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Humanitarian action in protracted crises: the new relief 'agenda' and its limits

by Dylan Hendrickson

Abstract

This paper offers a synthesis of ideas debated at a one day seminar examining international responses to humanitarian tragedies. With many regions of the world today caught up in a state of protracted crisis, questions are increasingly being asked about the international community's commitment to respond to acute human suffering wherever it occurs and to address its underlying causes.

This assault on humanitarian values can be understood in terms of a growing disengagement by rich countries from crisis regions and the belief that saving lives can no longer be the sole justification for international interventions. On the ground, this has manifested itself in declining levels of relief assistance and the manipulation of aid by donor governments in support of strategic and geo-political objectives.

The new relief 'agenda' identified in various countries today has emerged on the back of a claim that at best relief aid does not contribute to solutions and at worst may fuel conflict. In response to such assertions, new 'developmentalist' models of relief are being implemented today which posit a quick return to 'peaceful' development. In some cases, it is argued, these are simply a cover for reductions in relief assistance. In a context of continuing violence, and with the additional resources needed to bring about genuine 'development' not forthcoming, populations are often left in a situation of extremely vulnerability.

The paper suggests that the shortcomings of current responses to crisis by the international community stem from a failure to recognise key features of the new environment in which aid is being delivered today. The 'internal' analysis of conflicts and the search for 'local' solutions tend to disregard the systemic and protracted nature of current armed conflicts. The gravity of the protracted crises in many countries today suggests that governments need to engage more actively and genuinely with the underlying causes. The humanitarian community itself has a key role to play in bringing about this political response.

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Preface

This Network Paper to some extent represents a departure from its predecessors. As a digest of eight presentations by well known commentators on issues relating to the humanitarian 'system' prepared for a recent seminar in London, it seeks to capture and translate the key elements of those arguments. As a Network Paper, our aim in publishing this digest is two-fold: first, to keep RRN readers abreast of debates circulating and gaining currency in academic and policy making circles, and second, to provide those based in the field with an opportunity to contribute their experience to the debate.

The one day seminar, held in London in February 1998, which brought together an audience of (predominantly UK-based) representatives of NGOs, the military, UN, Red Cross and donor organisations, sought to identify and explain some of the key challenges to the wider humanitarian community operating in today's conflict situations.

The presentations and record of the debate which ensued together form the backdrop to this Network Paper and are elaborated in more detail in the following pages. In agreeing to write the paper, the author Dylan Hendrickson, faced his own, considerable challenge, treading a careful path between accurate representation of diverse and complex arguments put forward by the contributors and a coherent report relevant to policy makers and practitioners at different levels and in different institutional and geographical settings.

The at times somewhat academic nature of the presentations, the occasionally bleak picture drawn of the problems facing agencies working in conflict and the limited emphasis on specific lessons to be drawn at an operational level, drew a mixed response from the seminar audience. Some NGO representatives felt at a loss to know how to translate such assessments into policy and practice, while one particular commentator concluded that 'our academics have failed us'. In defence, the view was expressed that it is important to acknowledge changing realities, even where these do not necessarily conform neatly to the demands of humanitarian agency policy departments. Such exchanges illustrate the dichotomy which sometimes appears between the study of and commentary on the humanitarian system and the need to translate this into policy and practice.

As most regular readers will know, the customary emphasis within RRN publications is on the practical application of lessons identified (if not fully 'learned') in the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and rather less so on academic, theoretical material. However, on this occasion it was felt that the seminar represented an important moment in the evolution of current debates around humanitarian assistance. The profile and reputation of several of the contributors, and their influence in anglophone policy making circles, if not beyond, led to the decision by the RRN to carry this representation of the debate. There is strong evidence to show the direct impact on policy of writings by the US academic Mary Anderson, whose 'do no harm' school of thought has become common currency in policy makers' discussions, and indeed in recent donor government policies in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan. For this good reason, it was felt to be important to share these debates with RRN members.

The second principal reason for sharing this paper with RRN members is to help further one of the RRN's core objectives – to ensure that policy is grounded in practice; that reality in different conflicts, in many different countries, forms part of the policy making loop. It may be your view that the assumptions made are unsubstantiated by evidence from the field; that conclusions are drawn only from recent conflicts or are too narrowly confined to an African context; or perhaps that the views reflect a limited UK based perspective. While much analysis by the commentators whose views were represented at the conference is clearly based on field study, It is important that experiences from as wide a spectrum of conflict situations are brought to bear on policy formulation.

We hope therefore that this paper stimulates you to think, and to action. We look forward to your comments.

Laura Gibbons
RRN Coordinator

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Background

Humanitarian values under fire

While the core humanitarian values underlying activities to promote human welfare and alleviate suffering remain as valid today as ever, the image of the humanitarian system which embodies these values at a global level has been tarnished. The great humanitarian tragedies of the early 1990s – Bosnia, Liberia and Rwanda among many others – focused the attention of governments, relief agencies and the public on so-called 'complex emergencies'. In the face of the international community's glaring failure to respond effectively to these crises or to draw lessons which might help avert future ones (the case in point being eastern Zaire, in late 1996), the role of the humanitarian system has been called into question.

The broader cynicism regarding the efficacy of international aid interventions to alleviate human suffering has been in part driven by a perception – widely promoted by the media, for one – that relief aid serves to prolong or exacerbate wars. Governments have, in at least one recent case, used this argument to justify providing lower levels of humanitarian assistance. In a number of situations today, the amounts of humanitarian assistance being provided are largely inadequate; in others, the international community has turned its back on human suffering altogether. Where the initial relief responses are effective in saving lives – and there are many cases of this – the longer-term political measures and development assistance required to prevent populations sliding back into crisis conditions are often not forthcoming.

Underlying the international community's failings in the face of human suffering is a tendency by key donor governments to use relief aid in pursuit of broader political and military objectives. Seeking to avoid deeper engagements in crisis situations, relief aid often substitutes for firm political action which could potentially hasten the search for solutions. In other cases, the manipulation of relief aid by governments itself constitutes a form of political action when it is used to 'contain' refugees fleeing conditions of extreme insecurity in their countries.

Asylum laws have been tightened around the world in response to people fleeing crisis regions. Refugees are increasingly being coerced into returning to their countries of origin, very often in conditions of extreme insecurity. Across the board, legal mandates and treaty responsibilities which were once pre-eminent in defining the international response to armed conflicts are being undermined. In short, aid policy since the mid-1990s would seem to reflect a wider retreat from the post-Cold War promise that the international community could respond effectively and impartially to human suffering wherever it occurred.

Yet while the evidence suggests that more effective international interventions mounted in response to large-scale emergency situations could have saved many lives and protected hundreds and thousands of people from violence and persecution, policy-makers seem to be turning their backs on the notion that the prevention of human suffering can be the sole justification for international intervention.

The broad implications of these developments, which are examined in this paper, were the focus of a one-day seminar (entitled 'The Emperor's New Clothes') held in London on 4 February 1998. That the seminar was organised by the Disasters Emergency Committee, a consortium of British NGOs involved in relief activities, demonstrated the particular salience of the topic today. The conference was, however, neither conceived to serve as a defence of humanitarian organisations by mounting a counter-attack on their critics, nor was it simply a carefully masked plea for more funds. Indeed, many of those speaking and in attendance could be counted among the strongest critics of the humanitarian system (see Annex).

Their belief in the need to reassert the humanitarian imperative was not so much an indication that they have 'changed sides'; rather, it stemmed from a realisation that, in the revolving debate which many have been part of in recent years concerning the shortcomings of the relief system, bigger questions have been overlooked. As the critique of relief aid has grown, the debate has remained focused on how to reform the relief system, rather than seeking to come to terms with why current international responses to humanitarian crises are failing in the first place and whether broader approaches might be required.

The new relief 'agenda'

The recent failings of the international community in the face of massive human suffering can perhaps best be understood in terms of the growing incompatibility between the responses being proffered and the kinds of problems being addressed. and the starting point for such a debate is perhaps recognition that humanitarian aid was not conceived to solve the problems it is now expected to tackle. Yet a key dimension of the new relief agenda is the shift on the one hand to 'developmentalist' models of relief and on the other to a range of aid policy instruments which purport to tackle the underlying causes of conflict or to 'build' peace, but fall short of this. This shift has been spurred in part by a failure to recognise the protracted nature of crisis and certain new patterns of violence in many of the regions where relief aid is being delivered today.

In Africa, which is perhaps most illustrative of this trend, a state of emergency has prevailed in parts of countries like Liberia, Sudan and Somalia for periods ranging from a few years to more than a decade (not to mention non-African contexts such as Afghanistan or Sri Lanka for example). The 'developmentalist' relief strategies being deployed posit a quick return to stability and 'peaceful' development, with the assumption that stricken populations have the ability to care for themselves. This is serving to justify the provision of decreasing levels of aid with needy populations being left in a state of crisis. As yet, however, there is little credible evidence in support of the longer-term efficacy of many of the new policies being pursued.

The new models outlined above are not, it should be emphasised, illustrative of competing versions of humanitarianism (see Box 1). It is widely accepted that 'humanitarianism' is albeit not just about relief assistance, but about a core set of values subscribed to by different organisations, including those working under the banner of development or conflict resolution which seek to promote human welfare. While different interpretations of humanitarianism suggest different guiding principles and methods, there is generally a shared belief in the importance of accountability to those groups to which assistance is being provided.

A related set of questions concerns the increasingly 'hands-off' approach being taken by the international community to address humanitarian crises and the serious implications this has for the welfare of war victims today. Humanitarianism has been caught up in the wider global trend towards the acceptance of separate patterns of development between North and South. The aid system, it has been suggested, is no longer concerned with bringing about social convergence but managing the effects of global polarisation, social exclusion, and protracted instability (Duffield, 1997).

The principal danger, to which the seminar drew attention, is that relief aid, along with certain development and conflict resolution tools today, might simply be serving as a smoke-screen for a policy vacuum in the industrialised countries. There is a growing tendency to see the problems of countries facing crisis as largely internal, thus deflecting attention from the factors which sustain violent conflicts and impede development, many of which can be found in the inequitable nature of economic and political systems today.

Box 1

Humanitarianism: complementary interpretations

The earliest articulation of the principles guiding humanitarian action is associated with the international Red Cross Movement and combines two major elements: the delivery of emergency assistance and protection in a manner devoid of extraneous agendas – political, religious or otherwise. This interpretation suggests that there are absolute objectives and values which underpin humanitarian intervention: that it is to save life and reduce suffering. All other considerations, including the potentially negative impact of intervention should be subjugated in order to achieve this humanitarian imperative. The operational principles guiding the actions of the Red Cross and other relief agencies subscribing to this notion of humanitarianism are universality, impartiality and neutrality.

A more recent but increasingly widely held notion of humanitarianism recognises that there may be a hierarchy of ethical obligations and priorities: for example, providing food aid now might save lives, but in the long term it might undermine livelihoods and thereby result in increased mortality and morbidity. Is a policy of strict neutrality naive and in some cases seen to fail victims of human rights abuses? Those advocating the latter notion of humanitarianism are able to adopt a more iterative and flexible approach to humanitarian interventions, adopting a wider range of strategies to tackle the underlying causes of conflict, and relying on principles more explicitly political in nature such as the notion of 'solidarity'. Included here would be the activities of organisations working under the banner of development, conflict resolution and human rights.

Source: Macrae, 1997

As the principal organisations through which the major donor countries channel their aid, international relief agencies and many NGOs are being co-opted into covering for the absence of political action and, in some cases, the process of making relief assistance conditional to longer-term political aims. This is especially the case for those NGOs which are heavily dependent on government sources of funding, and has given rise to a range of ethical and operational dilemmas. While they have gained a higher profile and more responsibility within the international community as the welfare of crisis regions has been delegated to them, they also remain – at least nominally – vehicles for citizen action in favour of the dispossessed.

The challenge facing them today is thus how to reconcile their enhanced role in global governance with the threat this new context in which they operate poses to efforts to tackle problems of violence, oppression and poverty. If the analysis about the new aid agenda is to be believed, this challenge is not primarily about finding more financial resources or becoming more technically proficient in the delivery of relief aid. Real accountability to the victims of war suggests that relief action must not come at the expense of a broader humanitarian response. This is not to suggest that humanitarian aid is futile - its role is all the more important given the current context of protracted instability in many regions of the world – but that it must not substitute for other, inherently political, action.

Views on the current state of the humanitarian system are remarkably disparate, in part because the features of the new aid agenda and the environment in which it operates are still very unclear. While few firm proposals were ventured at the seminar regarding possible reforms, the debate highlighted many of the key challenges which the international humanitarian system faces today. What follows in this paper is a synthesis of some key ideas which emerged which need further unpacking, and continual testing. While by no means a comprehensive account of the day's proceedings, this paper seeks to highlight the need for those coming from different perspectives to be engaged in a common line of enquiry.

For ease of presentation, the paper is roughly structured around the presentations given at the seminar. However, it is recognised that the issues discussed were overlapping and interlinked. The first section examines three manifestations of the growing assault on humanitarian values: the trend to 'normalise' crisis, the undermining of the international regimes which serve to protect basic human rights, and the political manipulation of relief aid. Section two seeks to understand the

origins of the critique of relief aid and why it has gained such currency both within and outside the aid community. Section three explores the radically changing post-Cold War environment in which aid is being delivered and examines why current relief responses are often ineffective in relieving suffering.

The final section reaffirms the fundamental importance of responding to situations of acute human suffering, but suggests the need for a more realistic assessment of the limits of fine-tuning the relief system and the need for broader responses.

2

Uncovering the assault on humanitarian values

The erosion of humanitarian values is manifesting itself on the ground in three important ways which are having calamitous effects on the survival prospects of those caught up in armed conflicts.

The 'normalisation' of crisis

The most striking illustration of the threat to humanitarian values is the growing threshold of human suffering which is now considered 'acceptable' in crisis. In donor countries, this has been evidenced by the dramatic fall in contributions by the public and the often selective determination by news agencies of which kinds of humanitarian problems become 'issues'. The media effectively has the power today to decide whether or not it is 'scandalous' that thousands of people are dying from famine and who, if anyone, should answer for this.

This declining level of concern in richer countries has been translated on the ground by what Mark Bradbury terms the 'normalisation' of crisis. Despite protracted crisis in many countries, there has been creeping acceptance by the international community of higher levels of vulnerability, malnutrition and morbidity over the past decade. The mere presence of large-scale suffering is often no longer sufficient to trigger a humanitarian response of the scope or urgency of before. This is, in certain cases, leading to the premature declaration that the emergency is over and justifying reductions in relief aid.

The normalisation of crisis has been made possible by a formal shift to more 'developmental' models of relief which have been adopted in crisis situations as diverse as Sudan, Somalia, Rwanda or Northern Uganda. Buttressed by inadequate understandings of these crises, which often see them as temporary phenomena, the 'developmental' relief model posits a transition to normality which can be engineered. Whether formulated as the relief-to-development continuum, linking relief to development, preventative development, or capacity building, these 'developmental' approaches are seen by many to be a central tenet of 'good practice' in relief operations.

Box 2

Making suffering tolerable

In Sudan, malnutrition rates of between 10% and 20% were sufficient to trigger the major relief intervention that become Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in 1989. A recent review of OLS suggests that today, rates of above 30% among displaced populations in northern Sudan are considered normal (Karim et al., 1996, July). Meanwhile, recent UN consolidated appeals to donor countries for assistance for Sudan have attracted less than 50% of the funds requested.

Crucially, the new relief model is based on the assumption that once relief aid has been cut or reduced, the resources to develop will be forthcoming from donors. This assumption is often not borne out by the evidence and also overlooks the difficulty of carrying out development-oriented activities in situations of extreme insecurity.

By positing an early return to stability, the 'developmental' models of relief fail to understand, or simply ignore, the protracted nature of many emergencies today. In Rwanda, research on certain relief programmes has shown that they are planned on the basis that the country is progressively moving towards rehabilitation and development despite the absence of indicators to prove this (Macrae and Bradbury, 1998). Evidence of this return to 'normality' was cited as the return of refugees in 1996, a tentative recovery of economic activities within the country and the restoration of some basic government services. By December 1997, however, 50% of Rwanda was again considered insecure and internal displacement was increasing.

In Uganda, long touted as a model of successful development in sub-Saharan Africa by the World Bank and others, UN reports warn today that 'almost one third of the country is engulfed in a brutal conflict which has resulted in massive death, destruction and displacement' (cited in Macrae and Bradbury, 1998).

This gap between the aid rhetoric and the reality on the ground can in part be understood by the absence of explicit criteria or standards to define when an emergency is over. This means that mandates easily slip or are not adhered to, also allowing a more selective response to human suffering by the international community. Often, however, there is simply a straightforward accommodation with the crisis and the acceptance that certain populations will simply not have the same life chances as others.

While the difficulties of sustaining relief provision in protracted crises are evident, the shift to developmental models of relief can in part be interpreted as a trend to mask the gravity and nature of problems for which current humanitarian responses are ill-equipped to address. This has come about because of a growing belief by donor governments that relief aid must do more than just save lives, a belief which is at the heart of the erosion of humanitarian values.

The political manipulation of relief aid

To suggest that there has ever been a 'golden age' of humanitarianism when international action in favour of the poor was effectively carried out in isolation of other political agendas would be misleading. The reality is that, since its establishment following the end of the Second World War, the modern humanitarian system has had to accommodate with the political mores and priorities of the era. The early post-Cold War period, nonetheless, held the promise of greater convergence between prevailing political interests and strong humanitarian ideals in favour of those caught up in crisis situations.

In the event, this promise has failed to materialise to the degree expected. This has largely been a result of the shifting economic and political interests of donor countries, an increase in internal armed conflicts around the world which overwhelmed the humanitarian effort, and a growing isolationism in many countries. This belies the fact that unprecedented levels of resources and a wide array of instruments exist today to tackle the problems of human suffering which have not been deployed to their full potential.

In the post-Cold War context, the strategic rationale for aid has increasingly been linked to the disengagement from crisis regions by richer countries and to the adoption of policies which, in effect, seek to contain the crisis. One component of this strategy, particularly common in the early 1990s and which heralded a further erosion in humanitarian values, has been military involvement in relief, peace-building and development activities. While the military presence was initially welcomed by relief NGOs and other humanitarian actors as a way of increasing their ability to reach suffering people, doubts have been raised concerning the compatibility of the presence of military actors and humanitarianism.

As Michael Pugh notes, while there are strong cases 'for' and 'against' military involvement, the majority of observers now take the stance that the value of a third party military presence in conflict situations is dependent upon circumstances, the type of activities undertaken by the military and the likely outcomes. Nevertheless, there is growing suspicion by many today that decisions to use the military are based less on the ultimate benefits that they afford the victims of war than governments who have narrower political and military objectives

in mind. While these interests sometimes converge with humanitarian interests, all too often they do not.

At the heart of the justification for military involvement today is the protection it can provide in insecure environments, the logistic systems available to help distribute aid, and the 'stick' it can provide to achieve compliance with agreements signed by warring parties intended to bring about peace. In the process, however, the social consequences of military humanitarianism are often overlooked and traditional humanitarian principles eroded in several ways.

The first of these consequences is identified as being the increasing 'combat orientation' adopted by multinational military interventions. In a climate of ambiguous political support and financial uncertainty in recent years, UN operations have increasingly been replaced by proxy forces led by regional organisations in areas which parties regard as having economic or strategic interest. The ECOMOG intervention in Liberia and the NATO-led interventions in Bosnia to implement the Dayton Peace Agreement reflect these regional political interests and often go well beyond the bounds defined by the classic concept of consensus-based peace-keeping. There is a growing trend today towards the use of force where consent from one side or another involved in a conflict is uncertain. An important consequence of this has been for military forces to adopt a military footing to defend themselves and humanitarian agencies against the risks posed by working in complex emergencies rather than local populations.

This militarisation has affected perceptions of impartiality and neutrality as well as associating aid and relief with military solutions to humanitarian problems. More to the point, however, is that the humanitarian dimension of military-led interventions often takes second place alongside other priorities which have more to do with 'national interests'. For instance, the spectre of refugee flows into Europe's more affluent western states was a key factor motivating international involvement in Bosnia and the establishment of the so-called 'safe-havens' to protect displaced people. The tragic failure of the UN-led force to protect these 'safe-havens' would seem to indicate that avoiding a risky military engagement and containing refugees was ultimately the order of the day, with saving lives a distant secondary priority. With the political and strategic motivations for their involvement correspondingly more important, these internationally-legitimised interventions have lessened the credibility and potentially positive impact of humanitarian motives. The issue, however, is not whether military political action is needed or not, but what kind. Interventions which seek to meet the immediate needs of suffering populations while also contributing to the restoration of lasting and genuine peace may well be in line with humanitarian interests. This of course, is a difficult task. The recent collapse of Cambodia's coalition government, the product of a UN-brokered peace agreement in 1991, illustrates the immense difficulties the international community faces in moving beyond the short-term imperative of ending wars to effectively addressing the societal and international factors which sustain them.

The undermining of humanitarian mandates

While the decline in resources and the political manipulation of aid are helpful in understanding the erosion of humanitarian values, an important part of the picture is missing. This is the undermining of the international laws which have traditionally offered some sort of guarantee that, where political will might be in short supply, the international community would nevertheless seek to respond to human suffering. While people's rights are specifically codified in international law, enshrined amongst others in the Geneva Convention, the Genocide Convention and the Refugee Convention (Darcy, 1997), these rights are increasingly being seen as conditional to the promotion of non-humanitarian goals.

The undermining of the international refugee regime, examined by Guy Goodwin-Gill, is perhaps the clearest illustration of this trend and the broader changes taking place in relations between North and South. The refugee regime has traditionally served to ensure the protection of people fleeing civil strife in their countries. Refugees were guaranteed physical assistance until they were either resettled in a third country or conditions were safe enough to allow them to return home. Of the international humanitarian organisations set up after the Second World War, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was mandated to ensure the protection of refugees.

As barriers to entry in the richer countries have been raised and political support for refugees has waned, the fundamental strength of the UNHCR's mandate – which was its ability to protect refugees – has been undermined. Where refugees do succeed in reaching a 'safe' country today, they are now often pressured to return to situations which are still insecure and unstable, often violent.

With the rise in the number of internal conflicts which the international community has been called upon to address and a corresponding ability of the UNHCR and other relief agencies to work inside sovereign states, this has further served to staunch refugee flows. Crucially, while this new interventionism has allowed relief agencies to deliver humanitarian assistance in the very midst of conflicts, this has not been accompanied by an ability to protect war victims within their own countries.

Box 3

An over-abundance of rights?

The gap between the international rhetoric and the reality of protecting human rights can be seen in the tendency to create new 'rights' motivated less by a desire of governments to protect refugees than by their unwillingness to protect them. Thus the 'right to flee' from situations of violence, which has long underpinned the international refugee regime, has in recent years been replaced by a new 'right to return', which often translates into refugees being forcefully repatriated in conditions of extreme insecurity. As crises are increasingly contained by the international community, the new 'right to remain' – in the absence of protection mechanisms – may mean little more than a sentence to increased vulnerability or death (Hathaway, 1995).

Refugee policy, Goodwin-Gill argues, has always been influenced as much by prevailing economic and political imperatives of the era as humanitarian instincts. During the Cold War, when refugees were encouraged by the West to flee countries under communist influence, political and humanitarian interests often coincided. Today, as the UNHCR has become increasingly financially dependent on several big donors such as the US, political considerations are again dictating refugee policy in ways which threaten refugee interests. In the context of the refugee crisis which emerged in eastern Zaire in November 1996, humanitarian assistance was subordinated to forced 'repatriation' by the unwillingness of the international community to intervene to provide protection for relief activities. The evidence suggests that mortality rates among those Hutu refugees who remained in Zaire, fearing to return home, were high. The linking of the UNHCR's policy to narrow political goals has given rise to a new focus on prevention and solutions shorn of the doctrine or legal precedent needed to protect refugees. As Goodwin-Gill underlines, the strength of the UNHCR's mandate has always resided in its 'opposability' – the ability to use its statutory duty to protect refugees in opposition to governments that would seek to harm them. With the mandate rendered redundant either by oversight or intent, it ceases to carry any weight and the organisation's ability to protect refugees in an impartial manner has been undermined.

3

Origins of the assault on relief aid

In the midst of a policy vacuum regarding how to respond to crisis situations, donor governments have continued to proffer dwindling amounts of relief aid as a palliative even as they have criticised it for not contributing to 'solutions'. This critique, Joanna Macrae argues, is the product of a broader, but loose alliance of interests both within and outside the aid community which overlooks the fact that relief aid was never intended to do more than relieve acute suffering until solutions to the underlying crisis could be found by others.

Isolationism and the external critique of relief aid

The critique of relief aid from outside the aid community has brought together a range of commentators who share isolationist tendencies, but whose ultimate motives are very different, Macrae notes. Within foreign policy communities there has been an increasing withdrawal, since the mid-1990s, to old positions of 'non-interference' in the affairs of sovereign states. The bottom-line for engagement, it is argued in many richer countries today, should be the defence of strategic and commercial interests. This stance is thus effectively being used today to justify a 'de-internationalisation' of responsibility for humanitarian crises. Crucially, this position allows the selective interpretation of when intervention is or is not justified, a position which relegates humanitarian values to a distant second place behind political agendas. This *realpolitik* stance is evident across the board in international interventions today, ranging not only from political and military forms of engagement, but to humanitarian responses where the provision of even minimal amounts of assistance is not considered to be in the 'national interest'.

This isolationist position has its counter-point, Macrae notes, within a growing 'anti-aid' movement among certain recipient countries, suspicious of the ultimate objectives of the purveyors of aid and critical of the 'costs' which international assistance imply for local development strategies. Various governments in Africa such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have criticised international assistance, increasingly channelled through NGOs, for undermining state structures, capacities and legitimacy. As the international relief network has become entrenched in the political landscape of many of the African countries worst hit by famine, this has been seen to impede the development of a local and viable anti-famine capacity (de Waal, 1997). The provision of relief aid over long periods of time has the effect, it is argued, of blocking the

formation of the kinds of social contracts between state structures and populations ultimately necessary for the effective functioning of any society. Relief aid thus serves to undermine the accountability of governments to their people and, hence, their commitment to famine prevention.

These local variants of the aid critique draw legitimacy from the appalling historical record of international assistance in propping up illegitimate and violent regimes in many parts of the world. They are also an inevitable and understandable reaction to the international community's selective approach to the defence of human rights, the UN Security Council's non-action with regard to the genocide unfolding in Rwanda in 1994 being the case in point.

These positions, it is worth noting, are largely based on a critique of how the international relief and development systems operate rather than calling into question the core humanitarian values which underlie them. Macrae cautions that the critiques described above run the risk of being interpreted as a justification for international indifference or a shoddy cover for new forms of authoritarianism.

Box 4

Sierra Leone: the political abuses of relief aid

The claim that humanitarian assistance was not contributing to the resolution of a broader political problem was used to justify a decision by the UK government to limit the provision of aid to Sierra Leone following the overthrow of President Kabbah in May 1997. This position was based on the claim that aid would legitimise the illegal regime in place, that it would prevent the search for a regional solution to Sierra Leone's political problems, and that the extent of the humanitarian crisis at the time did not warrant high levels of emergency assistance. Crucially, this approach seemed to misconstrue important lessons identified following the Rwandese crisis which relate to the legitimisation of the perpetrators of violence and the abuse of material assistance. The answer was assumed to be a halt to the delivery of assistance, rather than attempts to enhance the delivery of aid in ways which might help to address this extremely violent and protracted crisis.

In particular, they are not based on a clear understanding of the conditions under which social and political transformation in war-torn societies work most effectively, or the role which aid can play in that. Even if more legitimate and capable governments of developing countries are emerging today, this still raises a very practical question for those with a humanitarian mandate of what to do, in the face of acute crisis, while awaiting this political transformation.

Competing interests within the aid community

Macrae suggests that as the task of responding to armed conflicts has been delegated from the political to the aid sphere, anti-aid interests outside the sector have found willing partners within it. Against a background of sudden growth in relief expenditure and activity in the early 1990s, those subscribing to an orthodox 'developmentalist' position have led to a two-pronged attack on aid based on notions of 'dependency' and 'root causes'. This has often been based on a poor understanding of conflict dynamics.

Echoing views espoused by the 'isolationists' and the 'anti-imperialists' described above, relief is seen to undermine local institutions and markets, and to reduce incentives for people to resume their normal patterns of production. Yet the hastening of the transition from relief to development underplays the political nature of many 'complex emergencies' and the degree to which populations themselves are the targets of predatory activity by armed groups. Hence, in some situations, to seek to 'rebuild' local capacity or to 'relaunch' development may play into the hands of local actors intent on undermining the position of other ethnic or political groups.

A second strand of the critique of aid made by 'developmentalists' argues that relief does not address the root causes of conflict and may even exacerbate it. This has led to development assistance for objectives as diverse as poverty alleviation, environmental protection and institutional development being reframed in terms of conflict prevention with more funding being provided for activities in these domains.

As Macrae notes, this position has been reached by effectively turning upside down arguments made by researchers such as Keen (1994) who have effectively articulated how aid can be manipulated by warring parties for military purposes. The new logic is that rather than exacerbating conflict, aid – properly delivered – can actively serve to reduce

it. In the process, the ultimate objective of relief aid – which is to alleviate immediate suffering has effectively been lost sight of. The more limited function of relief aid, which is undeniably valid in situations where people's survival is threatened, is thus undermined.

The issue, then, is not whether development or conflict resolution activities have a legitimate role to play or not – that is a separate question. Clearly they do, all the more so by highlighting the limitations of relief in situations of chronic political crisis and by contributing to longer term solutions. However, the danger Macrae highlights is that these forms of humanitarian activity will come at the expense of a commitment to preventing suffering and saving lives.

The 'developmentalist' orthodoxy

To equate the emergence of a loose alliance of interests against relief aid with a 'conspiracy' to undermine humanitarian values would be misguided and would overlook something perhaps more fundamental and insidious at work. As Bradbury, Duffield and Macrae noted, the mainstream debate on the role and future of relief activities is today being conducted against the emerging backdrop of a 'developmentalist' orthodoxy. This has negative implications, not simply for the commitment to provide relief aid in crisis situations, but for understanding the broader nature of the problem at hand.

The 'developmentalist' orthodoxy has come to define for both the supporters and critics of humanitarianism the types of problems being faced today, their origins, and the solutions. For a long time, mainstream development policy has promoted a model of humanitarian relief that predicts an early return to peaceful development following a state of war or crisis. This has been based on assumptions that war is a somehow temporary, abnormal and dysfunctional feature of society and that through processes such as 'relief', 'conflict resolution' and 'rehabilitation' people can be helped to weather conflicts and restore their lives to what they were before (Adams and Bradbury, 1995).

As wars have come to be seen largely as 'internal' problems in recent years, the legacy of historical and external factors has also been laid by the wayside. This has led to a failure to recognise key features of the new post-Cold War environment in which aid is being delivered. Mark Duffield's analysis of 'emerging political complexes' (examined below) poses a powerful challenge to conventional views that conflict in Africa is essentially rooted in underdevelopment – i.e. poverty, scarcity and competition over resources. This has become the preferred way to understand the problem, not least because it suggests a response – the technical 'know-how' of development.

This can be seen in the conventional response to large-scale famines today which often overlooks the fact that they are usually driven by war or predatory activity directed at rural populations (Macrae & Zwi, 1994). The relief model often applied today is similar to the one used in natural disasters: food shortage is seen as stemming from enviro-economic crisis, and the solution as food provision. This use of a technical instrument to tackle what is effectively a political problem stems in part from the ascendancy, since the 1980s, of a neo-liberal economic model (de Waal, 1997). This is to ignore the root causes of famine, which are increasingly found in human rights abuses and tactics such as asset stripping. Many NGOs are either prevented by their mandates and for security reasons from involvement in overtly political activities, and are ill-equipped to address the violent environments in which they work beyond addressing symptoms such as hunger and disease. Yet as donor governments have cut back on their activities, this has led to the subcontracting of many relief responses to NGOs, allowing governments to adopt a more 'hands-off' approach to dealing with humanitarian crises.

With UN agencies and many NGOs heavily dependent on government funding, the international humanitarian system has consistently faced constraints on its independence of action. While relief agencies may have considerable operational freedom on the ground, the availability or otherwise of funds determines both where they can work and how they tackle problems. For example, when governments have large stocks of surplus grain, these often find their way to relief agencies and become the preferred response to famine. While most relief NGOs are aware of this dilemma and seek to overcome it, they are put in a difficult position where they face competing claims from donor governments and the victims of war.

Given their close links to government funding, there is – David Keen has suggested – often insufficient incentive or opportunity to challenge the conventional interpretation of the problem or the response required. There is also a danger, Keen notes, that when the existing instruments are not up to the task of addressing the problem as defined,

Box 5

NGO reliance on government funding

Some 1,500 NGOs are registered with the United Nations today, most of which operate internationally, and they are increasingly the key organisations through which government humanitarian aid is channelled. Between 1990-94, for instance, 45-67% of the European Community's funding for relief went through NGOs. According to the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, in 1993 47% of the $100 million channelled to Somalia in relief aid went through NGOs, and 49 percent of the same amount in the case of Sudan.

Source: The Reality of Aid, 1996.

governments are very adept at defining the problem in new ways rather than seeking more appropriate solutions. Thus, helpless in the face of the genocide unfolding in Rwanda in 1994, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, or the fratricidal war currently tearing Algeria apart, the problem is conveniently defined as an 'internal' war requiring – in effect – local solutions.

The danger highlighted by various speakers at the seminar is that the mainstream interpretation of humanitarian problems often excludes important matters from the debate and leads to a simplistic analysis of complex realities. The analysis on the limits of aid has, in particular, often disingenuously been used to disparage the humanitarian system rather than to alert governments that they have something more complex on their hands. Without a clearer recognition of the new political landscape in which relief is delivered today, then the kinds of changes needed will not be forthcoming.

4

Protracted instability and the limits of relief aid

The nature of the political crisis in different parts of the world differs greatly. The examples and trends highlighted during the seminar, many of which were in Africa, illuminate more generally the shortcomings of current understandings of and responses to humanitarian crises. The emphasis today has largely shifted from an attempt to find sustainable solutions to armed conflicts to managing them. As the external dimensions of these crises have been downplayed, the costs of war are increasingly being 'internalised' which is placing greater burdens on the poorest sectors of society least able to bear them.

'Emerging political complexes'

Mark Duffield argues that there has been a failure to recognise that – far from ephemeral aberrations from a normal state of 'peaceful development' – the 'complex emergencies' occurring today are a symptom of new and innovative adaptations by those wielding power to crisis situations. This is the case in countries as different and far apart as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Somalia. Despite high social costs, the current situation represents an alternative form of 'development' driven by new and non-traditional forms of political authority.

The keys to understanding these developments are the innovative linkages between so-called 'parallel' and 'grey' economic activity and global markets. As the authority and competence of nation states have been qualified by the emergence of a range of new international and sub-state actors, often with strong commercial or military links, this has served to distance governments from their people in both the North and the South. In the latter this development is having a particularly explosive effect.

The process of economic globalisation has allowed transnational companies to expand in unstable situations. In the process, this has given Southern political actors fresh opportunities to shape political networks and to realign local resources to global markets. The phenomenon of 'warlordism' in countries such as Russia, Bosnia, Cambodia and Liberia (see Box 6 overleaf) is just one example of the manifestation of this new form of authority. Warlords provide an important link between resources and international markets and maintain a certain continuity in inter-state relations even as formal state structures are 'failing'.

Duffield's analysis, which echoes the findings of others, suggests that the phenomenon of warlordism along the lines of Liberia's experience is not an isolated case. It may, however, be a transitional phenomenon. In this respect, he suggests that it is worth posing the question as to whether today's emerging states are themselves adopting warlord strategies. That is, using the language of privatisation to help de-bureaucratise the state, axe

> **Box 6**
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> **Warlordism in Liberia: an innovative response to crisis?**
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> In Liberia, the process of state failure which followed the ending of the Cold War opened the way for enterprising strong men to assert both economic and political control. By forging lucrative links with multinational companies dealing in timber, diamonds and arms, Charles Taylor for example, assured himself of an income totalling hundreds of millions of dollars per year in the early 1990s which enabled him to prosecute his war. Along the way, communities with valuable natural resources were targeted, leading to both mass impoverishment and large-scale refugee flows. Taylor's political project, though neither territorially nor bureaucratically-based, nonetheless enabled him to gain sufficient influence and power to win the 1997 elections when a semblance of normality had returned to Liberia.
>
> *Source:* Reno, 1997

social and welfare expenditure and, at the same time, forge new linkages with international commercial actors. Since this involves a reworking of the relations between rulers and ruled in the context of liberalising access to local resources, it is possible to think of instability not as a feature of underdevelopment, but instead as a modality of economic expansion.

A key characteristic of the systems of authority in many countries today is that political reality conflicts much more with appearance than is credited. While on the surface there has been a move towards democratisation in places such as Kenya or Cambodia, this has often served to legitimise the concentration of power in the hands of sectarian elites. This is particularly the case where constitutional and legal checks and balances against the arbitrary exercise of power are absent. In many cases, donor governments are down-grading their humanitarian involvement in countries in favour of new strategic alliances with the 'powers that be', related to lucrative economic interests.

In the violent context where they work, multinationals have effectively pioneered the use of private protection by contracting security groups such as Executive Outcomes of South Africa, to protect their investments and activities. As state capacity – particularly in the legal and security domain – has been undermined, the demand for private protection has also increased among political elites, commercial companies and even within the general population. It is a paradox, then, that while the North is reaping a peace dividend following the end of the Cold War, the South is actively rearming through the 'greying' of the small arms industry. As globalisation has reworked political relations and increased the vulnerability of many sectors of society, these 'developments' – suggests Duffield – could well be the basis for continuing instability.

Non-conventional patterns of warfare

David Keen's analysis of the economic functions which violence served in Sierra Leone's war, during the early 1990s, also gives reason to rethink international responses to complex emergencies. Conflicts in countries ranging from Afghanistan to Cambodia, Colombia and various countries in Africa cannot be considered 'conventional' in the sense that they are fought over a set of political goals. Rather they are protracted and highly factionalised struggles with immediate economic goals frequently taking precedence over political objectives.

Keen's analysis of the difficulties relief agencies faced in responding to Sierra Leone's humanitarian crisis suggests the changing nature of warfare has been poorly understood by relief actors. He argues that the essential humanitarian problem was framed in such a way which precluded effective analysis and also justified the favoured response. Sierra Leone's brutal civil war has often been portrayed as chaos, effectively overshadowing the lucrative political economies which underlie much of the violence. Local elites have effectively manipulated this chaos to shore up their own political positions in the face of a threat by democratic reforms.

In so doing they have also carved out profitable economic activities, both aided and abetted by the role played by multi-national businesses. There was a failure to recognise that during 1993-94 the government was itself taking advantage of the rebellion by the Revolutionary United Front to carry out large-scale appropriation of resources such as crops and diamonds. Crucially, the abuse of civilians was not simply a weapon of war or a means to military ends, but became economically rewarding even as it was militarily and politically counter-productive. Often, government soldiers and rebels actually cooperated or took turns raiding villages.

While the UN organisations and NGOs showed habitual deference to the host government, attacks were consistently blamed on the rebels. This enabled donors to keep aid flowing into the country through government channels and to keep the state focused on broader economic reforms. The price though, as Keen argues, was that this likely fuelled suspicion and hostility within the ranks of the rebels towards possible mediators. The failure to highlight abuses being committed by government troops also contributed to their impunity and therefore to more abuses.

Aid also bestowed benefits on a variety of local interests who were either contributing to the violence or had an incentive not to voice too much opposition to it. Most importantly, however, aid served as a substitute for effective diplomatic action to address the roots of the crisis. In this situation, relief agencies were soon faced with insufficient resources to meet the growing needs by the local population. Nonetheless, the impression was frequently given that the relief operation was meeting assessed needs even when it wasn't. This let major Western governments off the hook in terms of making provisions for refugees or giving priority to human rights or concrete proposals to end the fighting.

While some of the arguments were made by relief agencies in good faith, others were not, Keen argues, thus inevitably contributing to the erosion of humanitarian values and the worsening plight of the population. He notes various techniques employed by relief agencies to in effect mask the failures, particularly by UN bodies facing strong institutional or political pressures to deal with the crisis satisfactorily. Such techniques included, for instance, conflating the assessment of 'needs' with an assessment of numbers which could 'realistically' be reached. Thus, in the face of security constraints and a limited NGO food distribution capacity which made it possible to help only 500,000 people, this figure came to be accepted as the full number of the displaced. Failures to report the large amounts of relief being diverted by warring parties also gave the appearance of a programme that was successfully responding to assessed needs. Given the importance of demonstrating to donor governments that responses were meeting needs, Keen notes it was often easier for relief agencies to achieve this by misrepresenting the extent the of need, the crisis and the nature of the response required, rather than bring the response into line with actual needs. While relief agencies can not completely be absolved of responsibility here, they are often made a scape-goat for a problem which, in essence, stems from the ambivalence of governments in the face of human suffering and the absence of alternative solutions.

'Internalisation' of the costs of war

Despite the important external dimension of many current wars, often commercial in nature, humanitarian responses tend to be devised on the basis of an 'internal' analysis of causes and a preference for local solutions. As the case of Sudan illustrates, this approach has been institutionalised through the adoption of 'developmental' models of relief which serve to 'internalise' the costs of war with potentially negative implications for the welfare of those caught up in it (Macrae, 1996). Two concepts underlying this approach which need to be questioned are 'sustainable development' and 'conflict resolution'.

As Bradbury suggests, the problem of sustaining the financing of large-scale humanitarian relief operations lies behind the rhetoric of sustainability. Thus, the main resources required to improve the conditions of stricken communities must henceforth come from the communities themselves. Sustainability is based on notions such as 'local financing' for services such as health, or that the war-displaced can achieve sustainability in food production. In the context of extreme insecurity and impoverishment, these approaches can have devastating effects on the welfare of populations, particularly where relief aid is no longer being provided.

Bradbury suggests that relief agencies are being forced to adopt this new model against a backdrop of declining resources, though they often fail to admit that people are simply doing without. He notes that governments such as Sudan's are also defining populations as 'dependent' in order to hasten a shift to development assistance which they can control, at the same time ridding themselves of the threats to their sovereignty posed by relief agencies. The reality is, as a review of OLS notes, that in certain areas of the country, the reduction of food rations to the war-displaced, rather than promoting self-reliance, is forcing the displaced to become dependent on unsustainable 'coping strategies' and exploitative economic relations (Karim et al., 1996).

Another worrying manifestation of this reliance on 'local' solutions put forward to address grave humanitarian problems can be seen in the growing

trend by many relief agencies, in particular NGOs, to become involved in conflict resolution activities. Eftihia Voutira calls for extreme caution regarding the view that conflict resolution represents a panacea for current problems. Another recent review suggests that 'there is little hard evidence to back up claims that NGOs have a peace-building impact, partly due to the lack of frameworks and tools for operationalising and measuring the process' (Hulme, 1998: 5). Moreover, in practice, NGOs and donors have very different understandings and operational definitions of what peace-building means.

A general critique applicable to certain current approaches deployed in the context of complex emergencies is that it is difficult to do more than tackle the symptoms of conflict. Dialogue, third party intervention and problem-solving, it is argued, are often weak instruments in the face of powerful economic and political forces, often external in nature, which lead to conflict. At the same time, a more enduring reality which is sometimes hard to accept, is that conflicts can be a necessary dynamic of social change which, if suppressed, may actually contribute to longer term abuse of certain sectors of society. Wrong assumptions about the causes of conflict, which are often difficult for outsiders to identify clearly in complex environments, may skew the types of response needed.

Peace-building initiatives may, in certain cases, help bring about a temporary halt to violence, thus allowing relief aid to be delivered or other more enduring solutions to the fighting to be set in motion. However, the key question is whether this new activity in its current form represents a meaningful response to current patterns of violence or simply another strategy of disengagement by the international community. It also assumes that outsiders are in a position to correctly identify local capacity and institutions which should be supported in the search for peace; again, not always straightforward in the complex environments characteristic of many of today's conflicts.

It is clear that because relief is not politically or materially sustainable, some kind of sustainable peace ultimately needs to be created. The question is thus less whether or not there is a need for peace-building activities, but what kind and by who? Certain longer-term approaches, which base themselves on a deeper analysis of conflicts and which aim to build local capacity to influence the institutions and structures which play a key role in preventing and resolving social disputes, have much potential. Nevertheless, whether these approaches can successfully contribute to constructive processes of social and institutional change will largely depend on donor governments. Their responsibility for responding to the more overt, political dimensions of the crisis – at the very least, through diplomatic means – cannot be renounced.

Box 7

Sudan: The new victims of 'peace' and 'development'

Receiving insufficient attention today is the fact that international responses to protracted crises may, in certain cases, simply not be coherent with political realities. Some UN policies, as the OLS review suggests, may unwittingly contribute to increased vulnerability for certain populations (Karim et al., 1996). In Northern Sudan, the UN's support for the 'mainstream development process' has involved its participation in government rehabilitation projects which are closely linked to military strategy.

The government's creation of 'peace villages' for displaced Nuba, for instance, belies the fact these people have been cleansed from their lands by the military, or dispossessed by large-scale, internationally-financed farming schemes. A history of Sudan's war, Bradbury suggests, shows that population displacements are an objective of warring parties intended to ensure that certain ethnic groups do not, in fact, 'develop'. UN policies thus suggest an ignorance of the context at best, and at worst an accommodation with government disaster-producing policies.

5

Reaffirming humanitarian values

Keeping the critique of relief in perspective

If the mounting critique of 'developmentalist' models of relief is to be believed, then blaming relief aid for its shortcomings in dealing with humanitarian crises is effectively missing the point. Attempting any form of development in contexts where people are actively dispossessed of their assets is bound to fail. Given the patterns of violence seen in many countries today, relief aid may well fall short of fulfilling its main objective – saving lives. It is thus necessary to reaffirm the inalienable rights of war victims to assistance, while explicitly recognising the limits of relief aid in the absence of broader political measures to protect war victims.

Mounting any defence of the relief enterprise and re-asserting the key humanitarian values which underlie it, Nick Stockton argues, is dependent on addressing the empirical ignorance and myths surrounding relief which are being intentionally and unintentionally propagated today. He highlights four major challenges to the humanitarian system which lie behind the collapse of both public and private support for international action to resolve suffering. While not denying that in some cases relief aid may have negative effects, Stockton argues that it is crucial to maintain a sense of 'proportion' in assessing the overall impact of relief aid on efforts to alleviate human suffering.

Perhaps the most insidious challenge to humanitarian values, Stockton suggests, is the notion that many disaster victims have only themselves to blame for their plight and are not genuinely deserving of assistance. The Hutu refugees who ended up in eastern Zaire following the 1994 Rwandese genocide are a case in point. They were portrayed by many relief agencies and others as 'extremist' and bent on finishing off the genocide they started in Rwanda in 1994. It was argued as a matter of 'pragmatism' that they should no longer benefit from humanitarian assistance and should even be forcefully repatriated.

The reality was that the vast majority of those labelled 'extremist' were not guilty of genocide, a significant number of whom were children. The humanitarian argument is very clear, Stockton underlines, that withholding assistance on the grounds that those in need might be criminals leads to the arbitrary application of 'punishment before trial' – in effect denying the right to life to people on the basis of supposed criminality. In the context of a commitment to principles of neutrality and impartiality, the withholding of relief aid as a substitute for political, military or judicial action is thus indefensible. In using the Rwanda/Former Zaire case as a justification for cutting relief aid in other situations, as some agencies have done, a dangerous precedent has been set which threatens humanitarian values elsewhere.

A second argument put forth by what Stockton terms the 'new pragmatists', is that aid both prolongs suffering and obviates the need for local solutions to what are in effect 'local' problems. Echoing a point made by others, he argues strongly that the misconception that were aid to stop, wars and complex emergencies would burn out, is not supported by the facts. Analysts who cite the notion of 'root causes' conveniently overlook the legacy of colonialism, structural adjustment, external debt, the arms trade and rapacious corporate behaviour because it is not 'politically acceptable' to highlight these issues or because they raise questions beyond their capacity or desire to address.

Box 8

Does aid fuel violence?

In the context of the war economies which have emerged in many countries ranging from Afghanistan to Cambodia, Sierra Leone and the Sudan in recent years, the evidence suggests that relief aid is but a drop in the ocean in terms of the resources involved. Total international aid to Afghanistan, for instance, stands at some USD100 million per annum, while the total street value of heroin grown in the country and sold in the UK is worth some USD15 billion. Afghanistan's war economy thrives on lawlessness and the collapse of civil and state administrative structures and it is unlikely that cutting relief aid would fundamentally affect the levels of violence today. What is more clear is that any potential for the abuse of aid is heightened when Governments turn their attentions away from protracted crises.

While local factors cannot be absolved of responsibility in armed conflicts, there is a danger in confusing 'correlation with causation', Stockton argues. The implication of this faulty reasoning, he suggests, is to argue that we can prevent traffic accidents and fires by abolishing ambulances and fire-engines. There is a danger, then, that thousands of lives are being sacrificed on the altar of a convenient combination of political and financial expediency which underpins the new interest in policies that seek to 'do no harm' or to support 'local solutions for local problems'.

The criticism that humanitarian aid leads to dependency has become a truism which on closer inspection, Stockton argues, has also been blown far out of proportion. Aid, it is argued, leads to indolence and in effect obviates the need for local people to find solutions to their own problems. However, with relief aid making up less than 10% of all international development assistance in 1994, at its peak, the sums available tend to be derisory in terms of the sheer number of people who are targeted by relief agencies. Using the official World Bank figure of $365 per year as the benchmark for absolute poverty, the amount allocated to victims of war or natural calamity is in fact far, far less.

While it is widely accepted today that the survival strategies of war victims are based, first and foremost, on their own resources, innovative coping strategies, and the extensive social networks to which they belong, those who are not caught by this safety net count disproportionately on relief aid. Moreover, studies show that beneficiaries of relief aid normally regard it as a temporary, unreliable and inadequate source of food, in large part because the relief system is not effective or extensive enough in its coverage to provide aid where and when it is needed. Thus, to invoke the culture of dependency as a justification for reducing international spending on relief, is not borne out by either the logic or the evidence of the way humanitarian relief is provided today.

Beyond the strategic arguments used to disparage relief aid are criticisms levelled at the effectiveness of relief agencies. Highlighted, in particular, is the massive proliferation in recent years of NGOs, many of which it is claimed lack professionalism and experience in the field. Agencies are also criticised for not working together effectively and for clamouring for media coverage in an attempt to raise their profile as well as funds for relief. While recognising that these can be problems, Stockton suggests that the positive consequences of more agencies responding to humanitarian crises, as well as the greater coverage the media affords of human suffering, may actually be key to improving the international disaster response.

Efforts are also under way, Stockton notes, to gain adherence by relief agencies to the Red Cross Movement and NGO Code of Conduct as well as to define clearer standards for humanitarian action and possible ways to enforce this. These are notable steps in the direction of improved accountability by relief agencies to their primary constituents who are the victims of war. Nonetheless, given the fact that 'humanitarian demand seems to be outstripping the supply of official and private compassion', Stockton argues that forging a public re-engagement with the human tragedies of poverty and violence must be seen as the key challenge in reasserting humanitarian values today.

6

Conclusion

Some will dispute whether recent changes in the international response to protracted crises constitute a new 'agenda', much less a coordinated policy by donor governments. However, in the absence of a coherent response to the broader dimensions of the crisis, this 'agenda' is emerging by default. The impact it is having on suffering populations and the limits of current responses cannot be discounted.

Without a greater political will to engage with the underlying causes of conflicts, increased funding for humanitarian activities and technical reforms of the relief system may well be of limited utility. This is because two key assumptions which underlie the work of many relief agencies are on shaky ground today in certain armed conflicts. These assumptions, which form the basis for operationalising principles of neutrality and impartiality, are that civilians can be distinguished from active military personnel and that those providing relief are in a position to ensure that relief aid reaches the needy.

Current armed conflicts are often characterised by fragmented political authority, by military tactics which directly target civilians, and by a total disregard for the Geneva Conventions by warring parties. In some cases, the division between aggressors and victims has become blurred as civilians have been forced to resort to violent means to ensure their survival. In such contexts, it has been suggested that greater technical proficiency and professionalism in the delivery of aid – including striving for closer adherence to humanitarian principles – without measures to reign in the conduct of warring parties, may be fruitless (Bradbury, 1997). The limits of regulating warring parties by using the military to support humanitarian programmes have already been clearly highlighted in both Somalia and the Former Yugoslavia.

This has led to attempts by relief agencies, drawing on the long experience of the ICRC, to devise mechanisms to influence the conduct of warring parties. For instance, in Southern Sudan, Operation Lifeline Sudan has established a set of 'ground rules' signed by the Southern rebel movements which aim to make the provision of humanitarian assistance conditional on free and safe access and on humane conduct in war (Levine, 1997). Similar attempts have been made in Liberia where relief NGOs have developed Protocols of Operation which establish humanitarian conditions on relief aid. While these codes of conduct are significant advances in the attempt to protect the entitlements of war victims, their effectiveness remains closely tied to the will and capacity of both donor governments and relief agencies to enforce them.

The general trends highlighted during the seminar, which point to a growing process of disengagement from crisis regions by donor countries, indicate that this will not happen unless governments can be

convinced that this is not only necessary for humanitarian reasons, but for political ones as well. This highlights the need for relief agencies to complement initiatives to deliver assistance and regulate the conduct of warring parties with broader strategies to bring about sustainable solutions to problems of violence and insecurity

The challenge is immense. The delegation in recent years of a range of new activities to relief NGOs such as peace-building and human rights monitoring is, in large part, an attempt by governments to avoid the responsibility of dealing with complex political realities themselves. In the process of extending themselves into these new areas of activity, where NGOs are not always appropriately equipped to be effective, they have left themselves open to criticism.

To start addressing these problems will require a clearer consensus as to which kinds of problems relief actors are qualified and competent to address, and which belong in the domain of military or political action (Macrae, 1997). At the same time, there are also compelling reasons for relief NGOs to more clearly define their activities either along the lines of humanitarianism in the 'pure' sense of the ICRC, or along more political lines. This would allow some to focus on providing relief without compromising the safety of their own staff or the notion of a 'humanitarian space' which is key to gaining access to the needy. For those adopting a more overtly political line, this would open the way towards forms of advocacy which address the other factors driving the crisis and the political constraints at home or abroad to more effective humanitarian action.

In deciding which line to pursue, several clear dilemmas arise for NGOs. First, in the market-driven aid system of today, many NGOs have come to depend disproportionately on government funding linked to activities such as the delivery of food assistance. They will therefore find it difficult to undertake more political kinds of activities which might be perceived as contrary to donor interests and thus entail the need to find new sources of funding. Second, remaining operational in the field and conducting activities perceived as political in nature by host governments and warring factions may not be compatible either. This would threaten the ability of NGOs to deliver relief aid to the needy, as well as the security of their own personnel.

While there is a need for a flexible approach to humanitarian action, the need for NGOs to take a step back and re-evaluate current approaches cannot be ducked. This raises a potential third dilemma which is perhaps most difficult to confront because it challenges the hallowed principle that all people are entitled to immediate assistance. In a context of limited resources and greater awareness of the limits of current approaches, morally abhorrent choices may need to be made – for instance, between seeking to prevent immediate suffering for the few or to secure the longer-term welfare of the many by working to prevent conflicts.

Increasing uncertainty regarding how to prioritise conflicting ethical principles and moral goals is a feature of the current complex environment in which humanitarian action is carried out (Macrae, 1997) and needs to be confronted honestly. If the principles underlying humanitarian action in its 'purest' ICRC sense are no longer best suited to helping war victims due to constraints on the ground or in the relief system, the way forward is perhaps for relief NGOs to re-evaluate their understandings of what 'accountability' towards war victims means. They may find that the responsibilities this implies are better fulfilled through other forms of action and adherence to different principles such as the notion of 'solidarity'. While this suggests a broader interpretation and application of humanitarian values and a recourse to new strategies, these have a potentially important role to play in re-asserting the humanitarian imperative.

A clear distinction between 'humanitarian' action and 'political' action has always been at the heart of the way many relief agencies operate. While depoliticising humanitarian action is key to operationalising the principles of neutrality and impartiality, this does not obviate the need for a political understanding of problems and the solutions required. The reality is that relief interventions have a political impact which cannot be neglected, not least of all because humanitarian actions have at times allowed governments to avoid addressing the causes of armed conflicts more actively. While this is not to be used as an excuse to cut aid, as has happened before, the key issue is what kind of 'politics' best serves the interests of populations caught up in wars.

Mark Duffield has suggested that the difficulties the industrialised nations face in responding to the effects of global polarisation, social exclusion and protracted instability are reflections of the difficulties they face in addressing their own internal divisions (Duffield, 1997). These stem from a decline in overall social spending and an

increasing reliance on market forces to address social disparities rather than firm political action. This would suggest, Duffield notes, that the external response to humanitarian crises will only change when, and if, solutions to these internal problems can be found. This is not an excuse, either, for further disengagement from crisis regions, but underlines the need for a broader understanding of the constraints to effective humanitarian action.

While the political question is central, it is much too important to be left to politicians. The greatest potential for meaningful solutions to protracted crises may, in the long-term, lie in being able to 'humanise' politics. Civil associations, including those in the aid community, have traditionally represented the conscience of societies and have been key to the upholding of humanitarian values. As the humanitarian enterprise has become increasingly market-driven, relief NGOs have been shorn of the ability to push for the political responses needed. Yet NGOs are best placed, due to their proximity to the crisis, to convey the gravity of the situation to those who can make a difference through awareness raising and/or advocacy strategies.

The longer-term challenge is however, not fundamentally about demonising politicians or aid administrators. Forging a public re-engagement with the human tragedies of poverty and violence, Nick Stockton suggests, is key to re-asserting humanitarian values. This is so because the public represents the largest untapped source of support for humanitarian action, though not in the ways generally considered by many. In the absence of a clearer understanding of the causes of humanitarian crises, the public has been left believing that what is essentially needed is a bit more concern and a bit more money to set things right. In the process, the immense political potential which the public holds to influence government policies has been left unharnessed.

The depoliticisation of humanitarian action has, in many ways, also contributed to a tendency to conflate the moral imperative of ending human suffering with the argument that the richer, industrialised countries must do it. In the process, those most concerned, who are the people from the South, have often been left out of the debate. Elucidating those so-called 'underlying causes' of conflict and determining how more 'equitable relations' between North and South can be restored cannot occur without their input. Only then can current claims that the solutions on offer are the only ones which are politically 'feasible' be forcefully challenged, and more innovative and appropriate responses proposed.

Annex

Synposes of individual papers presented at the D.E.C. Seminar, London, February 1998. Copies of some of the full texts are available from the RRN.

The Death of Humanitarianism?: an anatomy of the attack – *Joanna Macrae*
This paper aims to analyse the diverse sources and nature of the attacks on humanitarian principles and practice. Such a dissection provides a prelude to other papers, and to highlight how humanitarian actors need to increase the sophistication of their defence of their ethics and practice.

Aid and Violence in West Africa – *David Keen*
This paper explores the functions of violence in contemporary conflict, especially the economic functions. The implications of this analysis for aid are discussed with special reference to Sierra Leone.

Conflict Resolution: the new panacea? – *Eftihia Voutira*
The aim of this paper is to present an account of the logic of conflict resolution practices as promoted by donors and NGOs both for palliative and preventive purposes in situations of large scale conflict. It critically considers the main assumptions of 'conflict resolution' as a method of humanitarian intervention used by northern NGOs who tend to identify themselves as agents of 'civil society' without clarifying their exact role vis-à-vis the states in which they operate. It signposts some of the limitations of the current approaches including the lack of clarity in the usage of key terms and its impact when applied, as they tend to be, in cross-cultural contexts.

Normalising the Crisis in Africa – *Mark Bradbury*
Developmental approaches to humanitarian relief have become the orthodoxy in aid policy and in practice. Drawing on a series of field-based studies and evaluations of aid programmes in Africa, the paper offers some reflections on the implications of this for the welfare and rights of populations in distress.

From asylum to repatriation: international organisations, mandates, protection and assistance – *Guy Goodwin-Gill*
A short overview of recent operations by, in particular, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, raises important questions regarding the role and relevance of 'mandates' (particularly those with organisational or 'constitutional' implications) in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the fulfilment of other functions. The extent to which the UNHCR mandate has been exceeded in certain field activities invites consideration of the extent to which certain 'statutory' functions may have been superseded, in fact if not in law, and of the role of major donors in steering institutional developments to suit a particular agenda.

Military Humanitarianism: trends and issues – *Michael Pugh*
An important trend in military doctrine for so-called 'peace support operations' is to emphasise stability and security to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian relief and establish the conditions for peacebuilding processes. The discourse in this context is combat-oriented, placing peace support operations on a spectrum that includes coercion and enforcement. This is reinforced by a trend towards strategic subcontracting to 'coalitions of the willing and able'. A second important trend has been to institutionalise the involvement of military forces in relief, peacebuilding and development activities. Although there is a long-established record of peacekeeping forces engaging in goodwill 'humanitarian' activities (with mixed results), the current trends contain contradictions that erode humanitarian principles.

Warlords, Post-Adjustment Rulers and Private Protection – *Mark Duffield*
The presentation addresses the emergence of political projects in the South, including qualified state forms, which no longer need to establish territorial, bureaucratic or consent based political authority. Rather than weak or failed states, one is presented with innovative and long-term adaptations to globalisation. At the same time, these emerging political projects are linked to a growing network of parallel and grey economic activity. Contrary to images of scarcity or breakdown, protracted instability is symptomatic of new and expanding forms of political economy. However, while politically innovative in relation to globalisation, such projects often exact a high social and normative cost.

In Defence of Humanitarianism – *Nicholas Stockton*

Since the 1994 emergency in the Great Lakes region of Africa we have witnessed a collapse in levels of private and public humanitarianism. There are numerous explanations for this apparent indifference to the plight of people in Africa and elsewhere. This paper explores four major challenges to humanitarianism: the concept of undeserving disaster victims; 'New Pragmatist' viewpoints that call for local solutions; evocations of a culture of dependency and attacks upon the professionalism of humanitarian agencies themselves. These have all served to damage the reputation of the disaster relief effort while humanitarian codes of conduct remain as valid as ever.

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RRN

Background

The Relief and Rehabilitation Network was conceived in 1993 and launched in 1994 as a mechanism for professional information exchange in the expanding field of humanitarian aid. The need for such a mechanism was identified in the course of research undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on the changing role of NGOs in relief and rehabilitation operations, and was developed in consultation with other Networks operated within ODI. Since April 1994, the RRN has produced publications in three different formats, in French and English: Good Practice Reviews, Network Papers and Newsletters. The RRN is now in its second three-year phase (1996-1999), supported by four new donors – DANIDA, ECHO, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland and the Department for International Development, UK. Over the three year phase, the RRN will seek to expand its reach and relevance amongst humanitarian agency personnel and to further promote good practice.

Objective

To improve aid policy and practice as it is applied in complex political emergencies.

Purpose

To contribute to individual and institutional learning by encouraging the exchange and dissemination of information relevant to the professional development of those engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Activities

To commission, publish and disseminate analysis and reflection on issues of good practice in policy and programming in humanitarian operations, primarily in the form of written publications, in both French and English.

Target audience

Individuals and organisations actively engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance at national and international, field-based and head office level in the 'North' and 'South'.

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