

NGOs in New Wars: Neutrality or New Humanitarianism?

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ADAM GROVES, MAR 15 2008

Discuss the Problems Posed to NGOs Operating in Violent Environments, as well as the Different Strategies at Their Disposal to Deal with These Problems^[1]

With the end of the Cold War and the rise of global civil society, NGOs have played an increasingly prominent role in world politics. Yet due to the nature of their work, they often struggle to remain effective amid complex political, military and social dynamics. Specifically, NGOs face real problems when operating in 'violent environments'. Humanitarian actors have become subject to a progressively more rigorous critical analysis (cf. Macrae, 1998: 28) with many thinkers questioning the effectiveness of their efforts (cf. Rieff, 2002). Indeed, aid operations in Darfur, Afghanistan, Serbia, Somalia and Rwanda have been accused of *exacerbating* local insecurities (Fox, 2001; Young et al. 2005; Young, 2007; Prendergast, 1995).

The problems which NGOs face in violent environments are wide ranging. Thinkers such as Avant (2007) have highlighted the security dilemmas which must be overcome whilst Sunga (2007) has discussed the tensions often associated with advocacy work. This essay will focus on the complex practical and moral problems associated with aid distribution. First, the characteristics of 'New Wars' will be briefly outlined, together with an analysis of the broad difficulties which they pose for the effective distribution of aid. Second, efforts to resolve these problems through a 'new humanitarianism' will be explored. Finally, the essay will assert that the 'solutions' proffered by academics and policy-makers come with their own moral and political problems.

Distributing Aid in New Wars: The Unintended Consequences of Neutrality

In order to effectively discuss the problems which NGOs face in 'violent environments', it is essential to briefly consider the broader context in which their operations take place. In her seminal work, 'New and Old Wars', Mary Kaldor has argued that 'a new type of organised violence' is now prevalent, 'especially in Africa and Eastern Europe' (2006: 1). 'New wars' are closely tied to the notion of failed states. Within this environment, the distinction between 'war', 'organised crime' and 'human rights violations' is blurred (Kaldor, 2006: 2). The actors which are party to the conflict are not merely regular armies, but 'paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, [and] police forces' (ibid: 9). Although they 'may fight for one side, they are rarely under the full control of the structures of war' (Anderson, 1999: 12). Where no one group can prevail militarily, actors must 'try to control political territory politically'; however, in the absence of the ability to win hearts and minds, 'fear and hate' are utilised (Kaldor, 2006a: 7). Thus, the population is controlled 'by getting rid of everyone of a different identity' and 'most violence is directed against civilians'; Kaldor asserts that 'the strategic goal' of new wars 'is to mobilise extremist politics' (2006: 9). The associated degeneration of state frameworks and structures can leave NGOs as the sole providers of security and essential services for millions of targeted civilians (DeMars, 1996: 81). Simultaneously however, the strong emphasis on identity within new wars means that aid distribution can easily aggravate tensions between communities.

Kaldor has also highlighted the 'criminalised economy' of new wars (2006a: 7). Domestic production and tax revenues often collapse meaning actors must 'finance themselves through plunder... the black-market or through external assistance' (2006: 10). This observation has very serious repercussions for NGO operations, as aid can be

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used by actors as a resource to help fund and prosecute conflicts. Efforts to ensure that aid only benefits civilians are rendered almost impossible by the indistinct divisions between the general population and military groups (Barber, 1997: 9). In the context of these new wars then, the classic principle of neutrality has proved problematic: NGO operations have had unintended political consequences. Specifically, aid can function as a tool of war, its distribution can exacerbate the causes of war and NGO activity can substitute serious political engagement.

Aid can be utilised as a 'tool of war' in a number of ways. Actors often seek either to deny NGO access entirely or allow it on their own terms. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) estimates that restrictions placed on humanitarian access in Burundi caused dead to wounded ratios to increase from 1:4 to 10:1 (2004). Conversely, Macrae and Zwi observe that 'food has been used to lure civilian populations into areas controlled by government or rebel forces', thus lending legitimacy to the actor in question (1994: 20). Aid is also stolen and directly used by military groups. Leader notes that food is usually the commodity 'most sought after and most abused by belligerents' (2000: 55). It is prescient to note therefore, that the diversion of just 5 percent of Ethiopian humanitarian aid in the late 1980s would have fed up to 400,000 people, the equivalent of the entire armed forces (Africa Watch, 1991). In reality, many NGOs 'regularly include a 30 percent loss in their budgets' (Okumu, 2003: 130). In this way, NGOs may sustain militia and prolong violence.

NGOs can also exacerbate the *causes* of war by affecting vertical structures of accountability and authority and undermining horizontal relations between groups. Recent analysis of famines demonstrates that humanitarian aid affects social and political contracts between groups and their leaders. When NGOs provide substantial relief, the result may be that leaders are abrogated of their welfare responsibilities and can instead devote their energies and resources to war-fighting, a process observed in the Horn of Africa (Prendergast, 1995: 42). Experience from numerous conflicts shows that vertical power structures are also affected when aid communicates values and legitimises actors (Okumu, 2003: 128). Furthermore, NGOs may damage relations between groups by distributing aid unequally along ethnic lines. In Somalia and Somaliland, for example, 'aid imbalances are constantly cited... as a fuelling factor' in the violence (Prendergast, 1996: 28).

Finally, NGO activities may act 'as a smoke-screen for a policy vacuum in the industrialised countries' (Hendrickson, 1998: 6). By this reading, NGOs are increasingly significant because Western policymakers resort to supporting and promoting them when they are unwilling to politically engage themselves. NGOs are expected 'to undertake the tasks that the international community is unable to fulfil' (Kaldor, 2006: 129). However, the restricted mandates and power of humanitarian organisations leave them 'throwing food at political problems' (in Prendergast, 1996: 8-9). The *Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda* found that the international community had, 'in effect, and by default, left both the political and humanitarian problem generated by the Rwanda crisis in the hands of the humanitarian community'. It concludes that, 'this is untenable. It puts a burden on the latter that it cannot and should not assume' (Eriksson, 1996). In sum, NGOs operating in violent environments face great difficulty in carrying out their tasks effectively. Indeed, they have been accused of exacerbating local insecurities and substituting serious political engagement.

Resolving the Tensions: New Wars and a New Humanitarianism

'It is impossible to really do no harm' (Rieff, 2002: 22). Nonetheless, it is clearly in the interests of NGOs to address concerns that their work may have negative consequences. NGOs have therefore sought to dampen fears that aid may do more harm than good. It is an unfortunate irony that the same characteristics of new wars which have left donor states reluctant to engage politically, have also caused many NGOs to become uncomfortable with the traditional constraints on their ability to 'speak out'. The complex manipulation of extremist identity politics, together with the seeming lack of any clear geo-strategic goals, means conflicts are often perceived by western publics and governments as 'inevitable', 'internal' and 'tribal'. Simultaneously, the huge numbers of civilian casualties inherent in new wars has encouraged NGOs to vociferously demand political action to stop the crises.

'Speaking out' (advocacy work) –which might include calling for justice, condemning human rights violations by certain factions, and advocating international humanitarian law– has not always been a policy of the humanitarian community. Indeed, as the ICRC's controversial silence regarding the Holocaust demonstrates, under the banner of

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political neutrality 'humanitarianism can operate... very close to the victims of genocide and yet remain... very far from providing protection for them' (Slim, 2001: 141). However, in a context 'where the belligerents refuse to acknowledge the limits of war' and where political intervention is not forthcoming, 'many humanitarians are questioning whether they should still respect the condition of non-interference imposed on them' (Leader, 2000: 13). 'Neutrality' has increasingly 'become a dirty word' (Slim, 2004: 196). It is seen as morally undesirable (because it denies the space to publicly criticise those committing gross human rights abuses) and impossible to achieve with the limited resources that most organisations have at their disposal (Slim, 2004). Ed Vulliamy argues that 'to be neutral is to be on the side of the criminal' (in Fox, 2001: 277). At the very least, it leaves NGOs 'open to that most shameful moral charge of... being a bystander'; an accusation the ICRC has frequently faced for its inaction concerning the Holocaust (Slim, 2001: 131).

Remaining silent is simply no longer considered an option for many NGOs when unarmed civilians are being subjected to ethnic cleansing and systematic displacement (Rieff, 2002: 22). No one wants to be a bystander whilst innocents are being killed and less still does anyone want to be accused of fuelling the violence with 'relief'. It is therefore not simply humanitarian organisations' rhetoric which has changed; many have sought to ward off the 'bystander critique' and react to the charge that they contribute to conflicts by deliberately deploying aid in support of their advocacy work (African Rights, 1994: 6; also Duffield, 2001: 75). This approach has been termed 'new humanitarianism'.

By gaining an appreciation of 'how aid can support peace – or war', Anderson (1999) argues, NGOs are not only able to take steps to minimise aid's unintended political consequences, but also to contribute to long term goals of peace and stability. The first step is to 'do no harm'; the 'capacities for war, sources of tension and dividers' must be identified so humanitarian organisations can avoid reinforcing them (1999: 31-33). Step two 'involves identifying and assessing connectors and local capacities for peace' which can be used by humanitarian organisations as the 'building blocks of systems... that can ensure stable, peaceful, and just futures' (ibid: 24-31, 71). Keen and Wilson explain that if utilised in support of 'democratic, peaceful elements in society' aid has the 'potential to diminish violence' (1994: 216).

The logic behind new humanitarianism dovetails with studies undertaken by thinkers such as de Waal (2005), Duffield (1991) and Keen (1994) which have demonstrated that, whereas an end to violence has a significant and positive impact, aid plays a relatively marginal role in sustaining people during conflict. In light of such findings, NGOs would be well advised to concentrate on promoting peace and stability, thereby allowing farming and trade to resume. Thus, new humanitarianism appears to be a more effective approach which offers solutions to the failures of the past. Fiona Fox summarises the widely held perception:

'It is 'principled', 'human rights based', politically sensitive and geared to strengthening those forces that bring peace and stability to the developing world. It offers humanitarian relief agencies a new moral banner to march behind. It serves to re-legitimise an arena of aid that has been blamed for fuelling conflicts, prolonging wars and standing neutral in the face of genocide, It helps agencies adopt to the New World Order –and the new emergencies– that have emerged from the cold war' (2001: 275).

As such, new humanitarianism has won 'widespread application in programmatic work' (Longley and Maxwell, 2003: 32). However, as will be seen, it has raised its own moral and practical difficulties.

The Dangers of Sacrificing the Classical Principles of Acceptance and Neutrality

The problems associated with aid's unintended political consequences have been well documented. However, new humanitarianism also raises moral and practical questions for NGOs. Anderson asserts that 'too often, when international assistance providers arrive in a conflict area, they are so overwhelmed by the violence that they fail to see or recognise the capacities for peace' (1999: 23). However, one might question whether humanitarian organisations are capable of deciding 'who' or 'what' is potentially peaceful and, even if they are capable, what mandate they hold to make these decisions. 'Economic, political and social forecasting' is notoriously unreliable; NGOs do not have the 'benefit of 20:20 future vision' (Stockton, 1998: 356). Stockton argues that this was

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demonstrated during the Biafran war, when Oxfam took sides, and predicted an emergency which did not happen (in Fox, 2001: 281). This causes Fox to question 'whether aid workers should be making important political decisions. Suddenly the unelected, often unaccountable and usually foreign aid workers' are asked 'to decide which strategy would best deliver peace and stability' in the long-term (2001: 281). These problems become even more acute when one makes clear the potential human consequences of Anderson's guideline that 'not all capacities in a recipient society are ones we really mean to strengthen' (1999: 31).

The emphasis placed on promoting peace not war within new humanitarianism, has caused some NGOs to withdraw aid where it is considered to be supporting violent actors and institutions. Following the 1994 Rwandan genocide, a population movement of unprecedented scale occurred as over one million Hutus fled the country in fear of retaliation. The refugee camps in Tanzania and Zaire were widely cited as being controlled by the extremist Hutu regime which had led the genocide. MSF reported:

'Relief workers are becoming increasingly outraged about being unwilling accomplices to alleged perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda. To work in refugee camps where killers walk around freely, are often in control of the distribution of relief items and where preparations are being made for a new attack, poses a great moral dilemma for relief workers... MSF is forced to consider the question to what extent its humanitarian relief activities are sustainable' (1994).

Only 5 of the initial 150 NGOs which had sought to help the Rwandan refugees did not leave (Duffield, 2001: 81-82). Taking such an approach is problematic for a number of reasons. Withholding aid on the basis that 'those in need *may* be criminals... is the arbitrary application of punishment before trial'. It is 'ethically and morally indefensible' to use humanitarian assistance as a 'substitute for judicial action' (Stockton, 1998: 354-355). This is especially the case because clearly not all of the Hutu refugees were responsible for genocide; indeed of the 100,000 that are estimated to have died due to cholera and malnutrition in the camps (Oxfam, 2007) over half 'were children under five, most of whom had never set foot in Rwanda' (Stockton, 1998: 354). Thus, new humanitarianism's emphasis on not fuelling conflict creates an 'undeserving victim' (ibid: 355). Entire communities become associated with 'building capacities for war' merely because of their identity or (often forced) geographic location. This has been seen not only in Rwanda, but also Iraq, Afghanistan and Serbia (Fox, 2001: 282). Stockton writes that 'it represents an outright rejection of the principles of humanity, impartiality and universalism, fundamental tenets of human rights and humanitarian principles' (1998: 355).

Speaking in favour of new humanitarianism, Tess Kingham MP, a member of the UK's International Development Committee has asserted that, despite the human costs associated with withdrawing aid, an emphasis should be placed on 'the wider good... to actually achieve real stability and development'. She concludes that 'it may be better to withdraw aid now, to ensure that in the long-term, it is in the best interests of the people' (in Fox, 2001: 280). However, this attitude buys into the notion that aid drives the agenda of new wars. Whilst it has contributed to violence and should therefore be distributed with care, there is little evidence that simply withdrawing assistance will cause peace and stability (Fox, 2002; 2001; Leader, 2000; Duffield et al. 1999). Indeed, it may even exacerbate the conflict further: Duffield writes that by cutting off aid when people need it most (i.e. when insecurity and instability is rife), new humanitarianism 'has been a major source of the normalisation of violence' and suggests 'complicity with its perpetrators' (2001: 107; also Stockton, 1998: 355). The denial of aid therefore appears to be ineffective (even detrimental) with regards to ending conflict. By the same token, the prospect of aid supporting long-term peace also seems unlikely within the context of new wars. Macrae writes that 'complex emergencies are essentially political crises, in which the tactics deployed by warring parties are deliberately designed to negate the opposition's opportunities for development of any form' (1998: 29). To expect positive long-term results from humanitarian aid is thus perhaps unrealistic; by its very nature it 'has a more limited function' (ibid: 31).

However, the repercussions of new humanitarianism are not limited to recipient communities; there may be serious consequences for NGOs themselves as the humanitarian space is eroded. The desire to speak out and support those who are seen to be peaceful 'involves taking sides' (Slim, 2005: 207). When the political neutrality of humanitarian organisations is undermined, they become obvious targets for those they are not supporting – i.e. 'violent' actors. Thus a growing pattern has emerged whereby humanitarian personnel have been attacked and, in

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many cases, killed. Factions are also less likely to negotiate access and security agreements for civilians if humanitarian organisations are seen to be partial to the other side.

It is for these pragmatic reasons that, despite the many faults associated with so-called 'political neutrality', the ICRC (and some others) refuse to adopt new humanitarianism. Sandoz writes, 'silence has never been set up as a principle by the ICRC. The question has always been considered from the angle of efficiency in achieving the objective set by the principle of humanity' (in Plattner, 1996). There are simply no easy answers with regards to the effective and principled distribution of humanitarian aid. It is clearly desirable that aid should support peace not war, however implementing this 'in the field' has proven ethically controversial and limited in its efficacy. Danish diplomat Sorren Jessen-Peterson came to a similar conclusion with regards to the dilemma NGOs faced with Rwanda's Hutu refugees; regardless of the approach taken, it would be 'lose-lose' (in Rieff, 1999: 39).

Conclusion

This study has identified two broad humanitarian approaches, both of which have unintended political consequences. The first is when aid is deployed 'neutrally', purely according to human need and humanitarian capabilities. It has been shown that this leaves aid liable to be manipulated as a tool of war by violent factions; it may unwittingly exacerbate the 'causes' of war by undermining accountability structures and increasing tensions; and it may substitute serious political engagement. In response to these criticisms, many NGOs have adopted a second approach (new humanitarianism). However, this has raised its own moral and practical problems. When aid is deployed in an effort to support peaceful actors and institutions, humanitarian personnel (who are mandateless, often unaccountable, and sometimes ill-informed) are rendered responsible for judging who is peaceful and who is violent; it risks creating a hierarchy of victims which can leave civilians uncared for; and it may sacrifice life (indeed, legitimise violence) in pursuit of long term goals which there is little evidence to show are achievable. NGOs continue to face a myriad of problems when operating in violent environments; even if the security (Avant, 2007) and political integrity (Sunga, 2007) of their mission is assured, there are real practical and moral dilemmas associated with the distribution of aid.

[1] This essay draws heavily on another piece of work published on this website

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