Idealism and Realism in Humanitarian Action

**Two Talks Given at the ACFID Humanitarian Forum
Canberra, 5 October 2005**

by Hugo Slim

Introduction

Australia is famous for its moral philosophers. As we all try to think about the place of ethics, values and ideals in humanitarian work, we can usefully bear in mind the thoughts of two of them. Peter Singer has described the importance of ethics for all of us, no matter what we are doing:

> *"It is vital that ethics not be treated as something remote to be studied only scholars locked away in universities. Ethics deals with values, with good and bad, with right and wrong. We cannot avoid involvement in ethics, for what we do – and what we don't do – is always a subject of ethical evaluation. Anyone who thinks about what he or she ought to do is, consciously or unconsciously, involved in ethics."*

The humanitarian community has thought much about ethics in the last ten years. It has found many occasions to comment on what it sees as terrible wrongs in the many wars and disasters around the world. Humanitarians have also found time to write down several new sets of standards and codes that state what they believe to be good values and particular approaches that are right to aim for in their work.

As they have set out their values, they have mostly held fast to a belief shared by John Finnis, another of Australia's great moral philosophers. This is the deep conviction that there are absolute goods which must be sought and protected at all times. For many humanitarians, as for Finnis, the existence of these goods or "basic values" (like life, friendship, knowledge, play and aesthetic experience) creates in each one of us a form of human life which is so precious and of "literally immeasurable value" that it must be protected above all other calculations of future gain when we are deciding what is right.

However, while humanitarians may have been involved in quite a lot of ethical standard setting recently, they are only too well aware that there are powerful forces in the world in which they work which do not generally share their moral view. They have their ideals but there is also reality. It is, therefore, an interesting task we have set ourselves

today - to examine humanitarian ideals and then to see how many of them humanitarians and others can actually live up to and hold on to in reality.

It is a feature of our world that ideals and reality always exist in tension with one another and so we should not be surprised if they do so in humanitarian work as well. So, before we look in detail at particular humanitarian ideals and realities, it may be useful first to think a little about the general relationship between ideals and reality in human experience.

Ideals and Reality

An ideal is an idea which we consider so important that we put an "L" on the end of it. Miraculously, this little letter then imbues our original idea with extraordinary purpose and moral energy. It consecrates it. As an ideal, this idea now becomes something to live up to, to aim for, to hold precious, to share widely and even to die for. Our ideals express what we regard as perfection in human affairs – those things we think are absolutely right and desirable. We feel sure that these are the ideas which – if realized - will make the world a better place. The adding of an "L" to an idea, therefore, does two things: it transforms an ordinary idea into something moral and sets specific standards for human behaviour and actions.

But the adding of the "L" does something else as well. In an important way, it also serves to throw doubt upon the practical fulfillment of the idea. In English usage, ideals and idealism are frequently associated with excessive optimism, even naivety. When an idea becomes an ideal it also automatically becomes marked out as somehow unrealistic. To call someone an idealist is as much to damn them as to praise them. The irony in such usage expresses the truth that precisely because ideals are absolute goods they are often, realistically, beyond our reach. Our ideals hover tantalizingly and infuriatingly above us – more the stuff of heaven than of earth.

As human beings we have long experience of living most in the gap between our ideals and reality. We regularly express this constant falling short in phrases like "she never quite lives up to her ideals" or "in an ideal world I would obviously do this but actually I can't because of him". How often have we said or heard the phrase: "ideally I would like to do X but in reality I can only do Y". We humanitarians might say: "the world of politics, war and disaster never lives up to the humanitarian ideals which governments agree repeatedly in principle". And, of our own humanitarian organizations we might say: "thank heavens nobody looks too closely at us and sees all the mistakes we make and the problems we have in living up to our ideals of good practice".

When most of us mortals talk about ideals, therefore, we do so ambivalently. If we are honest with ourselves, the moment after we passionately express great moral absolutes for ourselves and others we often tend to feel a twinge of pre-emptive failure as what we call "a sense of realism" creeps in alongside our high ideals. This sense of realism is born not only of self-knowledge but also of empirical observation of the world around us which tends to show us that ideals are never fully realized in practice.

This sense of realism can make us feel rather down and many activists try to suppress it and deny it as somehow disloyal to the cause. I want to suggest that we should rather cherish this sense of realism whenever we feel it creeping up on us, and not suppress it. This is because, unless we are truly realistic about the challenges in applying our ideals, we are unlikely to succeed in realizing any of them. So we must have ideals but be wary of becoming either indignant or miserable if they are not easily realized. Better to take the line that "Rome was not built in a day". Better still, in fact, to be even more realistic and to say: "Rome was not built in a day, and then, when it was, alongside its good things it also killed thousands of civilians, brutally enslaved people all over the world and then was destroyed and ransacked by Germanic hordes a few hundred years later. But, despite all this typical reality, Rome did have and deliver some useful ideals which were good for the world and still are!" You can see where I am coming from, I think. I neither believe the world is all good nor all bad and that it will always embody a mixture of both. Such is reality.

The English word real is the Latin word for thing (*rea*) with an "L" on the end. It is reality - or the world of things - which is the great challenge to ideals. Things routinely get in the way of ideals and render them impossible in practice: personal things; political things; material things; emotional things; other people's things and competing things. It is the power and stubbornness of things which mean that large parts of our ideals stay hovering above us, unable completely to dictate our actions and events. However, despite the obvious difficulties that exist between ideals and reality in humanitarian action like everything else, I want to argue that ideals and reality do obviously mix, that they influence each other to change people's lives, and that we need ideals to guide and encourage us. But the way they mix is not simple, nor is it permanent. Instead, perhaps, it is reminiscent of a good vinaigrette.

Like oil and vinegar, ideals and reality never fully dissolve into one another and tend naturally to separate if left alone. To combine, they need to be regularly stirred up together if they are to make good vinaigrette. Also, like oil and vinegar, idealism and realism are better together. Each on their own is never enough. A passion for ideals alone will never make a good humanitarian worker. She or he also needs a gritty realism to guide them as they try to bring humanitarian influence and resources to bear in very worldly situations which are usually not ideal at all.

Humanitarian workers are not unusual for the amount of ideals they have and the amount of reality they experience. Like many other people and professions, they have loads of both. The brochures, policies and proposals they produce are full of ideals and the places they work are full of reality. In these two talks, I will try and think constructively about both aspects of their humanitarian work – the real and the ideal. First, I will look at the current state of humanitarian idealism and how it is currently set out in the Humanitarian Charter and the Code of Conduct – perhaps the most common moral denominators in the humanitarian world today. Secondly, I will look at a number of ways in which reality challenges these ideals and how the best way to respond is by forming realistic relationships, realistic organizations and developing realistic people. In particular, I will

suggest that the best way to operate realistically but with ideals is by developing a keen "sense of reality" which is then combined with very practical virtues like: reasonable expectation; compassion; fine judgment, and a little bit of cunning. These virtues enable us to mix ideals and reality, oil and vinegar, to best effect.

On Idealism

The ideas which humanitarians value so deeply that they hold them as ideals are clearly spelt out in the various articles of the Code of Conduct and the Humanitarian Charter which agencies have drafted and agreed in recent years. These ideals are really of six types:

- ideal values which make up the humanitarian ethic
- ideal activities which constitute humanitarian action
- ideals of good practice for how humanitarian action is best done
- ideal individuals and organizations who can best be humanitarian
- ideals of humanitarian accountability

These five are ideals about the why, what, how and who of humanitarian action.

Finally, there is a sixth aspect to humanitarian idealism today. Humanitarians are increasingly bundling up all their various ideals into one large envelope based on:

- an idealized notion of rights and obligations.

Humanitarian Values

There are three fundamental values in humanitarian action. The first two – the values of humanity and impartiality - are expressed in articles 1 and 2 of the Code of Conduct and 1.1 of the Humanitarian Charter. The third value is a belief in the ideal of the civilian or non-combatant in war as affirmed in the principle of distinction which runs throughout international humanitarian law and is particularly reaffirmed in article 1.2 of the Humanitarian Charter. This is closely associated with the ideal of the person who is *hors de combat*.

Humanity and impartiality are not complicated ideas, but humanity is more elaborately understood today than it is represented in article 1 of the Code because of the deep influence on today's agencies of human rights values and the protection tradition of ICRC.

The ideal of humanity states that human life is a precious and absolute good in itself – something of enormous value. Humanitarian thinking on this idea (as epitomized by Jean Pictet and developed by others since) goes well beyond an idea of physical life to that of a dignified and fulfilled life. In other words, humanitarians believe that human beings are not just physical creatures but also richly social, spiritual, emotional and psychological creatures who do not just breathe air and pump blood but also feel, hope and care. The humanitarian ethic values all this human richness and so is equally concerned with saving life and protecting the fullness of what our jargon calls "the whole human person".

Like the secular human rights movement and most world religions, contemporary humanitarian ideology shares a goal for all people experiencing war and disaster which

can be summed up in the popular slogan "life with dignity". This ideal states that it is not enough just to keep someone alive. One must also pay attention to the quality of that person's experience of being alive across every aspect of their being. So, biological life is not enough for humanitarians. It would be an abomination if people were kept physically alive but were separated from their families, in solitary confinement, raped regularly, deprived of religious ritual and given no means by which to express themselves, to love, to be loved, to grow and to change. This is being alive but not being fully human.

Humanitarian work is often caricatured as the most minimalist of ethics – as if it were about immediate rescue alone – finding, feeding, clothing, curing and sheltering. It is about these things but not only as ends in themselves. Humanitarian ideals - as expressed in the principle of humanity – are not just about life-saving but about quality of life. The Code of Conduct, the Humanitarian Charter and the Geneva Conventions do not just say that people should be allowed to live through war and disaster. They express a view on the quality of people's lives - how they should be treated by others and how they should be free to lead their lives. In short, humanitarian ideals place great value on life itself but also have a determined view of "the good life" that is based on negative freedoms (freedoms from fear, torture, hunger, separation etc) and positive freedoms (freedoms to associate, pray, move, grow, prosper, participate etc).
This same notion of dignity is also behind article 10 of the Code's commitment not to degrade people in agency publicity.

The ideal of impartiality is the idea that the principle of humanity should be extended to everyone in war and disaster based on what they need not who they are. Impartiality holds that protecting people's humanity is a universal obligation. The ideal of impartiality tells us not just to help some people - people we love, people we know, people like us, people on our side or people who might help us in return – but to help and protect anyone who needs it. In the jargon once again, being impartial means helping "proportionately to need" rather than any other bias. Impartiality affirms that all human lives are equally valuable so that you help people only because their life is in danger not because their lives are somehow more precious than others.

The ideal of the civilian or non-combatant and **the ideal of the person *hors de combat*** as wounded or prisoner of war are particular to war and is the third fundamental value of humanitarian idealism. This ideal is based on the idea that not everyone should be equally targeted and attacked in war and, indeed, that a large group of people who are not directly participating in the war should be actively protected from it. In the jargon of humanitarian law and the Humanitarian Charter, this is "the principle of distinction" which distinguishes between combatants and non-combatants, as well as those *hors de combat*. Identifying these groups of people as especially precious in war is perhaps the most practical way in which humanitarian idealism finds an obvious place in war when killing and restricting human life is so in danger of becoming a norm.

In war, all three of these values come together to urge **an ideal of restraint and protection** which demands that the use of armed force should have limits and that even at

their most aggressive human beings should be compassionate and protective. In disasters, humanity and impartiality serve as ideals of equality and fairness so that help and resources are distributed fairly.

Humanitarians use these three main ideals – humanity, impartiality and civilian identity – to make constant moral demands on all parties in war or disaster. From these ideals flow a number of detailed prohibitions and injunctions which humanitarian idealism has shaped into law and custom. These assert what it is right for everyone to do in war and disaster. Together, we can say that these three main ideals combine to create a **humanitarian ethic** which argues that everyone must be protected fairly in a way which preserves as much as possible of the dignity and richness of their life as human beings.

These ideal values are not "ours" within the humanitarian agency community. On the contrary, we believe them to be universal. We expect to find them everywhere and in everyone and we want everyone to hold them and be guided by them as much as possible in war and disaster.

Ideal Types of Humanitarian Activities

The fundamental values of humanitarian idealism lead naturally to action. As humanitarian action has developed in modern times, four ideal forms of humanitarian action have emerged as core to the profession. These are:

- Assistance - material help and support
- Protection - defense of people's safety and dignity
- Livelihood - economic support
- Advocacy – speaking out on behalf people's needs for all three

There is obviously considerable overlap between the first three activities. For example, a good strong shelter can keep a family dry, provide them with a sense of privacy to recover their dignity, give them a place to gather and store their economic assets and, if carefully sited, can also keep them safe from attack. Nevertheless, we still tend to categorize these activities separately because they require different skills on our part and we have not yet agreed on a single word that would naturally assume them all. I hoped it might be protection but this is not to be at the moment.

Advocacy is the fourth core activity. Humanitarian advocacy has a long and honourable pedigree. Increasingly professionalized, it is now mainstream business for every humanitarian organization and recognizes a spectrum of speaking out ranging from private personal conversations with key players to loud coordinated media campaigning which bellows from the global rooftops. Conversational style in humanitarian advocacy varies from the more nuanced and diplomatic convention of persuasion to the more blunt, and perhaps Australian approach, of downright denunciation. Walking on Bondi beach at the weekend, I was impressed by the bold signs on the rubbish bins whose advocacy urged me not to throw my litter on the sand by saying: "Don't be a Tosser"!

These four main humanitarian activities represent our ideals in action and so are our ideal types of action. They are the means which seek to ensure the moral ends of humanitarian values. They are what we want to do and what we want to do well in order to realize our values of humanity, impartiality and civilian protection. All four types are prioritized in the Humanitarian Charter and the Code.

Ideals of Humanitarian Practice

But the morality of humanitarian means goes further than simply identifying various forms of action. Humanitarians have also thought hard about the morality of methodology – what makes good practice. The third area of humanitarian ideals, therefore, concerns certain ideals we have about **how** we should carry out the four main activities. These methodological goods are essentially operational values about what works best rather than universal moral values. But – if we are honest - some of them are also more than this and overlap with a certain liberal political ideology. So, in our good practice ideals, we humanitarians are paradoxically influenced simultaneously by apolitical and political ideals.

Our apolitical ideals are represented in articles 3 and 4 of the Code of Conduct – the so-called neutrality and independence articles. These tell us that the best way to reach people in the contested political heat of war and disaster is to be and to appear thoroughly disinterested in anything other than people's suffering. These apolitical ideals try to set us apart from the ordinary interests of power in any situation. Our ideal of neutrality claims we take no interest in altering the balance political of power in a given situation but only the balance of suffering. Our ideal of independence then states that our operational relationships with the power holders in war and disaster are similarly only concerned with actions to end suffering. We do not want to form alliances with them around wider political goals. Our relationships are not dependent on shared politics.

Some people might include neutrality and independence as core humanitarian values. However, like Pictet, I see them as operational values specifically and unusually required to fulfill a discreet humanitarian mission. They are necessary operational postures for such work and not universal goods. They can help humanitarians reach people and vice versa. None of us, I think, would ever say that neutrality and independence should be values for everyone in every situation. These apolitical operational ideals are instrumental not absolute. Like a wet suit for a surfer in a cold sea, they are the right thing to wear in a certain situation but not the right thing for everyone to wear at all times. They are situational and not global values.

A considerable part of the Code of Conduct – articles 6 to 8 - is taken up with other ideals of good practice which are influenced by much more political ideals from the traditions of development and human rights. As such, they represent a mix of development common sense and liberal political ideals.

Most pragmatically and developmentally, the Code's ideals of good practice follow that irresistible moral logic which most of us feel when we repeatedly encounter a person in

trouble. This is the logic of addressing their root problems so that they are helped sustainably somehow and made less vulnerable in the short and longterm. It is the realization that the needs of real people do not stop when their lives are saved. On the contrary, that is precisely when their needs start and these needs are naturally many and inter-related. As the value of humanity affirms - people should not just live, they should live well. So how far should humanitarians go in helping people to meet their various needs and to live well?

This is Schumacher's moral tussle between giving a hungry man a fish or a fishing rod. It is the famous image of people downstream repeatedly rushing to rescue the same people from drowning in a river and eventually realizing that to make a real difference they need to investigate why they keep getting into trouble upstream and do something about it there. Common sense and morality determines that we should do more than simply rescue people.

The push of this moral common sense means that humanitarian good practice as it has developed is full of ideals around capacity-building; participatory and gender-sensitive project design; close cooperation with local structures, and a determined interest in wider developmental goals. This all represents the good sense of "the fishing rod" because it helps people to develop resistance to disaster.

Such common sense is not just about the efficiency and effectiveness of resources, but also the more fundamental humanitarian ideals of the good life as a life of autonomy and dignity. As well as effectiveness and sustainability, the fishing rod also brings with it an increase in dignity and self-determination because people tend to feel better after catching a fish rather than begging to be given one. Having caught one, they are also in a position to try and catch another and perhaps then sell it to improve and diversify their livelihood.

However, engaging more deeply with people's needs brings different risks. It also inevitably reveals a deeper political concern. Brazilian Archbishop, Dom Helda Camera, famously posed the problem when he said: "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why they are hungry, they call me a communist and a trouble-maker." Asking "why" people suffer in war and disaster and exploring how their suffering can be stopped means looking at causes, structures and interests, and then inevitably challenging them somehow.

Such an approach, for example, is at the heart of ALNAP's new inter-agency book on protection and also in much programming on livelihoods. It is here – in humanitarians' engagement with the reality of other people's powerful political goals and economic interests – that these moral ideals of humanitarian practice become contentious and can pose a risk. While terms like capacity-building and participation can be presented simply as technical common sense, they are also essentially political processes which can transform power structures and power balances. This is not an isolated individualistic intervention. Depending on where and how you do it, such humanitarian good practice can make communities more powerful, governments more powerful and armed groups more powerful. It can change the balance of power.

Here too is where the influence of human rights and liberal political ideals comes in because – if most agencies are honest - it is not just the moral efficiency of such methods which appeals to them as humanitarian ideals. It is also the political ideals which are embedded in this humanitarian common sense – ideals of:

- Encouraging participatory and representative decision-making
- Enabling women's empowerment and gender justice
- Supporting capable government structures that are responsive and accountable to the needs of their people.

These ideals go beyond the "good life" agencies want for each individual person affected to a wider political vision of the "good society" which is more likely to deliver this good life.

So, current ideals of humanitarian practice are partly apolitical, partly moral common sense and partly deeply political and liberal. This mix is by no means a bad thing. It just suggests that humanitarian practice's engagement with reality will be a bumpy one in many places as, indeed, it usually is.

Ideal Humanitarians

If we have looked at the ideals of what constitutes humanitarian activity and how it should be practiced, we must also look at certain emerging ideals around who is best placed to carry it out – the ideal humanitarian.

The ideal of professionalism in humanitarian work has become very important in the last 10 years. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern humanitarianism has always tried to improve technically in areas like health, sanitation and food aid as well as legally with the development of an increasingly comprehensive framework of international law around war, asylum, women and children in particular. Since the Rwandan genocide, still greater efforts have been made to formalize this body of knowledge, skills and organizations into a legitimate and recognizable humanitarian profession. The Humanitarian Charter and the Code have formalized its values while the Sphere standards have formalized its technical standards for assistance. Similar work on standard setting in protection and some core transferable skills like negotiation, advocacy and financial management are also in process. Within the donor community, the Swedish initiative on Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) is a comparable move in professional standard-setting.

The perfect humanitarian worker today is idealized as a slick corporate professional equipped with clear standards and skills but who has her feet firmly on the ground and rooted in a passionate personal commitment to victims of war and disaster. S/he is a truly global and cosmopolitan creature who is able to work in any country. At the leadership level, s/he must also be able to work well at every level of society from displaced person to government minister.

But professions, of course, are designed as much to exclude others as to improve a service or a skill. Not by accident has the increasing professionalism of humanitarian action – largely driven by the big eight global NGO families – become consolidated at a time when there has been a massive proliferation of NGOs, a consistent increase in government and private funding and the arrival of two potentially new humanitarian actors - the military and the commercial sector. Professionalism and competition have inevitably raised the question: can anyone and any organization be a professional humanitarian?

Here, of course, we enter the difficult territory of defining legitimate humanitarian actors. Can a government be a humanitarian actor? Can Brown and Root be humanitarian? Can a peacekeeping force, an invading army or an armed group be humanitarian? So far, core humanitarian agencies and policy people have come back on this question with three criteria: humanitarian values; humanitarian interests, and humanitarian competence.

These criteria – or professional ideals – dictate that if such new players want to claim humanitarian status they must abide by the new professional standards. They must be driven solely by an interest in the core value of humanity and operate impartially with no other political or commercial motivations taking precedence in the design and implementation of their humanitarian activities. Finally, of course, they must be sufficiently skilled and good at what they are doing – they must be expert in the various humanitarian activities they undertake whether it is food distribution, shelter construction or public health.

The message is clear from the humanitarian core: if others are going to do humanitarian work then they must not just do it right but also do it for the right reason. As a profession, humanitarian action claims to profess certain values, to work only for the interests of others and to be skilled in certain practices. It is becoming something of a priesthood which asserts that not everyone in the congregation around it can say the prayers and do the rituals. You have to be ordained and set apart to some degree.

Not surprisingly, winning the argument for this kind of exclusive professionalism is proving difficult in reality. At one level, it is as if clowns were claiming a monopoly on the universal characteristic of humour and were setting themselves up as the only people allowed to crack a joke. But at another level, there is a professional argument in favour of restricted competences. Otherwise, anyone could decide to practice as a brain surgeon, with or without appropriate training.

Ideals of Humanitarian Accountability

A heightened desire in humanitarian agencies to affirm their legitimacy and their distinct professionalism has been manifest in a massive increase in efforts to improve their accountability in recent years. This new emphasis on accountability has focused around:

- agency intention

- performance
- effectiveness
- appropriate relationships with affected populations
- impact
- transparency.

These new measures of self-criticism and improvement are most obviously seen in HAP International's seven "principles of accountability" but many other agencies are also setting their own accountability standards.

This new move represents a definite new ideal of accountability in humanitarian work. The ideal humanitarian agency today is one that can measure the quality of its performance and its impact against international legal and technical standards as well as against specific benchmarks agreed locally with an affected population. More ideally still, a model agency can then learn globally from this process, communicate its achievements and failures to a wide variety of different stakeholders and then improve accordingly.

This, of course, is all extremely difficult in practice – as we shall see in our later session on humanitarian reality.

Humanitarian Ideals as Rights

If these are some of the main areas in which contemporary humanitarianism is at its most idealistic, then in recent years the humanitarian movement has found a way to fold them all into one even bigger idea – the idea of rights and obligations. When talking of people's suffering, its causes and any subsequent humanitarian action, most UN, Red Cross and NGO agencies now all talk in the language of rights and responsibilities. Whereas before, many agencies would have been more likely to describe people's experience of disasters and war in terms of needs, charity and relief, they will now talk of violations, laws and duties.

Both the ICRC and UNHCR have talked in this way since their conceptions in international legal conventions – and so too have MSF. However, the wider UN and NGO traditions of humanitarian action have come to it more recently, most probably following UNICEF's conversion to the rights of the child in 1989, the global upsurge in rights thinking that preceded and followed the Vienna conference on human rights in 1993 and the subsequent adoption of a rights-based paradigm for development by UNDP's human development report. Throughout this period, Oxfam, CARE, ActionAid and the large church agencies also began describing their work in terms of rights – often after having been radicalized by their experience in Latin America and South Africa.

Looking at the public pronouncements and strategic plans of most agencies today and the texts of the Humanitarian Charter, Code of Conduct, Sphere standards and new manuals on protection, it is quite clear that the majority of the humanitarian sector has become "rights-based". All of them cite international humanitarian and human rights law as the

benchmark for responsible conduct by all parties in war and disaster. In other words, war, disaster and humanitarian action have become idealized as a matter of rights and duties.

The modern idea of human rights is a very important way of politicizing and legalizing particular human needs and moral values as universal or global norms. It is a way of affirming needs (eg. for food and freedom of association) and values (eg. life and dignity) as absolute contracts between us all so that in any situation we operate as rights-holders, duty-bearers or both. There are perhaps three great advantages of the human rights idea.

- Morally - because rights are universal it makes clear that we all have equal rights and that there are no exceptions
- Politically - it tends to give us more power as dignified "claimants" rightfully demanding something that is already ours rather than as vulnerable beggars hoping for and dependent on the goodwill and charity of others more powerful than us
- Legally – it automatically binds people's rights and obligations into an operational judicial process and so makes people's suffering and perpetrators' behaviour a matter for the courts.

Wrapping up war, disaster and humanitarian action as a key part of human rights deeply politicizes them as never before. It makes the suffering in war and disaster a matter of political responsibility for all the parties concerned. Reading the ideals of humanitarian agencies today leaves one in no doubt that people's suffering is no longer seen as a moral matter of concern to all good people who care but as a political and legal matter for states and courts. The current UN discussion (pushed so hard by, Gareth Evans, your own former Foreign Minister) insists on a government's responsibility well beyond its own borders to an active concern for the rights of people in other countries - the so-called international "responsibility to protect".

It is not only the violations of war and disaster which agencies now understand as human rights issues but also their own actions and responsibilities. In their humanitarian activities, they see themselves as protecting people's rights or pressurizing states, armed groups and mandated agencies to meet their obligations. Their understanding of agency accountability is also about human rights ideals. Aid recipients are now claimants. Agencies are duty-bearers. Humanitarian practice is only good practice if it empowers people to enjoy their fundamental human rights of dignity, participation, gender equity and also gives them the freedom to make demands and complaints about agency programming. The ideal humanitarian worker is a person who is well versed in international humanitarian law and human rights law and who works as something of an activist to empower people to organize for and demand their rights to protection and assistance.

Conclusion

So, we can perhaps talk of six aspects of humanitarian idealism:

- Value idealism
- Activity idealism
- Practice idealism
- Actor idealism
- Accountability idealism
- Rights idealism

These are all now well developed in humanitarian agencies. They are also increasingly identified as the ideals of a profession and so the conviction with which they are argued is not without self interest too. They all make good sense on paper. The question is how well they can be worked out in practice - in reality.

On Realism

If these are the ideals which humanitarians value so profoundly, we now turn to the reality in which humanitarians operate so deeply. This reality is as mixed up and messy as our ideals are tidy and clear. If idealism describes how we would like things to be, reality is how they actually are. In this session, therefore, I will try to do give a brief summary of the reality that dominates war and disaster for humanitarian agencies. I will then focus on three key agency priorities when handling this reality:

- Realistic relationships
- Realistic organizations
- Realistic people

But, first, a quick overview of humanitarian reality.

A Code of Reality

As we saw in the first session, humanitarian agencies have set out their ideals in a Code of Conduct. For the sake of brevity, and with an element of parody, it might be useful to try and set out their operational reality in a similar format by summarizing the typical features of agency reality in a ten point "Code of Reality".

1)   **The power and interests (or disinterest) of political actors are usually much stronger than the interests of humanitarian agencies**.
Humanitarian agencies are not usually the most powerful players in a situation. The power and interests of governments, armed groups and those supporting or opposing them internationally typically determine priorities, policies and realities on the ground. Sometimes, power interests are diametrically opposed to humanitarian interests so that, in practice, the humanitarian imperative comes last in their political calculations. This is obviously the case when governments or armed groups explicitly reject humanitarian values in extreme policies of mass killing, terror, displacement and impoverishment of a population. At other times, there will be an overlap of interests between political power and humanitarian actors when governments and armed groups share a humanitarian concern for a population and actively cooperate with agencies. Often a government or armed group may be split on the issue with hardliners and moderates contesting the wisdom of the humanitarian ethic and creating frequent contradictions or inconsistencies in their policy and practice as a result. Not all people in political organizations are terrible power-crazed people. Some are good people doing a very difficult job in a context that seems to give them mainly terrible choices.

2)   **Political power of any kind will seldom be able to see an affected population purely as people in need.**
Typically, a government or armed group will not simply see people as disaster victims or innocent civilians but also – and often more so – as strategic populations of some kind

whether as aggressors, enemies, buffer zones, military cover, potential voters or an easy recruiting ground for the opposition.

3)   Humanitarian goals are never the only aims that governments and armed groups have in war or disaster.
While a humanitarian agency may only be concerned with suffering and humanitarian objectives, an organized political power always has a much wider political project in its sights. This typically involves aims around social, economic and foreign policy as well as a constant goal of ensuring its own political survival. Many of these goals may be given priority over humanitarian goals if it is estimated that it is more important to win a war than feed people or if there is a belief that the correct rearrangement of society for a better future will inevitably cost lives in the present.

4)   Because political power has aims other than humanitarian aims, governments and armed groups will usually act with mixed motives in humanitarian matters.
Politicians of all kinds are charged with addressing much wider problems than humanitarian ones and will typically and not unreasonably try and find double or multiple usage in humanitarian operations.

5)   Most humanitarian agencies also have other aims than purely humanitarian ones.
Some agencies have a deep agenda for liberal political change or "development" that they hold and operate alongside their humanitarian mandate and which inevitably infuses and influences their way of working and their longterm goals in a disaster affected country or society at war. Many agencies, therefore, are really about transforming a society in the longterm and not just ensuring people's survival and dignity in the short term. Inter-agency competition, market share and media positioning are also real factors in determining where to work and what to do. Thus, agencies can also have mixed motives.

6)   Agencies will never be as independent as they would like.
This is because they are often reliant on government funding and their movement is usually dependent on permission from warring parties or international forces in war and government authorities in disasters. This dependence inevitably affects their scope for operational manoeuvre and their freedom of speech in any advocacy work. Sometimes agencies are considered simply as part of the enemy in wars and conventional humanitarian operations are simply too dangerous. Nor is one agency ever totally independent of other humanitarian agencies. Very often it is only by joining forces and coordinating that agencies can generate operational critical mass across all sectors in a given situation or enough voice power to generate sufficient political leverage in an advocacy campaign. In any such alliance compromises over speed, substance and profile are made. In many situations, the actions of one agency (whether in pay scales or human rights advocacy) can have a ricochet effect on the image and operations of other agencies.

7)   Humanitarian agencies will not be the only organizations using the language of humanitarian ideals or pursuing humanitarian activities.

Politicians will express humanitarian intent and give funding or approval for humanitarian activities. International military forces, local forces and commercial companies may all talk about their objectives in humanitarian language and carry out humanitarian activities of various kinds. Any major war or disaster will be crowded with an increasing variety of different actors, many of whom will have different understandings of humanitarian ideology and practice.

8)   Agencies will never be seen as they would like to be seen by political power or the affected population.
Understanding and correcting people's perceptions of humanitarian work will be a constant and sometimes un-winnable struggle not least because some key aspects of contemporary humanitarian agencies – like their domination by western power and symbols – is not easily recognized and owned by agencies themselves. Agencies will usually also be seen as taking sides somehow because of who they work with and the government or community structures they support. Finally, despite their different logos and mandates, agencies may not be seen individually at all by those they help but just generically as a single group of helpers.

9)   Your agency will never be as good as you want it and many of your biggest problems will come from within.
The quality and turnover of your staff and the time and money you have available to invest in good practice will usually mean that you can never implement the whole range of what you know to be good practice. This inevitably leaves you with the uneasy feeling that your agency often sounds better than it is. Many of the most distracting and heated problems you face come from conflicts, crises and frustrations within your own organization rather than from the war or disaster itself. Today's increasing emphasis on bureaucratic global systems, compressed and constant communications, standards, accountability and resulting risk aversion make particularly trying contemporary challenges.

10)   To get things done you will have to be tactical, make hard choices and form operational relationships which you would rather avoid.
This often involves working relationships with people and organizations you find at odds with the ethos of your own organization. It can also mean engaging in a kind of moral decision-making that goes against your ethical nature. Typically, this involves making unsure consequentialist judgments around possible future goods instead of clear decisions about absolute goods you know to be right. These decisions naturally arise because you do not and cannot control the situation you are in.

I hope this so-called Code of Reality for humanitarian agencies goes some way to summarizing the main challenges which the world of things – political things, emotional things and organizational things – throws up against humanitarian ideals. The ten points are obvious but not, I hope, banal. Instead of exploring each one of them in depth, I will now focus on three strategic priorities around relationships, management and staffing which agencies must address if they stand any chance of realizing their ideals.

Realistic Relationships

Humanitarian agencies alone or even in great numbers cannot ensure the practical application of the ideals of humanity and impartiality in war and disaster.   They are simply not powerful enough to do so. Darfur is the current epitome of this fact. To bring these ideals into practice, agencies need to make pragmatic relationships of all kinds. In particular, perhaps, they need to:

- negotiate with and influence the behaviour of anti-humanitarian perpetrating governments or groups
- make alliances of sufficient leverage with other state powers or international forces to stop violations and secure humanitarian access
- generate enough confidence within affected communities to gain their cooperation in humanitarian activities
- openly collaborate and compete in their relationships with other agencies

The centrality and difficulty of these relationships and the frequent power imbalance and conflicts that come with them is usually the first point at which a sense of reality comes rushing in amongst the apparent simplicity of humanitarian ideals. A great many of these relationships are far from ideal. They often involve compromises and half measures. Frequently, they are obstructive, manipulative or open to misinterpretation. The most common area of anxiety for humanitarians in recent years has been around civil-military relations either with internationally mandated intervention forces or with so-called "belligerent donor" forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. International agencies have become mesmerized with this relationships in particular, fearing it might become some sort of meta-relationship which could damage their image globally. However, in reality, this is but one of many problematic relationships which agencies need to enter and manage realistically if their ideals are to be realized effectively.

In all wars, warring parties give access in some places and not others. They make promises which are then constantly deferred. They can use the presence of humanitarian assistance to play down the fact that the crisis is really one of protection. Or, they can plan their ethnic cleansing with the confidence that humanitarian agencies will arrive to assist and inevitably institutionalize the development of *de facto* ghettos known as IDP or refugee camps. Most perpetrating governments and groups are not interested in the ideal of humanity, impartiality or civilian identity. They are interested in securing their political project. In short, many are simply anti-humanitarian. Dealing with them will never be ideal. It will become highly tactical and frequently prove fruitless.

One way to deal with these anti-humanitarians is to secure the stronger leverage of other states who are often the donors of humanitarian action. This typically involves humanitarian agencies dealing with states which have an overlapping but not identical humanitarian objective because states also have to play much larger politics with the violating state, region or armed group concerned. They too have interests they want to secure: regional stability, oil flows, counter-terrorist cooperation and commercial

contracts. None of these things are necessarily bad in themselves and humanitarian agencies are uniquely privileged not to have to worry about them. But, creating alliances with people who do have to worry about these things inevitably means that there will be ambiguity and mixed motive in the purposes and decisions of one's allies.

For example, securing US leverage on the Khartoum government in 2004 was a deeply ambiguous affair. Several key factors made it impossible that the US government would act on humanitarian ideals alone: an election year; a strong pro-Sudan Christian lobby; the possibility of unraveling a peace deal on the South; a reluctance to clash with Chinese interests; the costs of over-riding an emerging AU and a determined Arab League, and the dangers of opening up a new anti-American Islamist front if US troops set foot in Sudan. Around Darfur, any relationships between humanitarian agencies and the US government would never be based purely on humanitarian ideals but shaped by hard political things.

If we are honest, making relationships with affected communities is also difficult for humanitarian agencies despite the succession of smiling photographs of dignified and implicitly grateful "merry peasants" that beam out of agency publicity brochures in this era of "positive images": Maria with the sewing machine that now gives her economic security, Mohammed with the bag of seed which means he will get a crop next harvest time. In fact, operating by the ideals of humanitarian good practice is often a struggle. Communities have other interests too. The assistance they are given is not always their main preoccupation. Ideals of capacity building and gender balance may not guide their normal way of doing things. Indeed, communities are not always communities but a collection of competing factions in which one group has often captured a lead role – sometimes using the crisis and humanitarian assistance to do so. Very often, it is the government which takes the opportunity of a natural disaster to reassert its control over resources and their distribution. Sometimes this is a good thing because it is a good government. Sometimes the opposite applies as aid, land and investment decisions are swung towards a narrowly defined clique. Implementing humanitarian ideals of impartiality and capacity-building in such contexts involves challenge and conflict between idealistic agencies and realist powers in and around the affected population.

Finally, agencies need to relate to one another. These inter-agency relationships are usually labeled by the dullest of words – coordination – which only ever captures a small aspect of the relationships at stake and gives rise to endless tail-chasing papers by policy makers and academics alike. Agencies need to team up, form coalitions, agree policies of good practice and divide their labour and resources appropriately to need. Increasingly, this involves finding ways of being deliberately "complementary" – a useful word that has entered humanitarian speak with the recent protection debate. But this is still only half of the inter-agency relationship. The other half is competitive. Fierce competition for funding and profile plus turf wars over mandates around issues like IDPs and protection continuously rage within UN and NGO systems alike.

In a period of proliferating agencies and increased funding, this competition needs to be positively owned and not denied. Inter-agency competition is creative and can be very

good for civilians in war and people in disasters. No agency should assume it has a right to survive in its present form just because it has been given, or given itself, a mandate. On the contrary, some of the most exciting as well as realistic conversations in the sector today are about NGO mergers and strategic alliances. Merging a niche health NGO into a big childrens rights NGO may make sense. Combining two old UN mandates into one new one may work better for those people the mandates were intended to help.

As noted above, humanitarian agencies do not own the humanitarian ethic. On the contrary, they exist to keep it alive wherever it is and spread it as far as they can. For humanitarian ideals to be realized, everyone needs to own them. So, alliances and mergers with commercial corporations may also be creative and release new energy around humanitarian ideals. It might be very good for the people of the Niger Delta to see an oil company link up with a human rights organization. Nor should humanitarian agencies stand aloof from broad civil society movements but be delighted at mass movements to protect civilians and reduce disaster vulnerability.

In short, humanitarian agencies need to be realistic about getting the most from the relationships they inevitably have with many different powers with a stake in war and disaster. Agencies should not become wantonly promiscuous but neither should they play the prude. They need to engage with everyone while keeping their humanitarian ideals and the interests of victims at the heart of any relationship. Few of these relationships will be ideal but they are all essential.

Realistic Organizations

If an agency's external relations need to be handled realistically so too does its internal management. New ideals to improve agency practice and accountability must also be implemented realistically. Standards and accountability are very important and much needed in the profession - but in moderation. Today, there are grave risks of introducing deeply unrealistic measures and systems of quality, improvement and accountability into agencies and contexts which simply cannot absorb them, handle them or benefit from them.

Most of the accountability systems being explored by agencies at the moment err on the bureaucratic end of the quality management spectrum. Endless numbers of process and impact standards is not the way to go. It will stifle flexibility and introduce a new tier of standards bureaucrats into agencies which already struggle managerially either as transnational global corporations or small and under-resourced national agencies. A more bureaucratized agency culture will deter and undervalue the leaders, pragmatists and risk-takers who are so important to effective and innovative humanitarian work.

It is extremely important that humanitarian agencies resist this heavy top-down trend with its pseudo-science and nerdy hoop-jumping and box-ticking. Instead, agencies should work to a much simpler set of key standards on a small number of core aspects of humanitarian work. These must be easily understood and communicated from top to toe in any organization. They must be adapted contextually and easily monitored and

reported. Simplicity, relevance and efficiency must shape accountability initiatives. In this respect, the SPHERE standards are some of the best although they are still a little bulky as they also try to double as a training manual. Nevertheless, SPHERE focuses on core humanitarian activities and sets and illustrates some clear guiding stars of both process and impact which agencies can steer by in their various contexts.

As agencies rightly engage more with quality, accountability and continuous improvement, they must not become hijacked by bureaucratic quality quacks. Humanitarian organizations must be realistic about what they need to do and what they can do if they are not to bureaucratize themselves to death. Preventing their agency's slow bureaucratic death from a thousand standards is surely a priority for all senior managers and board members of humanitarian organizations.

Realistic People

The third major priority that will determine whether or not humanitarian agencies are able to realize their ideals as much as possible concerns the kind of people they employ and develop. In the 1950s, the philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote a couple of famous essays on gifted politicians in which he identified their greatest strengths as "a sense of reality" and the exceptional "political judgement" that flowed from it. If humanitarian ideals are to be realized, humanitarian agencies need realistic people working for them.

Berlin made the point that being realistic and having good political judgment was essentially a matter of art not science. The good politician feels reality rather than counts and calculates it. He has a keen sense of the salient feature of any situation and the possibilities within it. She or he functions with "antennae" more than method. Berlin compared this visceral feel for reality to the way a potter feels the wet clay as it turns on his wheel and knows intuitively what shape lies within it and what he needs to do to bring it about.

Humanitarian agencies need more than managers and humanitarian scientists. In all their people, but especially in their front line leaders, they need such intuitive and creative realists. Every agency should find its own way of generating and modeling an organizational culture which values and rewards such people. Steeped in humanitarian ideals, this kind of person is also a creature of context and a master or mistress of the possible in every situation and every relationship. She or he gauges the right moment, finds the right person, spots the right plan and is able to take others with them.

Such art is likely to be deeply innovative, highly tactical and not a little cunning. The realist humanitarian knows what s/he needs to know about the three golden rules of each humanitarian activity, the principles of good practice, the main points of the law and the conventions of the profession. But s/he is also always prepared to think of other ways, to bluff or to blur if the time is right. She might give out cash where others struggle to give out food. He might try an indirect approach through the Minister's wife when others are struggling to put together an inter-agency letter.

Also critical to the realism of such people is a sense of realistic expectations. Realistic people do not expect that they can end all violence, all suffering and all extremism. Their world view allows for these things as an inevitable part of the texture of the world. Instead, therefore, they focus on practical things they can do to end some of these things now. Realistic expectations mean less frustration and avoid the continuous and misplaced sense of failure that can be so corrosive in a humanitarian team. Such realistic expectations are better for morale and programming.

In political theory, realism is distinguished from idealism by its overarching interest in power. Realist humanitarians are attuned to power and not alarmed at it. They sense who has it and can see ways to leverage it or redistribute it in pursuit of their ideals. Such people are extremely valuable and their approach needs to be encouraged more widely alongside codes of conduct, standards and good management in humanitarian organizations. Recruitment needs to look for such people and staff development needs to encourage it.

Oil and Vinegar

A sense of both idealism and realism are essential in humanitarian work. We must know what we want and also be realistic about what we can expect to achieve in the wider world of power. We must bring our ideals into this world and share them widely. We must push them, argue them, prove them and infiltrate them wherever we can with whomever we can. In doing so, we can expect no pure space where our ideals will be left alone to thrive untouched by other people's realities. Humanitarian ideals will always be subject to the pressures, alternative priorities and ambiguities of power. To realize humanitarian ideals as much as possible means mixing it with power. Humanitarian agencies must not hark after a world that is not but engage with the world that is. This means developing realistic relationships, managing realistic organizations and cherishing realistic people within them. Humanitarian realism is not about compromising values and ideals but negotiating them and maneuvering with them as effectively as possible. It is the art of stirring ideals into the real world and getting the best possible vinaigrette.

END