“The Trouble With Aid”

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MICHAEL AARONSON, DEC 17 2012

This was the title of a two hour BBC 4 TV documentary shown on 9 December – unfortunately no longer available on iPlayer. The film charted the course of humanitarian assistance over the last 45 years and was followed by a studio discussion. The documentary has already been expertly reviewed from the perspective of humanitarian ethics by Oxford’s Hugo Slim. In this post I argue that it has more to say about the wider shortcomings of international intervention than the advertised and somewhat facile question of whether humanitarian assistance does more harm than good.

Some of the morally difficult choices aid agencies face were exhibited in seven case studies from Biafra in 1967 to Afghanistan today. These revealed often diametrically opposing views within the humanitarian aid community. Thus we heard Bernard Kouchner, a founder of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), dismiss critics of intervention: “Even if you can save one person, it’s enough”; while some of his successors at MSF argued equally passionately for a more consequentialist approach. Others, like Save the Children’s John Seaman, maintained that one could be “sternly impartial” even when dealing with the devil.

Ricardo Pollack, the film’s director, claimed that these debates take place within the humanitarian community but rarely among the general public, who nevertheless believe they are fulfilling their moral responsibility by supporting the agencies. The journalist Philip Gourevitch argued that in consequence agencies play down their own failings: “We defend against the knowledge that our solution is so very imperfect, and that the humanitarian response isn’t necessarily serving the end it wishes to and claims to. Because it leaves us without a good answer, and we want one.”

I would argue that there are two distinct, although related, questions here: (i) does humanitarian aid sometimes do more harm than good? and (ii) do we expect too much of it in the first place? Although the documentary focused on the first question, it missed an opportunity to address the second.

The story began with the Biafran conflict 1967-70. Here, it can certainly be argued that the emergency relief operation prolonged the war. But the real scandal is that the agencies were left to provide the only significant intervention in this humanitarian disaster. For example, throughout the crisis there was no effective attempt at international mediation between the two warring parties by the UK, US, UN or anyone else.

Similar criticisms of international intervention – or the lack of it – could be made of Cambodia in 1979. In the Cold War context of the time the West was more concerned that the Soviets were supporting the Vietnamese who had toppled the Pol Pot regime than about the unknown but significant humanitarian needs of the civilian population inside Cambodia. The aid agencies may have exaggerated the scale of the suffering, but at least they were there to help.

In Ethiopia in 1984 and again in the refugee camps in Goma following the 1994 Rwanda genocide there was undoubtedly manipulation by the government and the former leaders of the genocide respectively. Organisations responded differently; some, like Save the Children and Oxfam, stayed put; others, in particular MSF, left. People still argue about who was right and who was wrong. But more significant was the UN’s lack of a political strategy for ending the long-running civil war in Ethiopia that directly contributed to the famine, or for intervening in the aftermath

of the Rwanda genocide that it had failed to prevent.

The cases of Somalia in 1993, Kosovo in 1999, and Afghanistan in 2001 raise different issues, flowing from the emerging liberal interventionist ambition of Western politicians. This was characterised by changing attitudes to so-called "humanitarian intervention", which became synonymous with coercive, military, intervention. As stated in the film, one consequence of Somalia was that it gave the term a bad name. However this was not the result of failings by the relief agencies but of the strategically inept way the US military allowed itself to become embroiled in conflict with Mohammed Aideed, with disastrous results for both Americans and Somalis.

In Kosovo, the agencies may have been embarrassed by the presence of NATO troops in the refugee camps on the Macedonian and Albanian borders, but this reflected more a failure by NATO to anticipate how Milosevic would respond to its bombing campaign by stepping up his attacks on Kosovar Albanian civilians – causing them to flee across the border – than any naïveté by the agencies about the dangers of getting too close to Western powers.

In Afghanistan the US-led Coalition definitely overstepped the boundary between military and humanitarian action, resulting in a damaging blurring of the lines between the two. Again, while the aid agencies must take some responsibility if they have allowed their neutrality to be compromised, the real fault lies with a poorly conceived and executed strategy for international intervention in Afghanistan, with no clear objectives or defined end state and doomed from the outset to ignominious failure.

In conclusion, as Randolph Kent of KCL argued in the studio discussion: "To look at humanitarianism outside of the wider context of influencing and influencers is a mistake". Humanitarian action plays an important part in responding to the world's problems, but only a small part, and can never be a substitute for political action. It is certainly true that by "wanting a good answer" the public risks having unrealistic expectations of the aid agencies – and the agencies need to be mindful of this. But the response should not be to call into question the nature and validity of humanitarian action. Instead we should demand from our governments and the United Nations a more principled, coherent, and consistent approach to international intervention – not just in response to humanitarian crises but to prevent them. Meanwhile, aid agencies will do the best they can, dealing with difficult moral dilemmas along the way – and we shouldn't be surprised if the solution they reach is sometimes less than ideal.

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About the author:

Professor Sir Michael Aaronson was Director General (chief executive) of Save the Children UK from 1995-2005, and from 1988-1995 was the charity's Overseas Director. He first joined Save the Children in 1969, spending two years as a relief worker in Nigeria after reading philosophy and psychology at St John's College, Oxford. Between 1972 and 1988 he held various posts in the UK Diplomatic Service, serving in London, Paris, Lagos, and Rangoon. He is a founder member, and from 2001-2008 was Chair of the Board, of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based private foundation working to improve the international response to conflict, in particular through independent mediation. Since January 2004 he has been a Visiting Fellow of Nuffield College, Oxford. In September 2008 he was appointed an Honorary Visiting Professor and in May 2011 a Professorial Research Fellow in the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey, where he is also Co-Director of cii – the Centre for International Intervention. He is a Senior Adviser to NATO, working on the political/military aspects of NATO transformation, and

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