

# Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict in Africa

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## SUMMARY

**H**umanitarian assistance provided in recent years by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Africa has saved hundreds of thousands of lives. While the value of these efforts is increasingly recognized and appreciated, some analysts have begun to assert that this kind of assistance on occasion exacerbates conflict rather than contributing to peace. The urgency of this issue led the United States Institute of Peace to organize a day-long symposium in October 1995.

The most direct negative impact occurs when warring forces gain control of supplies intended for civilians, either through imposing levies or through theft. More indirectly, when international NGOs meet the needs of civilian populations, the government and rebels are freed to use their resources for war-making. Humanitarian assistance may also unintentionally convey negative ethical messages.

NGO representatives at the symposium pointed out the complicated and sometimes compromising context in which their organizations must operate. NGOs largely function as implementing agents for donor governments and the United Nations. Since these donors are often not well informed about field conditions, they may impose unrealistic restrictions and inappropriate mandates on NGOs with whom they contract. Moreover,

emergency situations usually do not permit time for the requisite planning to avoid all negative consequences. In any case, the positive outcomes from providing humanitarian assistance almost always outweigh the negative outcomes.

Symposium participants identified eight major steps NGOs can take to minimize or eliminate the negative impact of humanitarian aid: (1) improve planning; (2) assess need more accurately; (3) analyze the consequences of agreements negotiated to gain access to needy populations and obtain security for NGO personnel; (4) provide aid that will have the longest term benefit to particular targeted groups; (5) contract for independent monitoring and evaluation of assistance programs to reduce mismanagement and the diversion of supplies; (6) make the empowerment of local institutions a high priority; (7) coordinate closely with other assistance organizations operating in a particular crisis situation; and (8) deploy human rights monitors to help protect local populations from exploitation and repression by the fighting factions.

While political neutrality is a time-honored principle, most faithfully observed by the International Committee of the Red Cross, several symposium participants asserted that some conflicts in Africa require political involvement by NGOs. Some also argued that NGOs should provide humanitarian assistance only when local populations and factions agree to conditions that will ensure the most effective use of relief supplies.

Many agreed that the provision of humanitarian assistance could be an endless and futile process unless accompanied by efforts, probably spearheaded by other bodies, to build peace. The symposium ended with a shared conviction that despite the travail that Africans have recently suffered, African people are generally resilient and hopeful. Africans will continue to grapple with their issues and make progress in promoting peace. International NGOs should remain engaged with Africans on this journey.

## FOREWORD

The good work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in recent conflicts in such countries as Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia is well known—providing food, shelter, medicine, and a host of other materials and services under extremely difficult conditions. But does humanitarian assistance in some cases actually exacerbate conflict? And if so, what can NGOs and the international community do to eliminate or mitigate such effects?

At the request of several concerned NGOs, the United States Institute of Peace organized a symposium on this issue, “Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict in Africa,” in October 1995. This report summarizes the discussions and conclusions of the symposium.

That meeting in fact represents the intersection of two program streams for the Institute. The first is the Institute’s growing involvement with nongovernmental organizations. We focused on the burgeoning role of NGOs in international conflict at the “Managing Chaos” conference, which was part of our tenth anniversary celebration in December 1995. Since then, we have formally launched an initiative that I have been pleased to direct with the assistance of Pamela Aall, program officer in the Institute’s Education and Training Program. This effort aims to provide a clearing-house for Institute programs involving or impacting

on NGOs, coordinate activities among programs and initiatives, and identify projects in which the Institute can make a unique contribution to NGO activities in conflict management. Much of this work is done through an interprogram working group on NGOs, chaired by Aall, that brings together Institute staff having significant experience with NGOs to share information and plan further efforts.

Through informal consultations with NGO representatives and meetings such as the symposium reported here, we are identifying new ways to respond to the needs of these organizations as their pivotal role in international conflict resolution evolves. For example, the Education and Training Program is developing conflict resolution training seminars geared specifically to the needs of the NGO community, in addition to its current practice of including representatives from major international NGOs in the International Conflict Resolution Training (ICREST) programs.

Throughout the history of the Institute’s Grant Program we have made a number of grants to NGOs. Among these, grants to the Catholic Relief Services and the World Peace Foundation seek to clarify the roles NGOs are playing, and might play, in early warning of emerging international conflicts. A grant to CARE-Canada will help that organization, along with some academic partners,

think through more systematically the role of NGOs in situations of international conflict.

The second major program stream comprises the set of activities the Institute initiated relating to Africa. David R. Smock, coordinator of our African activities and director of our Grant Program, organizes these efforts. Under his leadership, the Institute engaged in Track II diplomacy involving Somali leaders and, more recently, Sudanese. Institute conferences have also focused on conflict resolution in South Africa and ways to promote implementation of the peace accords in Mozambique. A conference a year ago on the U.S. role in peacemaking in Africa generated a book co-edited by Smock and Africa specialist Chester A. Crocker

entitled *African Conflict Resolution: The U.S. Role in Peacemaking*, published recently by the United States Institute of Peace Press.

In deciding to organize the symposium on “Humanitarian Aid and Conflict in Africa,” we carefully considered the advice of Julia Taft and her colleagues at *InterAction*—a coalition of 150 American humanitarian relief, development, and refugee organizations working internationally—and other NGO representatives. We thank them for their help and encouragement.

HARRIET HENTGES  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years humanitarian assistance provided in situations of war and disaster by donor governments, international organizations like the United Nations (UN), and, particularly, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in situations of war and disaster has saved hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of lives. The provision of food and medical supplies to refugees, displaced persons, and those near the battlefields in Somalia, Rwanda, Zaire, Mozambique, Angola, Liberia, Sudan, and elsewhere constitutes one of the most heroic and life-preserving activities of our time. Major NGOs like CARE, Save the Children, Catholic Relief Services, World Vision, and many less well known organizations have been on the front lines relieving desperate human suffering in Africa.

While the international community increasingly recognizes and appreciates the value of these efforts, some analysts have begun to assert that humanitarian assistance on occasion exacerbates conflict rather than contributing to peace. No one questions that the value of this assistance far outweighs its occasional negative consequences, but members of the assistance community find it necessary nevertheless to address the issues these analysts have raised. They want to assess the extent of the damage and consider how to eliminate or minimize these negative consequences.

The urgency of this issue led the United States Institute of Peace to organize a daylong symposium in October 1995 attended by forty experts from NGOs, the State Department/U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the UN, universities, and think-tanks. Participants discussed and debated assistance issues, with the principal dialogue occurring among representatives of seventeen NGOs. In some respects the conversation was painful, because no one likes to concede that the highly acclaimed humanitarian assistance to Africa has some negative externalities. Nevertheless, the importance of maintaining the integrity of such endeavors led everyone to engage in an open dialogue. Symposium organizers confined the discussion to Africa both because Africa has featured so prominently in recent humanitarian assistance operations and to focus the conversation.

The format of the discussion consisted of three presentations followed by several hours of discussion. The first presenter, Mary Anderson, president of The Collaborative for Development Action, has been the leading analyst of this issue. She explored particular ways in which humanitarian assistance provided by NGOs in Africa at times contributes to conflict rather than peace. Next, Julia Taft, president of *InterAction*, the umbrella organization for American NGOs engaged in international relief and development, discussed the kinds of problems facing NGOs that make these negative externalities so difficult to redress. Finally, John Pendergast of the Center of Concern recommended creative ways to address these problems.

## 2 THE PROBLEM Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict

Anderson asserted that although NGOs do not generate conflicts, they sometimes contribute to and reinforce violent conflicts pre-existing in the societies where they work. The negative impacts of humanitarian assistance comprise two basic types: the first results from the transfer of resources, and the second involves “the ethical message conveyed by the provision of assistance.”

In the case of resource transfer, the most direct impact occurs when warring forces and armies gain control of supplies provided for humanitarian assistance, either by imposing levies on humanitarian assistance operations or by stealing supplies. A more indirect impact occurs when NGOs meet the needs of civilian populations, which frees the warring factions to use their resources for war-making. “Resources under the control of one or another warring faction help buttress the power and continuing legitimacy of that warring faction,” Anderson said. Intergroup tensions are also reinforced when NGOs provide external resources to some groups and not to others. For instance, NGOs hire people from certain groups and not others. When NGOs have more funds than local governments, that creates an imbalance between external resources and domestic resources, making it difficult for local institutions to build for peace. Also,

NGOs hire away much of the best talent from domestic agencies.

Illustrating some of these issues in relation to Sudan, Prendergast wrote recently:

In the context of Sudan, questions about the use of aid to underwrite Khartoum’s war efforts remain unanswered. To what extent is the international community assuming the public welfare responsibilities of the Sudanese government, thereby freeing resources for the war? Are aid flights from Khartoum to the south supplying soldiers in the government garrisons rather than civilians in need? Is money spent in the pursuit of aid projects providing the government with a source of hard currency used to prosecute the war, and are donated food stocks in the north freeing Sudan production for export (reports say up to a million tons of northern Sudanese sorghum may be exported [in 1995] alone)? [John Prendergast, “Tie Humanitarian Assistance to Substantive Reform,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, July/August 1995, p. 42.]

Anderson next discussed the second type of negative impact humanitarian aid can have, which involves the ethical messages NGOs sometimes convey. “When we negotiate with the parties who are at war with each other in order to gain access to the civilians behind the lines they control, when we hire armed guards to protect our staff and our delivery of goods in order to be able to operate in a highly volatile and dangerous situation, when we use the stories of war atrocities to educate and fund raise back home, we become part of the conflict and we convey an implicit message that it is legitimate for arms to decide who gets access to humanitarian assistance,” Anderson said. NGOs also sometimes express solidarity with groups engaged in armed struggle against repressive regimes, thereby indirectly reinforcing the conflict. Moreover, the moral legitimacy that accrues to a faction because of support received from international NGOs sometimes makes that faction less willing to engage in peace negotiations.

NGOs send complicated and compromised ethical messages, Anderson argued, insofar as their operations are now increasingly intertwined with those of official agencies. Donor governments and UN agencies increasingly rely on NGOs as their field agents. Moreover, NGOs now collaborate

with military forces in the delivery of humanitarian supplies. This raises questions about the non-governmental and pacific character of NGOs and also suggests they may be adopting some elements of military operating style. Moreover, the military preoccupation with logistics and delivery systems

may replace and in turn undermine local capacities to carry out locally initiated developmental activities. The predominant military presence can also undermine civilian control, which in turn slows peacebuilding.



## 3 THE COMPLICATING AND COMPROMISING CONTEXT

Julia Taft, while noting that tens of millions of people are alive today because NGOs delivered resources to them and advocated for peace, justice, and human rights protection, acknowledged the seriousness of the problems Anderson identified. However, Taft urged that these problems be considered in context, since NGOs are not free agents. NGOs largely function as implementing agents for the UN and donor governments, and this imposes severe constraints on their independence. In the case of the UN, member states govern that body, which limits the freedom of its agencies and in turn of NGOs under contract to those agencies. For example, when atrocities were occurring in Rwanda in the spring of 1994, the government of Rwanda, which was complicit with these atrocities, was sitting as a member of the Security Council, which was considering actions to halt the genocide.

As for donor governments, they are compromised because they engage in arms sales and have complicated trade linkages. Donors continue to favor relief aid at the expense of longer term development, which is where the real answers lie. Donor priorities in turn largely dictate NGO programs. Moreover, donor governments often prefer that NGOs distribute relief aid in the form of food exported from donor countries, which thereby

benefits donor country farmers, even though local economies would more likely benefit from purchases of local food.

Emergency situations usually do not permit time for the requisite planning. To avoid many of the problems Anderson identified, Taft continued, NGOs must preplan extensively. They must involve local officials in planning, train local relief workers in-country, and pre-position stocks to which relief agencies have access. But these steps are usually not feasible in an emergency. Moreover, the existence of Hutu militias in the camps in Goma, Zaire, the teenage bandits in Liberia and Somalia, and warlords in many countries create confusing and unfamiliar environments in which NGOs must function. NGOs must continually remind themselves that the situation they confront is not *their* situation. It belongs to the local people, and NGOs must ask local people how to deal with it. This means developing local partnerships and investing resources in training.

Other participants offered additional insights regarding the complicating context in which international NGOs must operate in Africa. To avoid exacerbating conflict, it is essential to support moderates and work with local groups that are working for peace. But how can NGO staff consistently differentiate the good guys from the bad guys, particularly in the chaotic conditions that often surround emergencies? It is not always possible to intervene without fueling local rivalries. Moreover, some NGOs, like Church World Service, are not operational, in that they provide money to local partners who direct the relief projects. When an NGO is not directly operational, it may have even less control over whether its resources exacerbate conflict.

Focusing attention exclusively on the negative impact of humanitarian assistance neglects the positive effects, which also have to be considered. Peter Shiras of InterAction stated, "To simply present the negative side of either 'taxation' or theft by the belligerents is an incomplete recitation of what is obviously a much more complex reality." Some types of negative effects may be a cost of doing business in such difficult circumstances. "We need to distinguish between those factors we can influence and those we cannot, and then look at ways in which we can really minimize the factors we can

affect, like theft and taxation,” Shiras said. But NGOs cannot agonize over factors they cannot control or affect, such as relief assistance freeing up local resources for war-making.

Donor governments and the UN frequently are not well informed about field conditions, and, in turn, they often impose unrealistic restrictions and inappropriate mandates on NGOs with whom they contract. Michael Bryans of CARE-Canada noted that new conditions also make standard operating procedures inapplicable. NGOs are “finding themselves in perverse situations, like CARE-Canada running a Rwandese refugee camp in Zaire, five percent of whose residents are almost certainly genocidal killers.”

Susanne Riveles of Lutheran World Relief pointed out that NGOs’ humanitarian imperative requires immediate responses to save people from starvation. This pressure does not permit the careful analysis and preplanning required to avoid some of the negative by-products of humanitarian assistance.

Political chaos, transition, or authoritarianism encountered in countries like Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, and Sudan pose major contextual difficulties for NGOs. In some cases, like Somalia, the government has disappeared and the state has collapsed, noted Hussein Adam of the College of the Holy Cross. Conventional approaches no longer work when NGOs have to confront factions and fighting, as in Liberia and Somalia. In those countries factions and alliances shifted constantly and war maneuvers were difficult to track.

Russ Kerr of World Vision International emphasized how confusing these situations are for NGOs. NGOs must do better at sharing information so they can understand the political agendas of various factional leaders and warlords, the territory they control, and the level of their popular support. As an example Kerr cited the difficulty NGOs had in comprehending and interacting with the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) during the Mozambique civil war. Ultimately, humanitarian relief can succeed only when it is linked to initiatives aimed at resolving political differences among the factions in conflict. NGOs themselves need not be involved in peace negotiations, but their long-term goal must be the generation of peace.

Understanding and addressing the often chaotic political dynamics undergirding these conflicts is critical to successful interventions. Angela Raven Roberts of UNICEF said members of the age group from six to twenty-six are becoming “the fodder for conflicts of the future: They have been marginalized, disenfranchised, thrown out of history, thrown out of culture, and thrown out of economics. [It is these people] who are going to be the perpetrators of new conflicts in the future.” Francis Deng of the Brookings Institution stressed that the international community needs to hold African governments, like the Sudanese government, accountable when they fail to shoulder responsibility for their citizens, since that failure is what precipitates humanitarian crises.

## 4 WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

### Planning

The first requirement to reduce the negative externalities of humanitarian assistance is improved planning, John Prendergast said. NGOs and agencies must assemble capable and well-prepared teams that are ready for deployment. A good example of such a team is the rapid response team UNICEF is currently organizing for deployment in any new emergency. CARE and other NGOs are exploring how they might pre-position experienced personnel in situations deemed likely to explode. To facilitate this, they can employ experts on the country in crisis on a short-term basis to provide training and advice on how to minimize the negative consequence of humanitarian assistance. Having ethnological and sociological expertise within an agency can help that agency develop appropriate population profiles before an emergency erupts. Risk mapping in advance can make emergency responses much more efficient and reduce the mistakes that sustain or exacerbate conflict. The development of an effective information system is also critical. Careful preplanning can minimize dislocations of populations, which is important because military factions can usually manipulate aid to displaced populations more easily than aid to those who remain in their homes.

Prendergast said that donors should require operating agencies to demonstrate short- and

medium-term plans of action as a condition for receiving support. “Many agencies responding to the mass exodus of Rwandans into Zaire and Tanzania were not fully aware of the political and military structures that were quickly being reconstituted in the camps, and, in turn they were not prepared to cope with them,” he said. Much of the difficulty NGOs have encountered in these camps resulted from this lack of early preparedness, he asserted.

### Accurate Assessments of Need

Factional authorities typically inflate population figures and exaggerate food requirements because this creates a surplus that is easy to divert, Prendergast pointed out. As a result, unofficial markets for the trade of stolen commodities emerge as a factor NGOs need to be on the lookout for. For example, where do the commodities go? Who sells them? Who gets the money? Who else benefits?

Agencies need to ascertain the factors that create vulnerability: What causes the food system to break down or people’s health to deteriorate? Those undertaking assessments often interview the wrong people. NGOs frequently accept skewed and biased reports given by local informants. An important corrective would be to interview women, who are typically excluded from these assessments but who know more about household needs.

Accurate surveys sometimes lead to unanticipated conclusions. In Somaliland an assessment following the resumption of conflict in 1994 discovered that most of the displaced people were able to fend for themselves. A major relief effort might have only added fuel to the conflict. “Limiting involvement to active monitoring may be the most helpful response in some situations,” Prendergast said.

### Access and Security

In the process of negotiating humanitarian access, NGOs and agencies often give weight to political balance and expediency rather than objective and independent assessment, according to Prendergast. “This is further complicated when humanitarian diplomats capitulate to the invocation of sovereignty by host governments,” he said. For example,

governments like Sudan's often insist that aid agencies meet their alleged food requirements as the price for access to rebel-held areas. Belligerents are most likely to offer access routes because of the advantages their armies can gain from the arrangement. "Warring parties often use negotiated access agreements to build credibility in international circles and deflect criticism about their war tactics."

Commercial channels offer one innovative way to gain access to food deficit areas in conflict situations. The World Food Program sells commodities to Somali merchants in Mombasa, Kenya, and contracts with them to transport the goods to designated sites in Somalia. The merchants are responsible for gaining access, which along with security is largely assured through clan protection. Another effective approach is to bring supplies across a variety of entry points from bases in neighboring countries.

"Using various cross-border channels and small ports, and even beach landings like those employed in Somalia in 1992, lessens agency dependence on large-scale distribution networks that are vulnerable to extortion," Prendergast said.

Humanitarian agencies have an understandable preoccupation with security, which, however, generates several problems. In Somalia in 1992 the UN and NGOs focused too much attention on agency security rather than on finding alternative distribution strategies that could have reduced security requirements. The military protection currently being provided in the Rwandan refugee camps by two battalions of Zairian soldiers hired by the UN on contract has not addressed fundamental problems. Law and order have improved, Prendergast said, but the underlying source of regional insecurity (mixing civilian refugees with militia who are guilty of genocide) has not been addressed successfully.

### Selection and Targeting of Aid

Donors need to select types of aid carefully, Prendergast said. It is more tempting to steal and divert certain kinds of inputs than others. For instance, rice is a high-value food item in Somalia, and at the

peak of the crisis it was attractive to looters, while other types of grains were just as nutritious but did not have the same resale value. Similarly, medicines can be stolen and then usually resold for cash. Other problematic aid strategies involve those that respond only to symptoms and promote dependency, as opposed to those that encourage self-reliance. Also, in some cases strong reasons may exist for giving aid to armies or rebel groups so they do not divert aid away from local populations.

Prendergast noted that donors still generally prefer to finance relief assistance while other kinds of aid could more effectively prevent conflict.

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Sustainability ought to be the overriding principle, he said. "External responses to emergencies should be driven by what already works at the local level: the structures already in place and supported by the community, and the indigenous social welfare mechanisms and kinship exchange processes already functioning."

Thomas Alcedo of CARE reaffirmed the need to shift the balance from relief to development. Although it is more difficult to obtain grants and contracts for development projects and they attract less media attention, such projects address root problems and are less likely to contribute to conflict than the simple provision of relief supplies, he said.

Another key component of successful targeting is to direct aid to those most adversely affected by the conflict. Navigating along critical fault lines of gender, class, and ethnic/clan identity "is a critical ingredient in minimizing the offtake of aid by the warring factions," Prendergast said. Local leaders cannot always be relied on to target those most in

need, because their decisions are likely to be influenced by “relations of entitlement based on a combination of political and ethnic considerations, as well as social debts that villagers are thought to owe leaders and various elites in the community.” Experience in places like Ethiopia during the 1980s convinced many donors that NGOs should deliver commodities directly to famine-affected populations rather than relying on host governments when those governments are parties to the conflict. In many crisis situations, local authorities have proven to be more predatory than helpful in distributing assistance.

The use of family ration cards is one important remedial step. Moreover, women generally should receive food aid and be heavily involved in the planning process, according to Prendergast, because they are usually the custodians of family welfare. In some places alternative planning and distribution structures have been adopted. For instance, in southern Sudan the World Food Programme has instituted local relief committees, which are popularly elected bodies responsible for much of the planning and distribution of aid. In the Rwandan camps in Zaire, attempts have been made to promote women’s groups as well as technical committees to oversee health and water issues, in order to bypass the military structures.

These measures help empower the community, which should be a key objective of humanitarian assistance. In so far as these measures increase local control and local accountability, they help reduce diversion of aid. Factional leaders may still approach local relief committees and negotiate for a certain share of the food, but at least this kind of diversion is negotiated and open.

### Cost Standardization

In addition to diversion of supplies, the excessive amounts of money paid to local authorities and factions for supplies and equipment often fuel conflicts. Prendergast said the UN and NGOs need to cooperate closely to keep payments at reasonable levels. All agencies operating in Baidoa, Somalia, collaborated to reduce the amounts paid to rent vehicles. In Rwanda, Save the Children-UK organized NGOs to set price controls on housing, transport, and local salaries. In Sudan, NGOs and donors cooperated to undermine that government’s

efforts to manipulate foreign exchange rates to its advantage.

### Independent Monitoring

The deployment of field monitors helped dramatically reduce the amount of diversion in both Rwanda and Angola, Prendergast said. He quoted one NGO representative as saying that monitoring is monotonous and boring, but critical in cutting down mismanagement and diversion. The more sophisticated warring parties become in manipulating aid to serve their war-making purposes, the more essential it is that agencies regularly evaluate the effects of their interventions. Monitoring and evaluation can help NGOs gauge the proper levels of aid and the appropriate groups to target.

### Empowerment of Local Institutions and Capacity Building

Several participants identified empowerment and capacity building as the most important remedial strategies. Prendergast noted that according to the Geneva conventions, the responsibility for the welfare of civilian populations rests with local authorities. NGOs can encourage these authorities to live up to their responsibilities. If they fail to do so, relief and development agencies need to challenge them. In addition, NGOs can help local authorities build their capacities. He cited several examples of capacity building, including the development of district councils in Somalia, the strengthening of the humanitarian branches of the rebel movements in southern Sudan, and assistance to government ministries in post-genocide Rwanda.

Joel Charney of Oxfam America said international actors, including American NGOs, too frequently think foreigners must parachute in to save local people in places like Somalia. Most relief, UN, and military officials in Somalia assumed that all Somalis were out to cheat them and that no worthy Somali partners could be found. In contrast, the Oxfam philosophy is to give highest priority to finding local NGOs with whom Oxfam and other international NGOs can work, and with some effort they did find effective Somali organizations. International intervention in Somalia resembled a military logistical exercise more than an

attempt to empower Somalis to cope with their crisis, Charney said.

Engagement requires coordination and constant vigilance. Prendergast said NGOs and other agencies must consistently challenge checkpoints, shakedowns, searches, and other abuses by any of the warring parties. One long-time observer of Sudan concluded that whatever reforms the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has made to adhere to human rights and humanitarian principles have resulted from pressure exerted by NGOs and donors.

The building of local capacity requires sustained engagement and training by NGOs. The Swedish Life and Peace Institute has training centers in Garowe, Jowhar, and Baidoa where it pairs international trainers with Somali counterparts to help create district councils. In Ethiopia the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is helping build local capacity of *woreda* councils to manage food security, natural resource protection, and disaster prevention.

Strong local NGOs can provide some of the greatest insurance against the local manipulation of relief supplies by military factions. To play this role, local NGOs need encouragement and support from international NGOs, Adam said. Granted, some local NGOs, like some in Somalia, have profit-making agendas or may even behave more like pirates than like servants to those in need. Hence, international NGOs have to be careful in selecting their local partners. But many indigenous NGOs in Somalia are run by professionals whose motives are as altruistic as those of American NGOs. Since Somalia has little governmental structure, local NGOs may begin to fill much of the void. Adam pointed to the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) as a model of what a local NGO can do to provide relief and stimulate development during wartime. The SPLA could usefully model itself on ERA's operations, he suggested.

African governments often inhibit and stifle local NGOs because they regard them as threats to

governmental authority and control. Taft indicated that international NGOs, through their relationship with local NGOs, offer them legitimacy and protection, which helps shield them against controls imposed by their own governments.

While donors and NGOs consistently give lip service to capacity building, Alcedo pointed out, they do not generally give it high priority in their field operations. Capacity building should be directed at both local NGOs and local governmental

structures to enable them to solve their own problems. The development of local capacities is the only alternative to what seems like an unending process of foreigners parachuting in to each new crisis spot. Another speaker added

that local institutions may also cope more successfully with factional leaders and troops that are misusing relief supplies.

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## Human Rights Monitoring

While it may be controversial for NGOs to monitor human rights and engage in human rights issues, Prendergast said, human rights monitoring, human rights advocacy, and human rights capacity building should be critical components in the international response to African conflicts and emergencies. "The mandates of most operational agencies prevent them from speaking out aggressively and publicly on human rights issues, but many of these agencies provide valuable information to human rights groups privately," he said. In the future, NGOs need to coordinate more closely among themselves on human rights issues. For instance, when Medecins Sans Frontiers withdrew from Ethiopia in 1984 and again from the Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire in 1994 to protest human rights abuses, other agencies remained. Such differing responses can create confusion both

internationally and locally. Quietly coordinating who stays and who goes and blows the whistle could significantly advance the cause of human rights, Prendergast said.

## Coordination

At the outset of a major emergency that draws dozens of agencies to the scene, coordination and a rational division of responsibility are critical, in part to avoid manipulation by warring factions, Prendergast said. The UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) should take the lead in coordinating operational agencies and developing an appropriate division of labor. If the major agencies can agree on a coordination mechanism, their leadership by example can influence others. Lionel Rosenblatt of Refugees International, quoting the late Fred Cuny, said this kind of coordination requires a single strong leader, similar to the role played by the UN in the person of Sir Robert Jackson in Cambodia.

But coordination is far from easy. As Kevin McCort of CARE-Canada noted, NGOs disagree over major issues, such as the degree of risk to which they will subject their staff. Donors and operating agencies may convey conflicting messages to the

international public about the nature of a particular crisis and the most suitable response. Donor governments often respond to domestic political agendas both in interpreting and in responding to crises, which may put them at odds with DHA and the operating agencies.

Anderson pointed out that it is usually easier to coordinate the external actors among themselves than to coordinate them with local authorities and local NGOs. The full empowerment of local institutions may not be compatible with strong leadership from DHA or any other external actor.

The interests and agendas of NGOs are not always consistent with those of donors and local African governments. David Shinn of the U.S. Department of State reported growing nervousness over the increasing and, some would say, excessive power of NGOs in humanitarian emergencies. On the other side, Roberts observed, NGOs must sometimes collaborate closely among themselves to stand up to donors and the local government on issues about which they feel strongly.

*InterAction*, as the umbrella organization for American NGOs operating internationally, is helping these NGOs develop strategies for field coordination, Taft reported. Hopefully, international NGOs based in Europe will be included in the process later on.

# 5

## DISCUSSION OF THREE CASES

Recent emergencies in Sudan, Somalia, and Sierra Leone illustrate many of the issues discussed.

### Sudan

In Sudan, according to Prendergast, there have been massive diversions of relief supplies; civilians have been used as shields by the various armed factions; favoritism exhibited by certain NGOs in the distribution of relief supplies has intensified the conflict; and the warring factions have consistently violated humanitarian principles. To combat these problems, the agencies operating in Sudan now engage the factions almost daily, urging and pressuring them to behave more responsibly. Recent progress is evident in persuading the southern rebels to adopt and begin to adhere to the Geneva conventions and other humanitarian principles, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The coordinating body, Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), has also achieved very impressive progress in introducing a new system to assess local food requirements. In the past, poor assessments enabled the military factions to divert or steal large quantities of relief supplies. The current assessments do not merely measure food requirements, but also consider food within the total economic context.

OLS has made some progress in strengthening local authority structures as part of the relief operations. Women-led distribution planning structures are now functioning in some localities. This emphasis on female leadership sometimes conflicts with local tradition, but it is consistent with women's predominant roles in household and food economies. Limited progress has also been made in strengthening the civilian relief wings of the two southern rebel organizations. Human rights monitoring has also been introduced. Although the success of these measures will have to be evaluated over time, they do represent dramatic progress over five years ago. At that time UN and NGO relief campaigns disastrously undermined local production, and relief supplies were regularly stolen or diverted.

Will Thach, formerly of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), affirmed some of the progress that has been made. The new food economy surveys in southern Sudan are a dramatic improvement over past practice. Local relief committees effectively involve local Sudanese in decisions regarding both food distribution and the process of distribution. Coordination among agencies, in sharp contrast to what happens in Rwanda, is impressive. On the other hand, Thach said he has been disappointed by his experience with the relief wings of the southern rebel organizations. They were too closely linked and controlled by the military factions, with military needs usually given paramount consideration. The most depressing factor is that, despite the efficiency of relief operations, humanitarian assistance has not brought peace, Thach said. Relief agencies struggle to promote local food security and then military operations undermine the progress made. Based on his frustrations in both southern Sudan and Rwanda, Thach said, "Speaking as a person who has spent time in the field, there was hardly a day that I or one of my colleagues didn't think or make the comment that we should pull out altogether, that what we were doing was a mistake."

Deng underscored the culpability of the government in Khartoum. He said that the government in Khartoum manipulates the differences among the rebel factions and strives to undermine the relief effort, in the belief that humanitarian aid to the south only augments the fighting strength of the southern rebels.



## Somalia

The most notable feature of the relief operation in Somalia in late 1995 was the degree to which the Somali Aid Coordination Body succeeded in promoting collaboration among the operating agencies. This coordinating body developed a code of conduct that guides humanitarian operations in Somalia. Consistent with this code, development activities in the post-emergency phase will be provided only on condition that safety can be assured for agency personnel and supplies. Many donors and NGOs have withdrawn from Somalia because they have become frustrated and question the effectiveness of their assistance. As already mentioned, much relief is now efficiently delivered through commercial channels, using indigenous networks. This experiment needs to be evaluated to draw lessons for other relief operations. UNDP, the designated lead agency in Somalia, concentrates on gathering and sharing information and closely monitoring developments.

Stephen Tomlin of the International Medical Corps emphasized the value of the Somali Aid Coordination Body, which has given the UN, donors, international NGOs, and Somali NGOs an opportunity to share information and be heard. Prior to December 1994, when it was moved from Nairobi to Europe, this body was an effective clearing-house for field operations.

## Sierra Leone

Symposium participants hope that lessons learned from Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda can be applied in Sierra Leone, site of the most recent humanitarian crisis in Africa. Roberts urged DHA and collaborating NGOs to grasp the nature of the conflict and the warring parties more successfully than

they did in other African crises. NGO staff must produce accurate background information and incorporate it in their plans. "Let's find which of these relief strategies could work for Sierra Leone and which we, as the responsible and caring community, are willing to try out in Sierra Leone," Roberts said.

Will Lynch, until recently Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) manager of relief services in Sierra Leone, lamented the failure of international planning commissions on Sierra Leone to consult with those with field experience and operational re-

sponsibility in the country. These commissions have also failed to engage local NGOs in either planning or operations. Assessment missions

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typically fail to visit the areas of greatest need because those places are dangerous. It is encouraging, however, that international NGOs have been incorporated in the DHA-sponsored assessment mission for Sierra Leone, Taft said. One role these NGOs can play is to insist that the assessment mission fully comprehend the political dynamics underlying the conflict, and not merely plan the logistics of a relief operation. William DeMars of the University of Notre Dame recommends that assessment teams make direct contact with the rebel group, not just with the government in Freetown.

Unfortunately, not all NGOs operating in Sierra Leone have been willing to sign the code for humanitarian operations drafted by CRS, ICRC, and others. This generates inconsistency, Lynch noted. On the other hand, NGOs collaborated successfully in eliminating the original distortions and inflation in the list of displaced persons reportedly in Freetown, he said. By hiring local chiefs at the rate of \$100 per month to verify the lists, they reduced the census of displaced persons from 750,000 to 287,000. This helped substantially reduce the diversion and theft of relief supplies.

# 6

## CRITICAL ISSUES REQUIRING ATTENTION

### Political Neutrality

One of the time-honored and cardinal principles of humanitarian assistance, best exemplified and practiced by the ICRC, is political neutrality. But, Roberts asserted, NGOs and donors can no longer avoid the political issues by claiming neutrality. The fact that several current wars are wiping out whole populations and ways of life makes it essential that NGOs confront the political dimension. As Deng noted, NGOs have to recognize that their work is linked to the challenge of peace, because the most important humanitarian objective is to end wars. And yet, although many wars seem senseless, others are waged in pursuit of just ends. When a war is fought to challenge the severe oppression of a minority group, can NGOs merely claim neutrality and confine their attention to humanitarian assistance?

Prendergast argued that the humanitarian community has to be fully aware of the politicization of its activities. Although rarely intended, the actions of NGOs often influence both the military and political dimensions of conflicts. DeMars noted that neutrality might work for organizations like the ICRC in cases of traditional interstate conflict, and also in civil wars where the warring parties look like little states. However, in the case of failed states, like Somalia and Liberia, where the multiple factions each lack the internal coherence of a state,

it is an open question how the ICRC model of neutrality can be adapted to fit. DeMars continued, “A generic problem for aid operations in failed states is that the boundary between the political and humanitarian erodes. CARE-Canada has genocidal killers in its refugee camp in Zaire, and whatever CARE does affects the fate of the killers and their hostages, and has a dramatic effect on the politics. So CARE is stuck in a situation where it loses its ability to maintain its humanitarian character by keeping politics at bay and having someone else handle politics.”

Underscoring the inevitability of political involvement, DeMars argued that successful peace-making requires the international community to combine humanitarian relief and political involvement, but ideally different sets of actors would handle the two dimensions. “Successful humanitarian operations require that somebody else, not the agencies providing relief assistance, is doing the heavy lifting politically,” DeMars said. “When no one else is doing that, the NGOs get stuck in situations where their humanitarian personnel become targets of the warring parties. That is one thing that happens when the distinction between humanitarian and political erodes; it is always ambiguous.”

### Conditionality

It is a well-established practice that donors place conditions on development and security assistance. But, Prendergast said, “humanitarian assistance to areas of the world not thought to be of vital strategic importance has largely been exempt from such overt conditions.” Agencies on the ground, however, continuously experiment with conditionalities, often outside standard operating frameworks. Humanitarian assistance is the major outside resource for many war-torn areas, and in turn the suspension of humanitarian assistance can serve as a significant lever on the warring factions. Before NGOs impose conditions or threaten to suspend aid, however, they must elicit the views of the local populations, Prendergast said. They should canvass local civilians about the magnitude of abuses committed by factions and whether to impose conditions or terminate assistance. NGOs could ask local populations whether to go public about the abuses, recognizing that this might

require their organizations to withdraw or run the risk of being expelled. Or should the agencies continue their aid and remain silent?

Thach argued in favor of putting conditions on the provision of humanitarian assistance. When a factional leader abuses local civilians or obstructs and diverts the delivery of supplies, NGOs have a responsibility to object and not be complicit. NGOs have to be faithful to their own mandates and principles.

Consultation with factional leaders might generate agreement on a code of conduct to be observed by both military and civilian leaders as a condition for continuing assistance. The UN and rebel leaders in southern Sudan have reached such an agreement whereby assistance could be reduced or suspended if humanitarian assistance is misused on a significant scale or if other abuses are observed.

On the other hand, NGOs are not lone operators, Kerr pointed out. They depend on donations from home populations and contracts from donor governments and international organizations. If these contributors do not support conditionality and threats of withdrawal, then NGOs cannot take independent action. Many NGOs depend completely on continued donor support.

The imposition of conditions and threats of withdrawal are pointless unless all the NGOs operating in a particular locale are united. But Taft described the difficulty NGOs have had in developing a common front in terms of whether to continue their operations in Somalia and in the Rwandan camps in Zaire. In the case of the camp in Goma, twelve agencies threatened to withdraw, but representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reminded them that if they departed, other NGOs were waiting to replace them so that their withdrawal would have no material impact.

While conditionality may sound appealing to those at NGO headquarters, one participant

pointed out, NGOs cannot in good conscience terminate food shipments to women and children at risk of starvation. Compassion dictates against conditionality. NGOs have to accept some diversion of supplies as the price for getting life-supporting supplies to those at great risk. Conditions, the participant continued, usually hurt most those the NGOs most want to help.

## Professionalism and Training

The lack of professionalism among more marginal NGOs adds to the negative impact of humanitarian assistance. Some NGOs are more interested in convincing their donors that they are productively engaged with an emergency than they are in assuring them that their work is productive and conducted responsibly.

Roberts emphasized that all NGOs need to train field staff more effectively as a means of ensuring effectiveness and responsible action. Field staff are placed in increasingly demanding positions and they need training not only in logistics but in micro-economics, anthropology, and micro-politics. In addition, new research needs to be widely disseminated among NGO staff to ensure that they base operations on the most current knowledge and insights. NGOs need to acquaint themselves, for

example, with a recent Oxfam-UK publication entitled *Organizational Response to Conflict* as a step toward professionalizing their staff and operations, Roberts said. Another participant urged dissemination of recent research in what might be termed the anthropology of war. Furthermore, field staff whose capabilities are

limited to the movement and delivery of supplies cannot handle the ethical dilemmas and political complications of operating in a camp in Goma or in Somalia, she said.

As satellite communication to remote areas improves, staff can access Internet and receive ongoing training while in the field. Kerr recommended

**When a factional leader abuses local civilians or obstructs and diverts the delivery of supplies, NGOs have a responsibility to object and not be complicit.**

that NGOs develop a set of papers considered essential reading before staff engage in any dialogue or negotiations with the local populace, government, or factions. Providing field staff with current information on the political and military dynamics of a conflict situation will help them avoid blunders and miscalculations that could jeopardize the mission.

## Public Information

One reason NGO staff do not discuss the negative externalities of humanitarian assistance more openly is their concern that donors and the press might misunderstand or exaggerate the seriousness of the problem and cast doubt on the whole enterprise of humanitarian assistance. McCort indicated that the Canadian public is increasingly aware of the negative side of humanitarian assistance, but remains supportive. NGOs need to make a commitment to engage the public and the press, he added. The positive stories need to be told without denying the failures. The media need to be shown the problems and dilemmas NGOs and others confront in the field. Another participant suggested that a forum similar to this one be organized to permit dialogue between NGOs and the press about the successes and shortcomings of humanitarian assistance, making it clear that on balance the outcome is overwhelmingly positive.

## Peacebuilding

Some NGOs involved in humanitarian assistance want to play expanded roles in promoting peace. As stated earlier, humanitarian assistance must be supplemented by peacemaking, whether by governments or international organizations. But there may be new peacemaking roles for NGOs as well. Kerr urged that NGOs share information on the state of the conflict. They could develop a common vocabulary and taxonomy to help them communi-

cate about “changes in the conflict or a famine or an economic collapse or a state of violence.” Such communication would prepare them for new situations they are about to face and enable them to be more effective actors in relation to peacemaking.

Prendergast expressed confidence that NGOs can play new peacemaking roles well beyond the sharing of early warning information. Because NGOs are engaged at the grass roots, they can effectively promote participatory dialogue as a first step toward local and regional conflict resolution and peacemaking. NGOs can help build the bridges among communities that are so critical to peacebuilding and to post-conflict reconciliation.

The longer-term process of peacebuilding is aided through the strengthening of civil society. Rudy von Bernuth of Save the Children said building local institutions that can support participatory democratic processes and pluralism is the best way to ensure a lasting peace. NGOs contribute to this process when they establish effective partnerships with local institutions, including local NGOs.

The goal for local institutions and their international NGO partners must be to establish the rule of law and responsible governance in troubled African states. Once these strategies are in place, African societies can handle their crises without collapse or violent upheaval.

The symposium ended with a shared conviction that, despite the travail Africans have recently suffered, African people are generally resilient and hopeful. They will continue to grapple with their issues and in time peace will be more the rule than the exception. International NGOs must remain engaged with Africa through this journey. DeMars said, “Religious NGOs can talk about faithfulness; secular NGOs can talk about a new kind of solidarity, the solidarity of staying with these communities as they sort their way into the future. A future will emerge, and we want to be with them to discover that.” Africans have not lost hope, and they will continue to experiment with new approaches. International NGOs need to remain their partners.

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