in Dayton hands over the reins of economic policy to the Bretton Woods institutions and the London-based European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Article VII stipulates that the first Governor of the Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina is to be appointed by the IMF and 'shall not be a citizen of Bosnia and Herzegovina or a neighbouring State'.

Just as the Governor of the Central Bank is an IMF appointee, the Central Bank will not be allowed under the Constitution to function as a Central Bank: 'For the first six years ... it may not extend credit by creating money, operating in this respect as a currency board' (Article VII). Neither will the new 'sovereign' successor State be allowed to have its own currency (issuing paper money only when there is full foreign-exchange backing), nor permitted to mobilise its internal resources. As in the other successor republics, its ability to self-finance its reconstruction (without massively increasing its external debt) is blunted from the outset.

The tasks of managing the Bosnian economy have been carefully divided among donor agencies: while the Central Bank is under IMF custody, the EBRD heads the Commission on Public Corporations, which supervises operations of all public-sector enterprises including energy, water, postal services, roads, and railways. The President of the EBRD appoints the Chairman of the Commission, which also oversees public-sector re-structuring, meaning primarily the sell-off of State-owned and socially owned assets, and the procurement of long-term investment funds.

One cannot sidestep the fundamental question: is the Bosnian Constitution formally agreed between Heads of State at Dayton really a constitution? A sombre and dangerous precedent has been set in the history of international relations: Western creditors have embedded their interests in a Constitution hastily written on their behalf, and executive positions within the Bosnian State system are to be held by non-citizens who are appointed by Western financial institutions. There is no constitutional assembly, there are no consultations with citizens' organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and there are to be no 'constitutional amendments'.

The Bosnian government estimates that reconstruction costs will reach US $47 billion. Western donors have pledged US$3 billion in reconstruction loans, yet only US$518 million dollars were granted in December 1995, part of which is earmarked (under the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords) to finance some of the local civilian costs of IFOR's military deployment, as well as to repay debt arrears with international creditors. In a familiar twist, 'fresh loans' were devised to pay back 'old debt'. The Central Bank of the Netherlands generously provided 'bridge financing' of US$37 million. The money, however, was earmarked to allow Bosnia to pay back its arrears with the IMF, a condition without which the IMF would not lend it fresh money. But it is a cruel and absurd paradox: the sought-after loan from the IMF's newly created 'Emergency Window' for so-called 'post-conflict countries' was not to be used for post-war reconstruction. Instead, it was applied to reimburse the Central Bank of the Netherlands, which had provided the money to settle IMF arrears in the first place. While debt is building up, no new financial resources are flowing into Bosnia to rebuild its war-torn economy.

**Multinational interest in Bosnia's oilfields**

Western governments and corporations show greater interest in gaining access to potential strategic natural resources than in committing resources for rebuilding Bosnia. Documents in the hands of Croatia and the Bosnian Serbs indicate that coal and oil deposits have been identified on the eastern slope of the Dinarides Thrust, a region re-taken from rebel Bosnian Krajina Serbs by the Croatian army in the final offensives before the Dayton Accords. Bosnian officials report that Chicago-based Amoco was among several foreign firms that subsequently initiated exploratory surveys in Bosnia. The West is anxious to develop these regions: 'The World Bank — and the multinationals that conducted operations — are [August 1995] reluctant to divulge their latest exploration reports to the combatant governments while the war continues'. Moreover, there are 'substantial petroleum fields in the Serb-held part of Croatia just across the Sava river from the Tuzla
From conflict to peace in a changing world

The latter, under the Dayton Accords, is part of the US Military Division with headquarters in Tuzla.

The territorial partition of Bosnia between the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Bosnian-Serb Republika Srpska under the Dayton Accords thus takes on strategic importance. The 60,000 NATO troops on hand to ‘enforce the peace’ will administer the territorial partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina in accordance with Western economic interests. National sovereignty is derogated: the future of Bosnia will be decided upon in Washington, Bonn, and Brussels rather than in Sarajevo. The process of reconstruction based on debt-rescheduling is more likely to plunge Bosnia-Herzegovina (as well as the other remnant republics of former Yugoslavia) into the status of a Third World country.

While local leaders and Western interests share the spoils of the former Yugoslav economy, the fragmentation of the national territory and the entrenching of socio-ethnic divisions in the structure of partition serve as a bulwark blocking a united resistance by Yugoslavs of all ethnic origins against the recolonisation of their homeland.

Concluding remarks

Macro-economic re-structuring applied in Yugoslavia in line with the neo-liberal policy agenda unequivocally contributed to the destruction of an entire country. Yet since the onset of war, the central role of macro-economic reform has been carefully overlooked and denied by the global media. The ‘free market’ has been presented as the solution, the basis for re-building a war-shattered economy. A detailed diary of the war and of the ‘peace-making’ process has been presented in the mainstream press, while the social and political impact of economic re-structuring in Yugoslavia has been carefully erased from our social consciousness and collective understanding of ‘what actually happened’. Cultural, ethnic, and religious divisions are highlighted and dogmatically presented as the sole cause of the crisis, when in reality they are the consequence of a much deeper process of economic and political fracturing.

This ‘false consciousness’ has invaded all spheres of critical debate and discussion. It not only masks the truth: it also prevents us from acknowledging precise historical occurrences. Ultimately, it distorts the true sources of social conflict. The unity, solidarity, and identity of the southern Slavs have their foundation in history, yet this identity has been thwarted, manipulated, and destroyed.

The ruin of an economic system, including the take-over of productive assets, the extension of markets, and ‘the scramble for territory’ in the Balkans constitutes the real cause of conflict. At stake in Yugoslavia are the lives of millions of people. Macro-economic reform destroys their livelihoods and derogates their right to work, their food and shelter, their culture and national identity. Borders are re-defined; the entire legal system is overhauled; socially owned enterprises are steered into bankruptcy; the financial and banking system is dismantled; social programmes and institutions are torn down.

Yugoslavia is like a mirror of similar economic re-structuring programmes applied not only in the developing world but also, in recent years in the USA, Canada, and western Europe. ‘Strong economic medicine’ is seen to be the answer. Throughout the world, people are led to believe that there is no other solution: enterprises must be closed down, workers must be laid off, and social programmes must be slashed. It is in this wider context that the economic crisis in Yugoslavia should be understood. Pushed to the extreme, these reforms are a cruel reflection of a destructive economic model imposed via the neo-liberal agenda on national societies throughout the world.

Notes

5 Ibid.
Dismantling former Yugoslavia, recolonising Bosnia

8 Sean Gervasi, op. cit.
9 Ibid.
11 World Bank, op cit., p. 10. The term GDP is used for simplicity, yet the concept used in Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe to measure national product is not equivalent to the GDP concept under the (Western) system of national accounts.
13 World Bank, op. cit.
15 Ralph Schoenman, op. cit.
16 For further details see World Bank, *Yugoslavia, Industrial Restructuring*, p. 38.
17 Ibid., p. 38.
18 Ibid., p. 33.
19 Ibid., p. 33
20 Ibid, p. 34. Data of the Federal Secretariat for Industry and Energy. Of the total number of firms, 222 went bankrupt and 26 were liquidated.
21 Ibid., p. 33. These figures include bankruptcy and liquidation.
22 Ibid, p. 34.
23 Dimitrije Boarov, op. cit.
25 'Surplus labour' in industry had been assessed by the World Bank mission to be of the order of 20 per cent of the total labour force of 8.9 million, i.e. approximately 1.8 million. This figure seems, however, a gross underestimate of the actual number of redundant workers, based on the categorisation of 'insolvent' enterprises. Solely in the industrial sector, this affected 1.9 million workers (September 1990) of the 2.7 million employed in enterprises classified as insolvent. See World Bank, *Yugoslavia, Industrial Restructuring*, Annex 1.
26 Sean Gervasi, op. cit., p. 65.
27 Ibid., p. 45.
28 Zimmermann, op. cit.
29 Figure for Macedonia, Enterprise, Banking and Social Safety Net, World Bank Public Information Center, 28 November 1994.
30 Ralph Schoenman, op. cit.
33 Statement of Macedonia's Deputy Minister of Finance Hari Kostov, reported in *MAK News*, 18 April 1995.
35 See International Monetary Fund, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes a Member of the IMF', Press Release Number 97/70, Washington, 20 December 1995.
37 Viviano and Howe, op cit.

The author

Non-neutral humanitarianism: 
NGOs and the Rwanda crisis

Andy Storey

Humanitarianism, neutrality and NGOs

The closure of Rwandan refugee camps in Tanzania and Zaire from November 1996 onwards brought to a partial end a controversial period in the history of international aid, including aid supplied by non-government organisations (NGOs). As the camps closed, the extent to which aid had helped to support the military and political aims of those who controlled those camps — soldiers and militias of a genocidal regime — was widely discussed. This article examines how (some) NGOs ended up playing the roles they did, and seeks to examine what lessons NGOs may learn from the experience.

A word of qualification is important at the outset: there is no such thing as an ‘NGO community’: different NGOs have different principles and practices. This article does not seek to brand all NGOs as uniformly good or bad; instead, it seeks to identify certain tendencies apparent in some NGOs which participated in the response to the Rwandan crisis. (We do not name individual NGOs in this article, on the grounds that a personalised debate tends to shed more heat than light and to distract from the more important, underlying issues.)

Aid and neutrality

According to African Rights, ‘relief aid delivered by international agencies [including NGOs] has become integrated into processes of violence and oppression’ (1994b: 3). The accusation is not new: for example, many NGOs are acutely aware of how international aid helped to buttress the forces of the Khmer Rouge on the Thai border with Cambodia during the 1980s. Similarly, those working with Afghan refugees in Pakistan operated within an organisational framework established by anti-Soviet guerrillas (Minear and Weiss 1995: 76-7).

If not original, African Rights’ formulation of the central problem is nonetheless pertinent and succinct:

The central dilemma is whether it is possible to supply humanitarian assistance, under the auspices of a governing authority that abuses human rights, without also giving undue assistance to that authority, and hence doing a disservice to the people one is aiming to help. Any involvement by international NGOs in a political emergency brings benefits to the parties to the conflict. The search for a completely neutral humanitarian space is ultimately futile. (1994b: 4)

In seeming contrast to African Rights, Minear and Weiss argue that non-partisanship should remain a guiding principle of humanitarian action: ‘The fact that the principle of nonpartisanship is regularly abused does not mean that it should be abandoned’ (1995: 71). In fact, there is no necessary contradiction between these two positions: one can accept that NGOs and others should strive for non-partisanship, but it is quite another thing to claim or assume that their actual actions can ever be neutral in their impact. It is this question of the impossibility of neutrality in the context of the Rwandan crisis which is the theme of this article.

The importance of NGOs

With the end of the ‘Cold War’, Western governments are, for the most part, less interested in developing countries per se: the main impulse behind any action is more likely to be public relations than strategic interest. And, because of the generally positive image of NGOs, good public relations can often best be achieved by channelling resources through, or otherwise supporting, the voluntary sector. The
tendency for Western governments to 'sub-contract' development activities to NGOs — the privatisation of overseas charity — also has the convenient effect of reducing direct State involvement (and often expenditure) on 'Third World' affairs, as well as linking NGOs to the neo-liberal shift in donors' policy agendas.

Robinson (1997) notes that NGOs have tended to take on the role of 'public service contractors' on a cautious and ad hoc basis, but the outline of the emergent relationship is nonetheless apparent: for many States, NGOs 'are seen as the preferred channel for service-provision in deliberate substitution for the state' (Hulme and Edwards 1997: 6). By the mid-1990s, approximately 30 per cent of NGO income came from official sources, compared with an estimated 1.5 per cent in the early 1970s (Hulme and Edwards 1997: 6-7).

A second reason for the growing importance of NGOs is the declining power and influence of 'Third World' governments, often due to the restriction in their economic power through the medium of 'structural adjustment' — a further link to the neo-liberal shift in global policy agendas. The State has been significantly 'rolled back' in most countries of Latin America and Africa, allowing private actors — both businesses and NGOs — much greater autonomy of action.

These changes have made international relief agencies not only larger and more influential, but have de facto expanded their mandate and role ... They may be the chief providers of public welfare, among the main sources of salaried employment and commercial contracting, but even more significantly they act as news agencies and diplomats. In short, relief agencies are expanding into a void left by the contracting power of host governments and the declining political interest of western powers. (African Rights 1994b: 6)

An example comes from Mozambique, where 'NGOs ... have used the freedom of movement allowed by the end of the war and the lowered authority of government ... to increasingly "do their own thing" — to go where they want to go and do whatever they wish' (Hanlon 1995: 13).

It is important not to exaggerate the importance of NGOs; for example, between April and December 1994, 86 per cent of all aid allocations to the Rwandan crisis derived from government sources (Joint Evaluation, 1996: 24-5). And it is government and inter-government agencies which bear primary responsibility for certain aspects of the Rwandan crisis discussed below, such as the failure to tackle abusive authority systems in the refugee camps:

The question of relief agency morality in Eastern Zaire cannot be answered in isolation from an analysis of the actions of other responsible actors in the international arena during and after the genocide. The United Nations and its member states are particularly mandated by international law to respond to genocide ... Essentially, they failed to do so and provided an 'aid only' response to the crisis without the requisite judicial response. Their failure left a notable moral vacuum on the ground in the refugee camps, where alleged perpetrators should have been sought out, denied refugee status and brought to justice. But the failure of international politicians should not mean that relief agencies ... somehow inherit moral responsibility for administering international justice, and in not doing so become tainted with the failure of other parts of the international system. (Slim 1996: 12)

However, despite these qualifications, the positions and practices adopted by NGOs are still of significant and growing importance.

### NGOs and the Rwanda crisis

#### Background to the crisis

Between April and June 1994, the army and government-run militias of the then Rwandan regime initiated and led the massacre of up to one million Rwandan people. (This regime was, strictly speaking, an interim administration formed after the death of President Habyarimana; for ease of presentation, it is this government which is here referred to as the 'former/old regime', despite its short duration in power.) Most of the dead were from the minority Tutsi ethnic grouping, though members of the majority Hutu grouping who were opposed to Hutu extremists were also killed. A rebel army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which had been at war since 1990 with this regime and its predecessor, ultimately succeeded in defeating the government forces and taking power in July 1994. The RPF is Tutsi-dominated but does contain some Hutu members; the new RPF-led government also includes several non-RPF Hutu ministers, though their positions appear marginal and vulnerable.

As the RPF advanced across the country in 1994, millions of Hutus fled, mostly to camps in
Zaire. Some feared retribution for their part in the genocide, while many others were persuaded or intimidated to flee by the propaganda of the old regime, which, anxious to undermine the legitimacy of the new government, warned of indiscriminate revenge-seeking massacres by the RPF. The forces of the former government mostly fled with the civilians and quickly established themselves as the de facto rulers of the newly created exile camps. Other Hutus — 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs) — took refuge in camps inside Rwanda, in a zone where a French intervention force temporarily prevented the RPF from taking over the whole country; these camps were later closed (with varying degrees of violence) by the RPF. Despite the massive level of displacement, it is important to note that most Hutus did not flee from their homes.

In a number of ways, some NGOs (as well as official donors, such as the UN agencies) lent support to the forces of the deposed genocidal regime, especially after they had fled to neighbouring countries. This support was manifest in the following ways:

- the choice of where to work;
- the type of support offered, and the structures and people with whom the NGOs worked; and
- some public statements made by NGO representatives.

Where to work

Writing in April 1995, one journalist estimated that over US$700 million of aid had gone to the people who had fled from Rwanda, compared with less than US$300 million of support allocated for use within the country itself (Vidal 1995). This imbalance was confirmed by the 1996 Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, which reported that, for 1994 as a whole, only 35.3 per cent of all aid had been allocated for use within Rwanda (25–6), and even this figure was artificially boosted by the inclusion of allocations prior to April 1994 (before the genocide and flight) and of later allocations to IDPs within Rwanda. By mid-September 1995, 20 times more aid had gone to refugees outside the country than to support the plan for refugee resettlement within Rwanda (Drumtra 1995: 17).

This imbalance had clear political implications. The camps to which most of the displaced had fled were, as mentioned, predominantly under the control of the forces of the former regime, which had been responsible for the genocide. A World Bank mission to the camps in March-April 1995 noted that 'there is an underlying power structure based on a committee of fifteen or seventeen members, made up of former government, military and business leaders ... which still controls most of what goes on in the camps' (World Bank 1995: 10). A later report for the US Committee for Refugees concluded that 'The exiled regime and its militia maintain control over the refugees through relentless propaganda' (Drumtra 1995: 7).

This is not to deny that the needs of the people who had fled were urgent and significant; but meeting those needs, while at the same time practising relative neglect of the needs of those who remained within the shattered State of Rwanda itself, sent a clear political message — whether an NGO thought it was sending it or not. Some NGOs did adopt a position of offering support within Rwanda, on the grounds that the needs there were being neglected by comparison with the attention afforded to the situation in the external camps. During late 1994, up to 180 NGOs were active inside Rwanda, compared with 100 in the Goma region (the site of several camps in Zaire) at the height of the crisis there (Joint Evaluation 1996: 152). However, many NGOs inside Rwanda chose to work in the camps for the 'internally displaced' in the south which, as mentioned, had been established under the 'protection' of a French intervention force — at least part of the remit of which had been to prevent the RPF from taking over the whole country.

Again, this is not to imply that the needs in the IDP camps were not serious and pressing: indeed, it has been argued that NGOs were somewhat tardy in responding to them (Joint Evaluation 1996: 44, 55). This tardiness may have been due to the fact that 'Many NGOs were initially reluctant to commence operations in the area, being suspicious of the motives underlying Opération Turquoise [the French intervention] and reluctant to work with Hutu officials and IDPs who had been involved in the genocide'. However, 'In July, ECHO [the European Community Humanitarian Office] practically obliged NGOs it was funding to establish operations in the safe [French] zone' (Joint Evaluation 1996: 43). (The issue of how NGO responses were affected by funding
pressures — both governmental and non-governmental — is discussed below.)

Another factor for some NGOs was the relative security afforded by the presence of French troops, again an understandable consideration. However, the point is that, given the history of these camps, and the fact that the army and militias of the former regime were also influential in them (though to a lesser extent than in the external camps), the decision to operate in them was very far from neutral.

The type of support offered

The decision adopted by a number of NGOs to focus solely or mainly on the external (and even internal) camps had clear political implications, especially in terms of the legitimacy it inadvertently afforded to the forces controlling those camps. The type of support offered — both inside and outside Rwanda — also had the effect of boosting those forces.

Massive material assistance was given to the killers, including food, transport and a secure base from which to launch attacks into Rwanda. Ironically, while the soldiers of the new government of Rwanda remain unpaid volunteers, the genocidal army of the former government, now in exile, is fed by international food aid. (African Rights: 1994b: 35)

There was not, for the most part, a deliberate policy to support the old regime. In many (probably most) cases, the forces of the former regime benefited from the diversion of aid, rather than being the direct recipients of it. But, in some cases, the relationship was more straightforward, as a report from Human Rights Watch (Africa) made clear in May 1995:

Essential services (food, water, blankets and tents) provided by the international NGOs to the civilian camps have been pillaged by the ex-FAR [government army] and militias for use at their own military bases ... (Human Rights Watch 1995: 16).

The ex-FAR also controls many predominantly civilian camps ... [M]ilitias operating under ex-FAR command have seized control of refugee camps ... The militias in these camps have taken control of food distribution, engage in theft, prevent the repatriation of refugees through attacks and intimidation, carry out vigilante killings and mutilations of persons suspected of crimes or of disloyalty, restrict the movement of persons in and out of the camps, recruit and train young men for incursions into Rwanda and Burundi, and actively launch cross-border raids. (Human Rights Watch 1995: 16)

One NGO official defended the feeding of soldiers on the grounds that ‘no one else was prepared to feed these people’ and ‘they have to eat; they are not all murderers’ (quoted in Human Rights Watch 1995: 16).

Other ways in which NGOs (and others) assisted the forces of the former regime included the recruitment of staff and the general organisation of camp life. The issue of recruitment was particularly sensitive, as it was widely accepted that many of the Rwandans employed by NGOs to control food distribution in the camps, for example, were people who occupied senior positions within Rwandan society before their flight. From the point of view of the NGOs concerned, this made practical sense: these people were usually well qualified and suited to leadership. However, the facts that they were highly placed in Rwandan society, that they were not targeted in the genocide (when most opposition activists were killed), and that they subsequently fled, all placed question marks over their suitability for such employment. Many, doubtless, were innocent, but many NGOs did not even address the recruitment issue, despite the troubling implications it raised. As a US Committee for Refugees report noted (in October 1995): ‘Too many international NGOs in Goma ... continue to employ Rwandan individuals who are strongly suspected of participating in ... mass murder ... In many instances, the genocide participants are well-known and easily identified’ (Drumtra 1995: 4).

The employment issue was especially important, because, when those employed were associated with the former regime, it directly boosted their income and reinforced their prestige and influence within society. But it was not the only practice through which some NGOs aided the perpetrators of the genocide. Procurement and other business arrangements sometimes had similar impacts. For example,
one NGO working in Zaire chartered buses (marked as property of the Rwandan government) for staff transport from the man who was Minister for Transport in the former regime.  

Public statements by NGO representatives

While some NGOs were most clearly inadvertent parties to the conflict in their operational activities, partisanship (intentional or otherwise) was also evident in the public statements of NGO officials, both inside and outside Rwanda. This is understandable: NGOs which adopt a wider political analysis of their role, which seek to place their relief work in a broader context, must feel obliged to try to influence that context in what they see as positive directions. What was more troubling was the tendency for partisan positions to be disguised as simple humanitarianism, or for some NGO arguments based on ignorance, and tending to lend political support to one or other side, to be accepted as those of informed observers (a problem which poses at least as many questions to the international media as it does to the NGOs).

Perhaps the clearest example in the Rwandan context of assumed 'neutrality' were the calls, endorsed by many NGOs, for a cease-fire between the FAR and the RPF during April to July 1994. These calls seemed the essence of reasonableness: rival forces were urged to desist from hostilities, so that the innocent civilian population could receive humanitarian assistance. In fact, this was not a conflict about which one could be neutral: one side bore ongoing responsibility for the genocide of up to one million people, and the other side, although also guilty of abusing human rights, was trying to stop them. If there had been a cease-fire, the FAR would have been able to consolidate its control over at least parts of the country and, almost certainly, continue the massacres in those parts — massacres which predated the renewed RPF offensive and which were often at their most intense in areas far removed from the fighting. Had the RPF advance — which is ultimately what stopped the genocide — been halted by the imposition of a cease-fire, it is possible that many more lives would have been lost. (It is impossible to form a more definitive judgement on this subject as, in some areas, killings intensified as the RPF advanced towards them.) The 'neutral, humanitarian' demand for a cease-fire could have had the effect of preventing the defeat of a genocidal regime and, possibly, prolonged the genocide itself.

Those NGOs which called for a cease-fire to be accompanied by increased UN protection of civilians had a more refined and coherent position, though not necessarily a very realistic one, given the dim prospects for serious UN action at the time. It was probably also the case that some NGOs tended to support a cease-fire because that would have made it easier for them to operate — in which case, an implicit and questionable assumption was being made concerning the relative priority which should have been accorded to the freedom of NGOs to offer immediate relief.

To return to a point made in the introduction, statements made by NGOs are more important now than ever before, because of the increased role and influence of these agencies. Yet there has been very little analysis of why NGO statements should be particularly esteemed (by the media or by policy-makers), save perhaps for a vague perception that they are the ones 'on the ground', and therefore in the best position to assess developments. This perception may have little basis in fact: 'inexperienced relief workers ... are treated as experts by even more ignorant reporters parachuted in for the event' (Winter 1995: 15).

In Rwanda, 'with few exceptions, it is fair to say that the staff of international organisations and NGOs ... [did] not have a grasp of the political situation, let alone an incisive analysis' (African Rights 1995: 61). This, in some ways, is hardly surprising: NGO staff are not usually recruited for their political sophistication, but rather for their more specialist skills. This does not prevent them developing political viewpoints, though many of them will choose not to do so: as one aid official commented, 'There are hundreds of inexperienced kids [in aid organisations] running around here who know nothing about Rwanda. Worse still, they are not interested' (quoted in African Rights 1995: 61).

It would be fair to add that the pressures of relief work may mean that there is little time or energy to develop an informed view of the country. However, this did not prevent some NGO representatives, both inside and outside the country, being asked for, and offering, their views, however misguided. For example, the head of one large NGO analysed the Rwandan situation in a (European) newspaper article in the following terms:
Two groups [Hutu and Tutsi] are intent on destroying each other ... Last April, the Hutu tribe turned on their Tutsi neighbours and butchered 800,000 of them ... The Tutsis are now bent on revenge ... When the Tutsis subsequently took power, the Hutus fled. 6

The article continued in the same vein. The facts (as stated earlier) are that the Hutus opposed to the old regime were among the first targets in the 1994 massacres; that Hutus and Tutsis share a common language and culture and have lived peacefully together in the past (though political manipulation does regularly whip up ethnic strife); that the genocide was not a spontaneous ‘turning’ of one group on another, but a carefully planned, officially sponsored programme; that the new government is RPF-dominated but also contains Hutu members (albeit in rather tenuous positions); that the Hutu flight referred to was instigated and forced by the defeated forces of the old regime; and, furthermore, that the majority of Hutus did not flee (which is not to deny that the human rights of some who stayed have since suffered abuse). All of these facts were completely ignored in this particular NGO contribution.

By no means all NGOs accepted this position, just as some NGOs chose not to work in the camps, and others took care to ensure that their recruitment and business practices did not lend support to the old regime’s adherents. And many other NGOs repeatedly called for action by the UN to disarm the soldiers and militias controlling the organisation of the camps. But the piece just quoted reflected one strand of NGO thinking: a claimed ‘neutrality’ which lent support to the old regime by diminishing its responsibility for the genocide, and by justifying its keeping people in the camps (to protect them from those allegedly ‘bent on revenge’).

Why did some NGOs do what they did?

When people first fled to Zaire, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), together with some NGOs, insisted that they should return home as soon as possible and that the fears being cited as causes of flight were unfounded. One human-rights group, working closely with the UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), established an independent radio station which broadcast factual information on the situation in Rwanda to the camp population, to counter extremist propaganda.

At the same time, the UNHCR and, again, some NGOs, refused to feed or otherwise assist fleeing soldiers who had established themselves in separate camps; they insisted that these people should first, at least, disarm. One NGO official went so far as to write an internal memorandum, recommending that continued assistance to the displaced be made conditional on action being taken to facilitate the arrest of leading criminals. This recommendation was rejected by the official’s superior, who responded: ‘Our remit is to provide humanitarian assistance. That is what we have to do. We are going to be feeding people who have been perpetrating genocide’ (in African Rights 1994a: 655). Later, some NGOs remained sensitive to the dilemmas involved in their work: prominent agencies pulled out of the camps in Zaire in protest at the extent to which the genocidal regime was drawing support and control from the operation.

Given the early awareness of the situation’s complexity, why did the response often fall back on assumptions of ‘neutrality’ of impact and/or on relative disregard of whether the impact was neutral or not?

Some personal explanations

The personal experiences of agency staff in the refugee camps were deeply traumatic and shaped their thinking in fundamental ways — while there were many fewer staff members inside Rwanda whose personal outlook was moulded by the genocide. (African Rights 1994b: 28)

This observation does not explain why agencies concentrated staff and other resources on the camps in the first place (see below), but it does help explain why some NGO staff, appalled at the levels of suffering endured by the displaced, would, for example, readily work with officials of the former regime in order temporarily to relieve that suffering. It also helps to explain why the public statements of such NGOs sometimes seemed to under-emphasise the centrality of the genocide. A variant on this level of explanation was offered by a nurse, quoted as saying: ‘It’s too much to handle emotionally. I just concentrate on what I’m doing’ (Vidal 1995).

Some politically aware workers, conscious of the dilemmas involved, still supported working in the camps. One very experienced worker (in this case with a UN agency in camps in
From conflict to peace in a changing world

Tanzania) posed the question: ‘If you were asked in 1945 to work in a camp for Nazi refugees, would your abhorrence for Nazism have prevented you?’. He concluded, ‘when we acknowledge other people’s humanity, we verify our own ... In the final analysis perhaps this is why I might have worked in a Nazi refugee camp’ (Daly 1995: 30). This response does not distinguish between simply working in a Nazi refugee camp and working in a way which helps to restore Nazi power — which is the most relevant parallel in the case of the Rwandan camps. It is, nonetheless, a principled and defensible position. Such reasons go some way towards explaining why some NGO workers de-prioritised the non-neutral impact of working in the external camps.

Some institutional explanations

But the personal feelings and pressures of individual aid workers cannot explain the whole story. Most particularly, why did many NGOs choose to become involved in providing relief to the external camps to a greater extent than they sought to provide relief within Rwanda itself? Or why did some NGO spokespeople feel obliged to make public statements about situations of which they clearly understood little?

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 in Zaire, it was a case, for the NGO, of ‘be there or die’ (Joint Evaluation 1996: 117).

The 1996 Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda commented:

Where media coverage is intense and such agencies [NGOs dependent on private funding] can literally ‘buy a field presence’ for the cost of sending a team to the area, then their ability to raise funds will be substantially increased. A field presence enables NGOs justifiably to claim to ‘be there’; enables them to ‘be seen’ through the display of their logos; and increases their chance of benefiting from direct media coverage, particularly if they operate the type of programme that TV crews and audiences find appealing, such as unaccompanied children’s centres and clinics. (p. 151)

One observer has identified the tendency for NGOs to ‘become more and more alike so that no single NGO can move in and scoop the publicity and the funds ... [P]rofile is the key to success and the relationships entered into and the roles pursued will be determined by the necessity for profile’ (Crowley 1995: 40). While, as has been seen, some NGOs responding to the Rwanda crisis sought to pursue a more innovative approach, ‘[i]n a context of severe competition it will be hard for any individual NGO to break ranks and set new standards - especially given the lower ... profile [such] ... standards would require’ (Crowley 1995: 44).

As was noted earlier, official funding, on which NGOs are increasingly dependent, may also push NGOs towards a more homogeneous approach, as evidenced by the pressure from ECHO — the official emergency funder of the EU — on NGOs to become more involved with the IDPs in south-west Rwanda.

Policy implications

As mentioned in the introduction, different NGOs reacted differently to the Rwandan crisis. This suggests that change is possible and that lessons can be learned. For those NGOs which want to improve their performance and impact in this regard, the following is a preliminary list of questions which might usefully be asked before any intervention is launched. (For a much more comprehensive guide to good practice in humanitarian operations, see Minear and Weiss: 1995.)

Where should the intervention be made?

The temptation to follow the television cameras is probably one of the most difficult for an NGO to resist. As discussed above, this may lead to a concentration on refugee camps in particular. However, an NGO seriously trying to alleviate suffering could usefully ask:

- Where is the area of the greatest need? This may, as was partially the case in Rwanda, be inside a country rather than at border camps.
- Are the needs currently being addressed by others? Even if the needs at the high-profile locations are indeed the most pressing, it is often likely that a large number of other actors (official and private) will already be dealing with those needs, so that the requirement for an additional intervention there by the NGO may be limited.
On this last point, a World Bank mission to the camps in Zaire in March and April of 1995 found that 'the rise of women's associations has been one of the most important phenomena to occur recently. These “associations” work for the economic betterment of families in camps, while also providing a sanctuary to discuss a range of sensitive issues, including repatriation. Support for these groups should be a priority of any assistance programme' (World Bank 1995: 1). Searching out such alternatives to reliance upon the previously existing power structures is one way in which some NGOs might have avoided bolstering abusive authorities, difficult though this would have been in the absence of camp disarmament.

The development of information-dissemination capacities, along the lines of the radio initiatives mentioned above, constituted another potentially innovative response, recognising that a greater good may sometimes be achieved by a speedy closure of camps than by catering to their immediate needs.

What is the impact of public statements by NGO representatives?

Before commenting upon a situation, NGO representatives might ask:

- Is this statement based on a proper understanding and knowledge of the situation?
- Is the purpose of the statement to draw attention to a genuine problem, or merely to draw attention to the NGO?
- Who will benefit from this statement? Rather than simply claiming neutrality, has the statement been analysed to assess whether it will offer support to one side or other in a conflict?

Should the NGO intervene at all?

This, of course, is the most difficult question of all. One example of where an NGO intervention should perhaps have been opposed has already been cited: had the conditions (i.e. a cease-fire) been created for major humanitarian intervention in Rwanda before July 1994, then the genocide could have been prolonged. In situations such as this, NGOs must ask whether their perceived ‘right’ to intervene should not be subordinated to other priorities.

Unfortunately, it is often easier to brush aside reservations (where they exist) and concentrate on the high-profile work in hand, while ignoring or under-emphasising the far from neutral implications of the work done. It will be difficult for many NGOs to follow the example set by the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers) in Britain in 1849, when they discontinued their relief efforts regarding the famine in Ireland, and in fact turned down official financial support offered to them for that purpose. Their reasoning was based on what they saw as the limitations of private charity and the need to assert governmental responsibility:

Seeing that the difficulty was so far beyond the reach of private exertion, and that the only machinery which it was practicable to employ was that under the control of the public authorities; and believing that the Government alone could raise funds, or carry out the measures necessary in many districts to save the lives of the people, we feared that if we ventured to undertake a work for which our resources were so inadequate, we might, through our incompetency, injure the cause of those whom we desired to serve.9

The admission of inadequate resources and incompetency, and the willingness to stand aside rather than ‘injure the cause of those whom we desire to serve’ are examples from which today’s NGOs could yet draw inspiration. The Quaker purpose was to highlight the failings of official agencies, failings which remain depressingly familiar today. The strongest defence of NGOs in the Rwandan crisis is that they were asked to perform impossible roles in vacuums left by those agencies — such as the UN and governments — which had the power to frame and enforce an appropriate political response; the challenge for NGOs is to decide whether ‘standing aside’ is sometimes the best way of confronting and correcting the actions and inactions of others.

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Notes

1 For ease of presentation, the term ‘NGOs’ here refers only to international NGOs; the role (often vital) of indigenous NGOs in
emergency situations is not the focus of this article.

2 This World Bank report, however, also noted that 'the control of the former leaders is not absolute' (1995:1), a point we return to in the concluding section of this article.

3 The Joint Evaluation points out that the tendency to favour those outside the country was evident in the fact that people who were displaced inside Rwanda on 13 July 1994 received almost no assistance, while the same people received very generous assistance when they crossed the border into Zaire on 14 July; this change was only partly explained by the outbreak of cholera in the newly formed camps in Zaire (1996: 117).

4 We should also mention the approximately 40 NGOs which had become involved in relief and rehabilitation work in RPF-held areas in northern Rwanda by June 1994 (Joint Evaluation 1996: 35).

5 As reported to the author.

6 As explained in the introduction, individual NGOs are not identified in this article.

7 The earlier discussion of promising initial aid responses to the crisis is also drawn from this source.

8 It is beyond the scope of this article to examine in detail the reasons why some disasters receive greater media attention than others, but one factor is clearly that it is easier for the media to cover a disaster which is concentrated in a small number of areas (border crossings, refugee camps) than one which is spread throughout a whole country (devastation, destitution, trauma). The former also makes for more spectacular footage and can be 'explained' through standard terms of reference: helplessness, flight, etc.


References


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Guatemala: uncovering the past, recovering the future

Elizabeth Lira

Editor's note: In early 1995, Dr Elizabeth Lira met with Guatemalan human-rights workers involved in the transition process which was being overseen by the UN (MINUGUA), and with the Human Rights Office at the Archbishopric. In December 1996, the Peace Accords were signed, signalling the formal end to the 36-year war and, among other things, conferring amnesty on the military. The author's personal reflections on her visit are included here for the insights they offer into the human-rights dimensions of transition from war to peace.

Human rights: a numbing obsession

What does one expect of Guatemala, a country with one of the worst human-rights records in the western hemisphere? I had few preconceptions other than what I had learned through reading people like Rigoberta Menchu. I knew that the military had pervaded all areas of life and expression, and I had an idea of the Guatemalan version of 'national security' and the policies emanating from this. I had listened to Guatemalan refugees in Los Angeles, Berkeley, and Boston, and read many accounts of human-rights violations, torture, assassinations, and political disappearances. I knew the work of the historian and poet Eduardo Galeano, and had read poetry and stories of the Mayan culture. Yet, in spite of everything I thought I knew, I had no idea what Guatemala would actually be like.

My first impression of Guatemala City was the pollution. The traffic congestion is so severe that the city seems on the verge of collapse. Everything moves at a snail's pace. The constant racket is itself an assault on the senses: traffic, street vendors, music blaring out from stores and shops. This chaos is compounded by the posters, bill-boards, and signs of every shape and size hanging from every available space. The number of street sellers makes it impossible to move around. The beauty of the city is lost in the noise, the crush, the bustle, and the general disorder. But I saw no beggars, no violence. Everyone seemed friendly. The human climate was hard to gauge.

Some chance conversations gave some idea of what was going on in the country. A woman who was selling weavings began telling me about the pains in her heart, which she described as one might describe anguish. She told me about her insomnia, her fears, her psychosomatic illnesses. It was not easy to ask her what caused these pains. But she told me that they arose from profound fears and things to do with death concerning members of her family, 'things one cannot talk about'.

How many things can one not talk about in Guatemala? I tried to understand what was going on, but the newspapers gave very little idea. The television was the same. Though endless speeches by politicians appeared on the news, these were mostly repetitive and meaningless. Whatever their ideological persuasion, they seemed pretty much the same. Television itself seemed like a good way to create exactly the kind of confusion that would make sure that nothing ever changed.

Superficially, the issue of human rights seemed to be the most important subject in the public arena, given the exhaustive media coverage. It was disconcerting to see how 'human rights' could become so obsessively absorbing. Cases were denounced, extracts from reports on human rights in Guatemala were publicised, and so on. Many issues featured under 'human rights', from acts of violence attributed to the guerrillas, or the international report on human rights, to the discovery of clandestine graves or information about past violations. I wondered whether this
almost indiscriminate coverage did not trivialise the problem, by making everyone used to hearing about atrocities that would be quite overwhelming if one stopped to listen, while at the same time mixing up politically motivated violence with acts of State-sponsored terrorism. A similar thing happened in Argentina, when it came to light that gross violations of human rights had been committed by the Alfonsin government. Information was prolific and constant. What it actually generated was a sense of banality; people became weary and uninterested. Thus the enormity of the horror went unheeded. Consequently, the information had no great impact on public opinion, and there was little pressure to go beyond a mere denunciation of events.

Yet in Guatemala I was impressed by people's sense that these crimes had been committed with impunity, that the threat is still ever-present. Fear is palpable, despondency as well as hope, and the impact of the violence is deeply personal. Given the scale of the atrocities, and how they are perceived by ordinary people, it is hard to understand how the peace process could be under way. Some say the transition began in 1985. But what can this possibly mean? The end of the repression? A transition to what? How can fear be eradicated? How can social peace be built? What social and cultural behaviour will be needed to make possible the changes in people's minds, alongside the political changes? What institutional changes will occur? How can the information to establish the yearned-for truth about what happened possibly be produced, given the impunity with which the abuses were committed? And what about the military? In other spheres, what would be the role of academics, what controls would be imposed on their teaching, and what type of ideological persecution might follow? What about the students or social organisations?

The signing of the Peace Accords will bring enormous consequences, especially for those who suffered most intimately during the four decades of political violence. Fear lies behind every conversation, like something woven into the fabric of society, something one must live with. When I read the Archbishop's reports on human-rights violations since 1992, I was impressed by the thoroughness of the documentation. I also realised that, while the scale has lessened, grave violations continue. Fear becomes a chronic response to a situation that is constantly threatening, and where there seem to be no boundaries. Arbitrariness is 'normal', even in a context that is supposedly democratic.

I was often told that the telephones were probably bugged, and correspondence intercepted. But it was far from clear what kinds of precaution one should take. Simply reading the denunciations made me feel that there were no adequate precautions, since political repression was characterised above all by being arbitrary and unpredictable. From what I could gather, the recent persecution had focused on people who had been trying to piece together the sheer enormity of the violence of the past, especially in the countryside. It was clear that some forces wished to stop cases reaching the tribunals, in spite of MINUGUA.

Breaking the silence

A central element in human-rights work is to contribute to peace through establishing what actually happened. Breaking the silence means creating the social conditions that enable the truth — 'the clarification of what happened in the past' — to contribute to a kind of subjective justice. This means that individuals must be able to see that their experience of pain and persecution is recognised by society.

For the Church, breaking the silence means restoring the value of human life, and re-weaving the social fabric so to include a collective memory of the past: a past that includes not only the repression, but also resistance, and the efforts of the dispossessed to bring about social and political change. The Church is therefore developing a history of the violence in order to help to build a Guatemala that can form a collective judgement about its past. This is not just a question of gathering statistics, but also of testifying to the ways in which the violence was experienced by individuals, families, and entire communities. This will in turn contribute to the work of the Truth Commission.

Basically, there two main aims to the ambitious task of recovering the collective memory. The first is to gather well-substantiated information that can serve as legal documentation, so that judicial proceedings may be initiated. The second is to obtain first-hand testimonies that register not only the concrete facts but also their psychological impact. The emphases are different. The rigour
Guatemala: uncovering the past, recovering the future

with which facts must be documented for strictly legal purposes may not generate the right conditions for recovering the collective memory, which is essentially intended to have a subjective and therapeutic function. Giving testimony is a chance to recount a history that has been silenced — and to do so in the presence of someone who represents that element of Guatemalan society which wants to acknowledge as fully as possible what really took place.

Giving testimony is an emotionally cathartic act. However, while it can be a huge psychological relief for the individual, it is also important to contain these emotions — something that places a huge responsibility on the one who receives the testimony. This person must demonstrate empathy, but also be skilled in conducting the interview, so that the witness is not re-traumatised. The interviewers themselves need to be trained and supported by a capable team. They need a high level of self-awareness, an understanding of what draws them to the work, their fears and vulnerabilities, and inner resources. It is important to bear in mind that, while the interviews are with individuals, the political repression was generalised, and much of the history is of wholesale massacres of rural Indian communities.

The Church's task is then both social and political, but also potentially therapeutic. It is concerned with recognising and validating the experience of violence, of the pain and loss this caused, in a context that still cannot guarantee basic rights to all; a context in which the 'truth' is a repudiation of the military version of repression and the impunity enjoyed by the Armed Forces, and which is thus likely to generate intense emotional reactions. This remains an extreme experience that cannot be adequately symbolised.

At the same time, the interviewers are not immune to what they will be documenting, for the experiences and realities have been shared by almost everyone. Those who testify are likely to have needs that range from wanting to establish the truth and seek justice to simply having someone listen to them. Likewise, the interviewers will have their own needs and expectations of the process. These should be out in the open, so that they do not interfere with the work.

Who wants to hear about the past?

And what is this work? It consists in building up both a formal environment and the human relationships that will foster the gathering of reliable information. This means establishing a sense of trust, and a relationship that can 'hold' the torrent of emotional release. Fear will inevitably be present, since fear is a protective emotion, part of the protective baggage that is itself a response to the life-threatening reality in which everyone has had to function and survive for decades. At the same time, what people will describe is a history of unimaginable horror and suffering. Who wants to hear it? Who wants to tell it? What's the point of telling it? And why listen?

While all this can come to seem self-evident to those who are used to working with these issues, the answers are in fact not at all obvious. We need to be very clear with everyone concerned about why we are doing this work. We cannot deny the need for emotional release, but catharsis itself is not enough. People need support and feedback in various ways, which may include therapy or various forms of cultural expression. But what is needed is a space within which people can find some kind of symbol of what they know about what happened, and their feelings about it, and gain a public recognition of the experience. This is fundamental, given Guatemalan society's denial of what took place, and the impunity with which these violations were committed.

Victor Montejo's Testimony: Death of an Indian Community in Guatemala, published in 1993, is a first-person account of the obliteration of an entire community, and gives some insight into the emotional issues to be taken into account. The personal vulnerability, and the possibility of reprisals for giving testimony about the repression, must be considered. It is one thing for someone spontaneously to talk about some of what happened, as part of a discussion about the price of maize or whatever, because it is a very deep and significant part of their everyday existence. But it is quite another to talk about these terrible events in a formal and structured way, for this to be recorded in writing. People's reactions could be very different. For some, it will be something they have been longing to do for many years. Others may be more ambivalent. Language and the meanings of particular symbols will vary from one ethnic
group to another, just as the reactions and needs of mothers and fathers, children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, will differ.

Assessing reality: risks and feelings

It is essential to have a realistic picture of the human-rights situation today, and the likely future scenario, in order to distinguish the real risks, as opposed to those perceived by people with long experience of repression and violence. This will provide the basis for a better understanding of the social conditions in which the work of collecting testimonies will be done. It will also assist in developing appropriate strategies for coping with the uncertainty and constant threat, the difficulties and risks inherent in a chronic emergency. Recognising one’s own strategies gives insights into the defence mechanisms used by others — such as black humour, psychosomatic complaints, inter-personal conflicts, or specific psychological responses such as denial or dissociation. Such awareness makes it possible to give space to and validate other people’s fears, their uncertainties, their anguish; and at the same time to recognise that everyone involved in this kind of work also has the right and the need to have their own feelings recognised — whether of tiredness, frustration, or impotence.

This calls for keeping one’s feet firmly on the ground. There are ethical issues at stake, as well as subjective needs. In addition to training, those involved in gathering testimonies need a strategy of collective support. For many people, this work inspires great hope and represents something they have been longing to happen. But precisely because of these expectations, reality will be very hard: it is important to avoid unrealistic expectations, in order not to lose hope.

Training for human-rights workers

If the preparatory work is done collectively, it should be possible to anticipate specific situations, and predict the kinds of problem that will arise: difficulties affecting the individuals involved in the work, or the people they are interviewing; problems inherent in the situation, or the process itself. If we know that we will be dealing with pain — pain that will often resonate with our own — we need to learn how to offer support, acceptance, emotional limits, and help. These are part and parcel of the work, and we need to be clear and self-aware in order to function. We need to acquire some specific skills, like how to ask questions, almost as if one were taking a clinical history — which means being as objective as possible about what the patient says, without losing sight of the fact that it is pain that causes people to be concerned about themselves, and to seek and accept help. Taking a clinical history is a skill that must be learned, but in this case it also entails both the interviewer and the ‘patient’ using all the resources at their disposal to relieve the pain that is actually caused by giving the history.

When we talk about memory, we are using a concept that is sometimes a metaphor for unresolved personal or collective grief. We need to construct memory, to recall — ‘feel it in one’s heart again’ — in order gradually to close the wounds. There are two elements here: the history of the ‘patient’, and that person’s history in his or her wider social context. That is, the history of the community, the family, the social group to which they belong. Therapy is often a process of restoring the link between an individual’s grief and their collective experience. It is like finding some sense of what happened, whether as a way of understanding the past, or of projecting into the future. It does not depend on an outsider, but on each particular individual.

It is far from easy to see how to design an appropriate training programme for human-rights workers in this context. Clearly, the legal requirements are real, but have somehow to be combined with interviews which are intended to gather many hundreds of profoundly painful experiences. The task of preparing people to deal emotionally and professionally with this is daunting. The needs of the coordinating team will differ from those of the people working on the ground, but there will undoubtedly be a need for some kind of counselling support for everyone in what cannot but be a gruelling experience. There is also the question of how to recognise psychological and psycho-social trauma, and how to formulate specific recommendations in response.

Underlying everything is a need to reflect on the wider implications of a ‘transition’ which seems to be focused on establishing peace and
respects for human rights. This reflection should draw on a range of backgrounds and disciplines, and promote a meaningful exchange of experiences of other post-war transitions in order to get a sense of what is really possible, and where the problems lie. Perhaps the problems to concentrate on relate to political transitions, which depend on achieving peace. The calls for peace have many different origins, each posing a different challenge. In Guatemala, memory, history, truth, justice, reparation, and reconciliation have particular significance. Experiences of transition elsewhere would need to be set within the Guatemalan context, where real advances in the area of human rights are taking place, and where it has been the military who have been primarily responsible for political repression. Any such exchange should be within a framework for mutual learning from the experience of people elsewhere.

Human rights and mental health

Many Guatemalans have for years been involved in mental-health work as well as human-rights work. One NGO began working in the early 1990s in areas that suffered badly in the war, using a small technical team and a larger group of community-based health workers. For them, mental health has nothing to do with classifying people as mad and shutting them away. It has to do with living communities, with collective identity, and with day-to-day survival. In this, small production projects play an important role.

The organisation CONAVIGUA (a war widows’ rights organisation) was formed as a direct response to the repression. It provides a forum within which bereaved women ‘can say what we feel, talk about our fears, our mistrust, as well as domestic violence, and alcoholism’. Alcoholism has increased in the rural areas, which the army occupied and controlled for 15 years. CONAVIGUA’s festival of community mental health is aimed at helping people to see alcoholism as a collective problem that needs some public expression.

The case of the Nebaj area of El Quiche is telling. High in the mountains, about 250 km from the capital, it suffered terribly from army repression and brutality. The military destroyed many homes and settlements, and then forced people to live in ‘model villages’, in each of which is a monument to military achievements — in what? Creating peace? Promoting education? Repression? Given the lack of land in these ‘model villages’, the army eventually began to allow resettlement in the surrounding areas. The people of Nebaj, mainly young adults, began to return to their places of origin in the early 1990s. They did go back, while other communities were still resisting in the mountains. They had been forced to leave because of the massacres. They are dignified, interested in the world around them (for example, about events in Chiapas, Mexico), but do not place their trust lightly. The men urge the women to speak out, while the women hide behind their lack of Spanish, at least when they are addressing a group. Speaking to them individually is easier. Gradually, these people open up enough to speak about what they have been through: about how they are frightened to set down roots, because who knows whether the violence is really over, or whether it will return? They are afraid, and yet they seem quite calm under the protective shield of their own language. To see where these people are living now, to view the ‘model villages’, to understand something about how they organise themselves, and how they see their lives — all these details give shape to the personal testimonies of repression.

Back in the capital, some church-based human-rights workers are holding a workshop to look at the problems they face. One group mentions people’s fear of denouncing any form of violence, whether personal or structural. They may show apathy and lack of interest in the institutions that are meant to deal with the problem. Other reactions range from timidity to aggressiveness, from despair to obedience, resignation, or passivity among those who have directly experienced political repression. ‘They seem to have no recollection of what has happened, saying “I don’t want to remember”, while what one sees are signs of anguish, stress, disbelief, and despair.’ A second group displays a range of reactions and behaviour patterns. People are afraid of widespread criminal violence. Some people are against human rights. Many of those who come to the human-rights office are aggressive, violent, and expect to be given everything on a plate. But some become enthused, and start getting involved. A third group of workers describes how, when people come to file a denunciation about a human-rights violation, they often find
From conflict to peace in a changing world

themselves weeping. Some fear that this may affect their capacity to work; others fear that they are not affected at all. The last group talks about violence in all its forms — economic, political, and social — seeing poverty as a consequence of this. 'People feel marginalised, and violence causes psychosomatic problems', they say.

In summing up, one worker says that many of the things they have described are things they feel themselves: 'We feel frustrated, impotent in the face of a situation of no change'. The group jokes about impotence, taking it to mean sexual impotence. Then someone comments that this is not so far from the truth, and that sexual impotence is one way in which people respond to their feelings of helplessness. 'We reproduce the authoritarian system as a kind of defence mechanism. We become withdrawn and express things through black humour and booze. Liquor is the people's psychiatrist' — a comment that causes ripples of nervous laughter — 'and may be a personal response to pressure.'

We need to be on constant alert, not on the defensive, but ready to fight back. It is something we get very sensitive about, and sometimes aggressive, when we feel impotent, when we feel helpless and yet responsible for raising others' expectations. We think about our work all the time, and lose sleep over it. We feel indignant about things that can't be changed. We are afraid that our impotence may make us indifferent. We sometimes over-identify with the problems we hear about, and feel isolated as a result. The work is stressful, especially since some of us have been the direct victims of violence. It can give rise to a wish for vengeance, and this can become a very strong feeling among human-rights workers. The problems we are dealing with affect us. And what we don't talk about can come out later in the form of aggressiveness. The sources of stress stimulate our own destructive capacities, and we seem unable to tap into our constructive potential.

Collaboration through difference

This is only the briefest glimpse of Guatemala. In everything I observed and heard, there were are things that are familiar — from the constant traffic jams to what these human-rights workers said. But many things are very different. Any serious efforts to collaborate in the area of human rights must be based on a recognition of our similarities and our differences, and on the possibilities that these offer. In all human experience we find some elements that are universal, and others that are unique: and we must learn to recognise these. Can we work together on human rights? Possibly, but precisely in those areas in which we can join in identifying our differences, so that these become the basis for a genuine exchange of experience.

Notes

1 The Catholic Church was embarking on a nationwide effort to recover and record the memory of the military atrocities that resulted in the deaths of 150,000 people during the 36-year war.
2 Rigoberta Menchu is a Mayan indian and human-rights activist, awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 1990.
3 As the opposition to the government represented by the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) mounted in the late 1970s, the armed forces launched a campaign of terror that has rarely been paralleled for its savagery (and lack of publicity) in the history of Latin America. The resulting carnage was so vast that at least another 30,000 Guatemalans [had] been killed [by 1987], hundreds more [had] been "disappeared", 440 Indian villages [had] been wiped off the face of the map, and between 100,000 and 200,000 children [had] lost at least one parent' (J. Painter (1987): Guatemala: False Hope, False Freedom, London: Latin America Bureau).
4 Since the CIA-sponsored military overthrow in 1954 of Jacobo Arbenz, the democratically elected President of Guatemala.

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Assisting survivors of war and atrocity: notes on ‘psychosocial’ issues for NGO workers

Derek Summerfield

Introduction

What has been generally labelled the ‘psychosocial’ dimension of the impact of war and organised violence has been of increasing interest in the development field, and in agencies like the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This offers some positive possibilities, but the danger is that a narrowly ‘medicalised’ and ‘psychologised’ view of ‘trauma’ will be imposed in diverse settings worldwide. This would constitute a typical North-South transfer of concepts and practices.

Because this issue has become fashionable, funding is being attracted to some highly flawed proposals. What are the issues for agencies which aim first and foremost for the fullest possible understanding of the experiences of war-affected peoples and of the factors which shape their responses over time, including the decision to seek help? Can such NGOs enrich the relationships they forge with those they seek to assist, and go on to highlight new possibilities for well-grounded interventions?

The following notes are not intended to be prescriptive, but to sketch out a framework to guide workers in whatever war-affected setting they are addressing. Actual approaches and solutions have to be locally tailored.

1 There is a set of themes running through most modern conflict. Violence is played out where people live and work; there is little distinction between combatants and others; and more than 90 per cent of all casualties are civilian. Exemplary brutality is often systematically used to create terror as a means of control of whole populations. Abductions, extrajudicial executions, and torture are frequently public and witnessed by families of victims. Sexual violation is a standard and under-reported element: women are exposed to this in prisons, in their homes in conflict zones, during flight, and in refugee camps. In twenty violent conflicts during the 1980s, children were not just passive bystanders, but also had active roles, including bearing arms — either as volunteers or through coercion. Damage, frequently intentional, to social, economic, and cultural institutions and ways of life takes place almost invariably. This may disrupt the way a particular people connect with their history, identity, and lived values, all of which define their world. Prominent and respected people — community leaders, health workers, priests, educated people — are often targeted. The neutrality of medical facilities is not respected.

The cumulative effect can mean that large numbers of civilians are rendered near-destitute, whether or not displaced from their communities. Modern conflict is frequently chronic and fluctuating, with hostilities varying in intensity and location. People feel besieged and threatened, even when their particular locality is quiet. Staying silent about what they have endured or seen may be important for survival. In many parts of the world, social tension and war are not extraordinary or ‘abnormal’; their effects are so chronic that they have come to be incorporated into economic and social life; various groups, affected in varying ways, respond and adapt to the situation in diverse and shifting ways.

2 Thus survivors suffer multiple injuries, not just to life and limb but to the social fabric of their communities, which may no longer be able to play its customary protective and problem-solving role. They will be horrified and grieving, not just for what has happened to individual human beings, but to their community, society, and culture. Most will register the wounds of war in social rather than psychological terms. Those who are refugees must also contend with the insecurities and hardship of their new situation, including (for
some) a cultural gulf between themselves and the host society.

3 Fundamental to the human processing of atrocious experience is the subjective meaning it has or comes to have for those affected, the understandings and attributions they draw on in the struggle to encompass what has happened. These understandings, and the adaptations that flow from them, are drawn from society, its history and politics. People who have not been able to generate an interpretation of what has happened, and who find events incomprehensible, are likely to feel most helpless and unsure what to do.

Help-seeking behaviour will be determined by background, culture, and social norms. War-affected communities are heterogeneous, and there will not be one standard reaction to events. Those affected are not ‘pure’ victims, and even the most destitute still exercise active interpretations and choices. They are victims, but they are also survivors. It is important to know as much as possible about how the particular society functioned in the past.

4 The sense which people make of their predicament, and the priorities they nominate, are not static; they may shift with time, with change in the war situation, and as people adapt and reorganise.

5 Supportive interventions for war-affected people must ideally be based upon an accurate and comprehensive grasp of the complexities of what has happened. Naturally this starts with appraisal of the scale and nature of the material damage and upheaval which the war has wrought. But the experience of people on the ground also involves subjective, less material elements. War provokes states of feeling and thinking which to the people concerned are not necessarily any less ‘real’ as reflections of what has happened than, say, the total numbers of dead and injured. For them this is part of the story of the war and is destined to become part of social memory. These factors will influence what survivors say and do, and what they want, and thus shape short-term and, arguably, longer-term outcomes for individuals and for their society.

6 NGO workers must be aware of these issues, and pay attention to the ways in which they may be manifesting themselves in a particular setting, if they are to deepen their background knowledge and capacity for accurate empathy with those they seek to assist. This may generate new possibilities for creative intervention and provide more criteria for choosing between proposed projects. It may minimise misunderstandings, make survivors feel better understood, and thus improve the relationship between NGO and ‘client’ group, whether the project concerns emergency aid, agriculture, education, or whatever. Thus we are talking about an approach, about the way NGO workers engage with war-affected peoples, and not just about defined projects. The effectiveness of project evaluation will also be strongly influenced by the quality of this relationship over time.

7 NGO workers need first to reflect on their own assumptions and notions about the personal impact of war, atrocity, torture and so on. Do you think, for example, that someone who has been tortured is likely to be psychologically disturbed or damaged, if not overtly then under the surface? Psychological concepts are part of Western culture and thought and are thus not absolute or universal, though they are being increasingly globalised. ‘Trauma’, and a presumed need for psychological treatment, is a fashionable concept in the West, and there is a danger of inappropriate application to war settings worldwide. Every culture has its own constructions of traumatic events and recipes for recovery. Interventions aimed at alleviating the psychological distress of war-affected peoples may be simplistic and ignorant of local culture, and risk being experienced as insensitive or imposed. If this is so, they will fail anyway. Local workers can also feel undermined by imported concepts and ‘experts’ who implement them.

8 Wars cause distress or suffering, and this is of course understandable and ‘normal’. We should not generally interpret and re-label this as psychological ‘trauma’, denoting a mental injury, analogous to a physical injury, needing treatment or ‘therapy’. This basic error is already being made, at the risk of distortion in the wider debate about the effects of war and the prioritisation of resources to address them. Only a small minority develop a psychological problem which (if facilities permit) merits professional help. Expressions of distress, even when forceful, do not generally imply psychological frailty or damage, or nearness to breakdown. Survivors do not want to be psychologised or have some kind of ‘sick’
identity imputed to them. The few who do develop objective psychological disturbance generally show themselves by their inability to function properly in their situation. For this reason their family or community tend to identify them for themselves. It is not these few but the majority, and the processes which can sustain them, which will be the focus of interventions by the NGO field.

9 The narratives of survivors can give a graphic illustration of their experiences, what they mean to them, and the coping processes brought to bear on them. Some may seek to tell their stories to others, including NGO workers, to obtain ordinary human comfort and solidarity. However, we must not assume that this is what survivors should do if they want to get better; some cultures do not prescribe this, and even in the West individual needs vary.

10 What is fundamental is that suffering is a social experience and not a private one. What this suffering provokes in war-affected peoples is played out in public. They struggle to come to terms with their losses (which sometimes seem to amount to their whole world), engaging with their situation in what one hopes is a problem-solving way.

11 Provision of the essentials for daily living, and issues of physical security, obviously come first. Beyond that, the major thrust of NGO interventions will be towards the social world of survivor populations, for herein lie the sources of resilience and capacity for recovery for all. Thus the 'psychosocial' agenda is substantially a social one. Because of its association with the mental-health field, it might be better to drop the term 'psychosocial' in favour of one indicating that the core task is to address the social and collective wounds of war. Interventions should not use a (mental) aid-and-relief model, addressing ‘psychology’, but a social-development model, addressing suffering.

12 Most people endure war and recover from it as a function of the extent to which they can, firstly, regain a measure of dignity, control, and autonomy over their immediate environment. They will seek to reconstitute what they can of their family and other networks, so often splintered in modern conflict. Anything that generates a sense of solidarity or community, and bolsters the viability of local organisations and structures, must be helpful. Meaningful training and work can be one logical focus of NGO efforts, allowing people to feel useful and effective again, as well as perhaps generating income or essential items for subsistence. Most people would rather be active citizens than mere recipients of aid. Involvement in projects can help people to sustain their weakened social relationships, or develop some new ones. In a partial way, such engagement can perform some of the functions which peacetime society used to do: helping people to generate a social meaning for events, to recognise, contain, and manage grief and its social face, mourning; to stimulate and organise active means of coping and problem-solving, individual and collective, in the face of continuing adversity.

And when in due course they get the chance, people will seek a substantial reconstruction of the damaged social fabric, including the economic and cultural forms and institutions which make sense to them. The restoration of health services and schooling are generally high priorities in all cultures. However, they will not necessarily seek just to restore to their old state what they valued before the war; they recognise that some things may have changed for ever.

13 NGO workers may represent a source of emotional support to war-affected people; but this is not, and does not have to be, ‘therapy’ or ‘counselling’, implying a professional activity with a technology. None the less, in some situations workers may feel empowered by some basic and contextualised advice on mental-health issues, either through contact with local professionals or from written material. An example of the latter are the succinct Save the Children Fund manuals on assisting children in difficult circumstances, notably war zones.

14 Those refugee camps which emphasise confinement and control, which provide residents with insufficient protection against further violence and abuse (often from within), or which do not involve them in decision-making obviously breach the basic principles outlined above. In some situations, NGOs also need to take account of the local people among whom refugees have come to rest. A good working relationship between them and the refugees may help both parties.

15 Much modern conflict worldwide is endemic, so that those affected have not even got to the stage of an aftermath and must keep up a kind of crisis-management response. NGOs need to support the structures which help these people
to endure and keep going. A proper counting of the costs and a ‘recovery’ has to be postponed.

16 There are few prescriptions which can be carried from one context to another: solutions need to be local, drawing on survivors’ resilience, skills, and priorities. War-affected peoples are often in fluid or evolving situations: with time, their perceptions and priorities may change, so their relationship with an NGO needs to be able to accommodate this. Will the NGO be able to detect and respond to such shifts, to join in their exploration of what is possible over time, without sacrificing clarity and rational planning?

17 While many of the experiences which war brings are shared by young men, young women and mothers, children and elderly alike, we may also identify differential effects in some circumstances. For example, the key role of women, both in relation to their increased vulnerability (particularly to sexual and other violence) and their responsibilities as providers and protectors of the children, should be recognised. They often constitute the majority of adult refugees. Time needs to be taken to establish the expressed needs of women, both in their own right and in respect of those for whom they care.

Women can be the focus of projects which generate community-wide benefits. The physical and emotional well-being of children in war is strongly dependent on the capacity of their principal care-givers to cope. Once this fails, their morbidity and mortality rapidly escalate. Orphaned and otherwise unprotected children are a high-priority group and urgently need reconnecting, if possible, with surviving family members or others from their original community. All children need as much day-to-day normality and structure as can be managed, inside the home and outside it — for example, through the restoration of some schooling. People with physical disability (frequently war-induced) represent another group who may have distinct problems.

18 When we are discussing ‘targeting’, we should also note that there have been projects which focused exclusively either on a particular event such as ‘rape’, or a particular group, such as ‘traumatised children’, and so imposed a simplistic and decontextualised view of the experiences of survivors.

19 Some survivors are aware that their experiences amount to testimony which may have a wider political and legal significance, and are a part of the history of the war and a counting of its costs. It may apply universally that victims suffer more over time when they are denied official acknowledgement or reparation for what has been done to them. NGOs could consider collation, publication, and dissemination of their testimonies. This is evidence which could be presented to war-crimes tribunals and other forums.

20 To summarise, it is pivotal to recognise that the social fabric is a core target of modern warfare and in its damaged state remains the context in which large numbers of people must manage their distress and cope with their fractured lives. A basic task is to help them to sustain some social ‘space’ within which they can foster their collective capacities for endurance and creative survival.

The NGO field should largely avoid Western approaches which presuppose the incidence of mental trauma and tend to take a simplistic view of the complex and evolving experiences of war-affected populations. Too often, such approaches ignore the way in which people’s experiences are shaped by their background norms and current understandings; and too often such approaches merely assign people the role of client or patient. Instead, the basic framework should be based on the model of social development — a model which is already well understood by the NGO field. Actual projects should ideally be locally tailored, situation-sensitive, able to adjust as circumstances change, and capable of taking root and thus be self-sustaining.

The author

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Tensions in the psychosocial discourse: implications for the planning of interventions with war-affected populations

Alastair Ager

Introduction

Derek Summerfield’s paper on psychosocial issues for NGO workers (Summerfield, 1995; reprinted here) raises a number of fundamental questions regarding the planning and implementation of programmes targeting war-affected populations. Principal among these is whether psychosocial programmes adopting a broadly clinical approach have any justifiable role in addressing the needs of populations facing the consequences of conflict.

Summerfield (1995, 1996) persuasively argues that it is the destruction of the social fabric of a society which is targeted in much contemporary warfare, for the very purpose of instilling fear, disorientation, and loss of identity. In such circumstances, it is plausible to argue that assisting in the reconstruction of social forms — through the swift re-establishment of structures of civil society — should comprise the dominant form of response from the humanitarian-assistance community. The more molecular, clinical approach of many existing programmes can be seen in these terms to conceive of the impact of warfare in an inappropriately de-contextualised manner. A focus on individual experience, adjustment, and coping capacity may be seen to result in programmes blind to the crucial issues regarding the social meaning of war experience within a disrupted cultural frame of reference (Stubbs 1996). Other workers, however, have continued to assert the value of clinically based programmes in war-affected areas, pointing to the complex psychological needs associated with traumatic experience and the effectiveness of therapeutic intervention in addressing them (Agger 1995, Orley 1996).

Tensions in the contemporary psychosocial discourse

This response argues that there is a fundamental conceptual tension underlying such debate regarding the appropriate form and focus of psychosocial programmes. Figure 1 attempts to represent this tension, by identifying three associated continua which reflect the bases of different conceptualisations of psychosocial programmes.

The first of these continua represents the judgement that is made regarding the generalisability of knowledge in the field. At one extreme, the circumstances of each population are considered quite unique. As such concepts of well-being, mental health, and adjustment are socially constructed, it is inappropriate to generalise understandings gained from other cultural settings. At the other extreme, core psychological functioning is broadly invariant across cultures, and thus programmes may safely be established on a basis of certain fundamental principles regarding psychosocial processes.

The second, related continuum reflects the emphasis given to technical as opposed to...
indigenous understandings of trauma and difficulty. Summerfield’s (1995) analysis encourages attention to ‘the sense people make of their predicament, and the priorities they nominate’. Do such understandings drive the structure and form of the programme, or is there some technical, clinical framework determining the programme’s fundamental nature? We may wish to avoid this question — as with the other continua — by saying that ‘both’ forms of understanding are valued. Nonetheless, in terms of structuring the debate regarding the appropriate forms of psychosocial intervention, the key question is: which form of understanding exerts the dominant influence on programme goals, structure and reporting? Local understandings may be captured in the course of assessment or intervention, but if overall programme strategy is set prior to implementation with regard to a Western, psychological framework, the latter remains the dominant discourse. Translation of elements of local understandings into external terms may appease sensibilities regarding cultural awareness, but it maintains a structural relationship between forms of knowledge which reinforces the dominance of the external discourse.

The third continuum reflects the extent to which programmes are targeted towards a particular client group or are community-wide in focus. This continuum may be seen to provide some insight into where a programme may be appropriately located on the previous two continua. Programmes that reflect certain generalisable principles of psychosocial functioning and respect technical understandings of potential intervention are, for instance, more likely to be those which specify a particular target group for whom the planned intervention is most needed and/or potentially effective. Specification of a programme targeting intervention for children traumatised by war, for example, will commonly bring with it assumptions of what has proved effective in previous ‘war trauma’ programmes for children, and be predicated on some technical framework with respect to which children’s vulnerability and means of readjustment may be conceptualised. On the other hand, programmes that focus on indigenous understandings of assumed unique circumstance are more likely to work on a community-wide basis. Community-wide programmes inevitably engage with dominant local understandings of circumstance, and are commonly fundamentally driven by them.

**Implications for intervention**

While it is tempting simply to propose a compromise between the two extremes of each continua, such a position is complex and necessarily dynamic. There is no comfortable ground in this territory. What follows is a personal appraisal of appropriate strategies for negotiating such difficult conceptual and pragmatic terrain.

A survey of the broad literature regarding the psychosocial status of populations following war and political oppression (see Ager 1993) supports the key role of a number of protective or ameliorative influences. These include, notably, family integration, social support, and personal ideology (the latter reflecting the potent benefits — see Punamaki’s study of Palestinian women (1987) — of belief systems which provide a basis for constructing meaning for experienced trauma). Preserving and strengthening such influences must be the first line of psychosocial support — both in terms of practical resourcing and in terms of breadth and cultural contextuality of intervention. This affirms the value of generally beginning at the right-hand side of the continua portrayed in Figure 1.

So where, if ever, is there a place for more explicitly psychologically focused programmes? The key question here is whether ‘technical’ psychological understandings are purely Western cultural constructs, developed, in part at least, as a result of shifts in Western culture, where counselling and therapy have
increasingly replaced traditional mechanisms (the family, the church, etc.) of support and guidance. If therapy is no more than a Western mechanism compensating for the increasing failure of familial and social support in the developed world, it clearly has little place within more traditional societies, where such familial and social mechanisms are still operative, or at least arguably more readily restorable.

In these terms there can be only two justifiable bases for any form of psychosocial programme based upon some form of technical psychological understanding. The first of these is the circumstance hinted at above, where pre-existing cultural forms of support are so disrupted that facilitation of their reinstatement is not a realistic goal. Where civil society has been so disrupted by war and displacement that traditional mechanisms of community coping are not plausibly to be re-established in the short term, one can make a case for some form of ‘compensatory support’ as appropriate for some individuals. Such a justification can only be short-term, however, with the principal effort again being directed to the eventual establishment of traditional coping mechanisms.

The second basis for such programmes is that they do encapsulate some generalisable ‘technical’ understanding, which can be unpacked from the cultural baggage of Western psychology. Such a proposition is perhaps more readily acceptable in the case of Western medicine or agriculture. Such scientific enterprises reflect the values and concerns of the West, and yet have provided the basis for a wide range of development programmes with accepted local value within developing societies. The argument may be advanced that this process of sifting genuine technical understanding from cultural packaging is more achievable for the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaft) than the social sciences (Geisteswissenschaft). Nonetheless, a broad range of scholars from both developed and developing societies is currently engaged in work in the area of ‘indigenous psychologies’, with the explicit intent of identifying emic (generalisable) and etic (culturally bound) elements of Western and non-Western psychologies (Kim and Berry 1994).

The status of this developing field of work is currently such that it would be foolish to draw any firm line between emic and etic concepts within the Western psychological conceptual vocabulary. What is clear from such studies, however, is the value of the breadth of cultural background of those involved in the debate. Those indigenous to a given culture are in a far better position to identify potentially generalisable technical insight from Western cultural baggage than is a Western expatriate. For the latter, ignorance and insensitivity to cultural practice and custom are always likely to render the required ‘conceptual sifting’ too delicate a task to accomplish without extensive acculturation.

Given this circumstance, to the extent that psychosocial programmes based firmly upon psychological concepts are to have any place within development work, it is likely to be with indigenous psychologists (and other workers) very much to the fore. Concern over the lack of trained personnel required for such an approach can be overstated. Psychology is an established academic discipline in much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The peripheral involvement of untrained personnel within many existing psychosocial programmes seems to reflect more the nature of NGO project specification, planning, and implementation than any real constraint on their role. While many programmes can point to the training of local personnel as a key element of their strategy, there is a clear danger that such provision privileges external understandings, at the expense of local ones. Genuine empowerment of indigenous professionals in shaping programme goals, strategy, and methods is clearly warranted if the aim is sustainable, culture-sensitive intervention.

**Phased response to psychosocial needs**

Given the above analysis, it is proposed that the planning of psychosocial programmes be governed by consideration of four phases of potential response. These phases — while not formally identified with respect to this framework — may be identified in the work of an increasing number of NGOs working in the field (Ager 1995).

The first phase involves ensuring that humanitarian-assistance efforts in any given setting are planned in a manner which involves **minimal disruption of intact protective influences**. That is, where community structures, meanings, and networks have survived through
conflict, assistance policy must explicitly seek to preserve such resources for community rehabilitation. Policies which threaten family integration (such as inflexible settlement and registration practices for refugee families separated during flight), social support (for example, discouraging community festivals and ceremonial adherence) or personal ideology (such as limiting public expression of religious or political beliefs) compromise the capacities of communities to rebuild a common sense of well-being. Where capacity to express religious or political ideology potentially provides a group with a sense of identity and purpose, at the cost of exacerbating inter-group tensions and precipitating further conflict (which is perceived by many as a major risk, for example, among Rwandan Hutu refugees), clearly some degree of cost-benefit analysis needs to be conducted. However, the basic notion remains that the first principle to govern psychosocial support must be not to threaten those adaptive structures which are already present.

The second phase of response in circumstances where protection of surviving protective influences is considered insufficient to ameliorate experienced trauma is the re-establishment of protective influences. Family reunification programmes, community-development initiatives, vocational training schemes, and so on can potentially serve as a means to strengthen family structures, social networks of support, and shared ideologies and understandings, each of which provides resources for communities to rebuild personal and social well-being. Much of this work may be seen as putting back in place structures which have been disrupted by conflict, though again there may be circumstances when re-establishment of structures may be seen to conflict with agendas for political development.

As noted earlier, there may be many circumstances where a strategy of reinstituting protective influences alone may be too long-term for the needs of particularly vulnerable groups. Provision of compensatory support may, as a third phase of response, be warranted in such circumstances. Here activities replicate not the form of pre-existing community patterns, but rather their function. Thus women’s study groups may not be structures that were previously present, but they may represent the most effective way of re-establishing women’s networks and support disrupted by the impact of warfare.

Only when the above phases have been implemented, and particular assessed needs have been shown to remain unmet, does there seem a clear case for considering a fourth phase of response: targeted therapeutic intervention. In most circumstances this would constitute the most culturally alien, and therefore unsustainable, form of response. It will also usually be the most costly. Nonetheless, if there is any acceptance of the existence of certain emic principles regarding human mental health, it must be acknowledged that clinical intervention plays a potential role in a comprehensive psychosocial programme. The delivery of such clinical intervention must clearly take due account of prevailing cultural norms; but, in terms of the preceding analysis, it is necessarily and fundamentally driven by external technical understandings of psychological process and function.

These four phases of response thus represent a strategic means of negotiating the conceptual space identified in Figure 1. Essentially, programmes begin with an explicit emphasis on unique, indigenous understandings and community-based support, only moving towards more generalisable, technical understandings and targeted support as evidence suggests this appropriate.

‘Appropriateness’ is another value-laden term, which is likely to be influenced both by judgements regarding unmet psychosocial needs and broader social, political, and ethical considerations. To illustrate the latter point, practices such as female circumcision may be considered to reflect existing indigenous understandings and, as such, potentially provide a mechanism for reinforcing patterns of meaning and identity strained by war. ‘Reinstituting’ such social practices, however, may be seen to contravene broader principles of human rights and thus be deemed ‘inappropriate’.

The former point — regarding judgements of unmet psychosocial need — returns us to the heart of the conflict in the psychosocial discourse. Those advocating more generalisable, technical, targeted interventions tend to justify the demand for such an approach in terms of external technical assessments of need (Agger 1995); while those favouring unique, indigenous, community-based approaches consider the expressed needs of communities — ‘the priorities they nominate’ — the only justifiable basis for assistance (Summerfield,
Tensions in the psychosocial discourse

The presented analysis does not remove, therefore, the complexities of competing meanings and rationales for psychosocial programmes. Making the tensions in the psychosocial discourse explicit, however, may assist in their negotiation.

Note

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References


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Papers from a Symposium

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