Humanitarian Exchange

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In this issue

About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network at the Overseas Development Institute is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policymakers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or the Overseas Development Institute.

Editorial

Neutrality is traditionally regarded as one of the core, defining principles of humanitarian action, and essential to securing access to people in need of protection and assistance in politically-charged environments. Together with impartiality, it features in the mandates of many organisations involved in humanitarian response. It is, however, interpreted in different ways. Many argue that, with such crises as the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, neutrality is under grave threat as an operating principle. Some believe that it is essential for the future of humanitarian action that its neutrality be reinforced and protected. For others, neutrality is an impractical and unrealistic standard or condition. For some, it is a senseless charade that may cost lives instead of saving them.

The special feature of this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* focuses on neutrality in humanitarian action. The articles in the feature show that the concept of neutrality has many facets: neutrality in the public position adopted by organisations regarding political disputes; neutrality in the actual effect of their interventions (does it advance the war aims of one or other party?); and the *perception* by others of the neutrality of an organisation.

Marion Harroff-Tavel reviews the origins and rationale for this principle from the point of view of the ICRC, for whom it is one of seven Fundamental Principles. Abby Stoddard discusses the implications of post-9/11 US foreign policy

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for neutral humanitarian action. Jo Nickolls of Oxfam looks at the co-option of humanitarianism into the international coalition's political project in Iraq. Eva Bjøreng presents the approach of Norwegian People's Aid, for whom solidarity with the people NPA aims to help supersedes neutrality and impartiality. Chris McIvor of Save the Children examines the application of the principle in non-conflict situations such as Zimbabwe. Finally, Abdel-Rahman Ghandour describes perceptions of the neutrality of Western aid organisations in the Islamic world.

As always, this issue also has articles on a range of other humanitarian policy and practice issues. Luc Zandvliet examines relations between humanitarian agencies and commercial actors; Robert Muggah discusses the findings of a survey on the impact of small arms on civilians and relief workers; Jonathan Potter presents the new People In Aid Code of Good Practice; and Adele Harmer considers calls for a 'new humanitarian coalition'. As part of our series on the humanitarian policy of institutional donors, Tasneem Mowjee reviews the policy and practice of ECHO. Sarah La Trobe examines the approach of institutional donors to disaster risk reduction, while Tom Palakudiyil and Mary Todd look at community responses to natural disasters. Amelia Bookstein calls for more effective protection for people in neglected conflicts.

Does it still make sense to be neutral?

Marion Harroff-Tavel, ICRC

Neutrality, a commonly misunderstood principle of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, is once again in the line of fire. Yet those of us who work for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) firmly believe that neutrality provides a sound basis for action. This article discusses five arguments frequently advanced against neutrality, and raises some questions of its own at a time when world views are becoming increasingly oppositional, seemingly leaving little room for neutrality.

The ICRC and neutrality

First, a few words about neutrality as we see it in our daily work. To the ICRC, neutrality does not imply aloofness, but compassion for war victims, in the etymological sense of 'suffering with', or being by their side. Nor does neutrality imply coldness or lack of feeling. It is precisely because the feelings we have towards the suffering of those we seek to assist are not 'neutral' that we must adhere to political, religious and ideological neutrality – for that is what enables us to gain access to them. It is because we refuse to accept a world torn apart by conflicts of interest, ideology and civilisation that we strive to convince all parties that our action is impartial and cannot in any way be construed otherwise. This is our way of building bridges in a highly polarised world. People are not born neutral, they choose to become so. And people do not struggle against their own nature without good reason. While refusing to despair of mankind may denote a lack of realism, refusing to take sides does not signify a lack of courage.

> ## neutrality is once again in the line of fire

Five misconceptions about neutrality
Neutrality is naive

Some people contend that it is naive to believe that any humanitarian action can be neutral. All such action is necessarily political – for it has a political impact. In this view, the days of apolitical humanitarian action are over. While the maxim that humanitarian and political action must be kept apart admittedly failed to take into account the full complexity of the underlying issues, it drove home the point that humanitarian agencies have no political agendas of their own and that their work is disinterested. Although visiting a prominent member of an opposition group in prison may well have political repercussions, the organisation's aim in so doing is purely humanitarian. Neutrality in this case means that the ICRC does not comment on the grounds for incarceration or on any ideological matters.

Neutrality is a smokescreen

The second argument given against neutrality stems from the belief that humanitarian agencies, while claiming to be neutral, not only have political leanings but also belong to a loosely defined 'opposition' that uses the defence of human rights as a smokescreen for a political agenda of its own, be it toppling a regime or putting pressure on an occupying power. The error here is to lump together a host of organisations that consider themselves humanitarian but in fact have very different identities, mandates and principles of action. Some are tied to political movements while others, like the ICRC, are independent. Among those that have political leanings, some oppose their governments while others are instruments thereof. While ICRC delegates have their own personal political views, which no doubt cover a broad spectrum of opinion, as representatives of a neutral organisation they cannot express those views. It is therefore important to examine all aspects of the problem and avoid hasty generalisations.

The above argument raises the question of whether the term 'humanitarian' should only be applied to organisations that meet a specific set of criteria. A number of organisations, considering that this is precisely what is required in order to preserve the integrity of humanitarian action, have adopted a code of conduct. Certain criteria are deemed especially important, i.e. assistance must correspond to existing needs and be given without discrimination; the organisation in question may espouse certain political or religious opinions, but the aid it provides cannot be used to promote those opinions; and humanitarian organisations cannot serve as instruments of a government's foreign policy. By adopting a code of conduct, these organisations made their position on these issues clear for all to see. It is far more constructive to acknowledge the differences that exist than to indiscriminately label as 'humanitarian' a wide range of activities carried out by a variety of organisations.

Neutrality is passivity

A third argument frequently heard is that being neutral is the same thing as failing to take a stand against behaviour that deserves to be condemned or – worse – that it is tantamount to a shameful surrender of principle. In this view, neutrality is considered as cowardly, if not complicit, silence in the face of acts of aggression or violations of humanitarian law. With the resurgence of the

notion of total warfare, it is all the more urgent to reply to this criticism.

Neutrality should not be confused with confidentiality. The ICRC's neutrality has a very specific purpose, namely to enable the organisation to gain the trust of all the parties to a conflict, whatever their stance, and thus to come to the aid of all the victims. Neutrality is simply a means to this end. If it were not neutral, the ICRC would be unable to evacuate the wounded or repatriate prisoners across front lines. If it carried armed soldiers in its ambulances, the latter would immediately be shot at. As for confidentiality, it is a working method, a means of persuasion that is the ICRC's preferred approach. The organisation enters into agreements based on trust with the parties to a conflict, whereby it undertakes to inform them confidentially of any violations it finds in places that come under their authority, especially prisons, and the parties in turn commit themselves to putting an end to those violations. This is not the same thing as silence, or cowardice, or compromise. It is more difficult to say to a security minister that a country's prisons are unsanitary, overcrowded and run by staff that torture inmates than to publish an article denouncing these facts in the press.

Confidentiality, however, has limits. In cases where ICRC delegates note serious and repeated violations of humanitarian law, where their confidential approaches fail to make a difference and where the ICRC believes that going public would be in the interest of the people it seeks to protect and assist, the organisation informs the States party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions of the situation, drawing their attention to the obligation they have under the Conventions to ensure respect for humanitarian law. In other words, the ICRC is fully aware that there are limits to persuasion and that public denunciation – the means of action favoured by organisations like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International – can sometimes, albeit not always, be more effective.

When the ICRC decides to take a public stand on violations of humanitarian law because its efforts at persuasion have been to no avail, it is not departing from the principle of neutrality but from the practice of confidentiality. The ICRC can object publicly to attacks against civilians, the destruction of homes and summary executions, for example, without taking sides in the conflict that has brought on such tragedies, as long as it does so objectively and on the basis of principles that apply equally to all. In other words, it should be understood that those who criticise the ICRC for failing to publicly condemn violations of humanitarian law are calling into question not its neutrality but its judgement in relying too long, in a given conflict, on persuasion as an effective means of putting an end to violations. And sometimes they are right, as the ICRC has acknowledged with respect to its action in the Second World War. It can therefore be useful to challenge the ICRC's position. But in calling into question the ICRC's neutrality, critics are involuntarily harming the very cause they wish to defend. The ICRC's reliance on the principle of neutrality is the result of long years of steadfast determination and practical experience.

A humanitarian organisation cannot be partially neutral or intermittently neutral. Yet it can occasionally make an exception to the rule of confidentiality provided it does so in accordance with clearly-defined criteria.

Neutrality and 'just war'

A fourth argument advanced is based on the re-emerging notion of 'just war'. Those who believe they have good reasons to wage war tend to misunderstand the motives of those who, owing to their neutrality, do not support them. If a cause is just, they feel, then war is legitimate and the ends justify the means. That being the case, everyone should take part in their struggle.

In our view, however, the notion of 'just war' makes neutrality all the more necessary for an organisation whose aim is to bring assistance to conflict victims on the ground. There are few belligerents who do not consider their war as just, but this does not make it just for their adversaries. The ICRC must not fall into the trap of stating that some wars are just and others not, which would be tantamount to ruling on issues of *jus ad bellum* – the law governing recourse to force – whereas its mandate requires it to ensure respect only for *jus in bello* – the rules that apply in wartime. Those who carry out so-called humanitarian interventions may do so in the name of lofty ideals, or to put an end to human rights violations, but they may at the same time be defending national or geostrategic interests. Likewise, those who fight in the name of ideology, ethnicity or religion may be using that as a means of appropriating the natural resources of an enemy. If there is one issue that humanitarian organisations must approach with great caution, it is that of the legitimacy of a cause. The ICRC cannot take a position on the grounds for a conflict or the legality of a war under the UN Charter, for example; it can only determine what is right and wrong in relation to behaviour in combat, on the basis of humanitarian law and considerations of humanity. The ICRC cannot discriminate between victims depending on their attachment to the 'good' side or the 'bad' side.

the idea of 'just war' makes neutrality all the more necessary

Neutrality and 'guilt'

As for the fifth argument, its proponents claim, on ethical grounds, that some people entitled to protection under international humanitarian law are less deserving than others, namely those who have committed atrocities before being wounded, falling ill or being captured. If the ICRC were to follow such a line of thinking, it would have to pass judgment on those it sought to help and thus distinguish between the 'innocent' and the 'guilty'. This is a slippery slope that could lead to judgment on the basis of group affiliation rather than individual behaviour. This approach would contravene the principle of impartiality, which is a cornerstone of humanitarian law and action. While ICRC delegates may well have little sympathy for

certain causes or disapprove of certain acts committed by people with whom they come in contact, they strive to set aside that feeling to the extent necessary to provide those individuals with the protection and assistance to which all human beings are entitled. The work of ICRC delegates is based on the premise that the moral, physical and spiritual integrity – the dignity – of each and every person must be respected, without discrimination, in accordance with the international treaties that provide for protection of the individual. In any event, distinguishing between the 'innocent' and the 'guilty' would be unworkable as it would require humanitarian organisations to presume guilt in advance of any judicial process. The ICRC is not a tribunal and its delegates are not judges. Furthermore, the organisation's role is precisely to protect those people on whom states or groups may seek to take revenge.

neutrality remains as valid a principle as ever

The complexities of neutrality

Thus, neutrality remains as valid a principle as ever. Does adherence to this principle make life any easier for the ICRC? If only things were that simple.

First, neutrality carries an unfortunate connotation of distance, coldness. Yet it does not imply an absence of feelings. The ICRC can and must talk about human suffering, but to what extent can its delegates show what they feel when confronted with it without appearing to take sides? Furthermore, neutrality can be misunderstood as meaning that one must strike a perfect balance in any public positions adopted or admonishments given. How can such a pitfall be avoided? Lastly, tomorrow's conflicts are likely to be accompanied by increasing acts of sabotage and terrorism, which will no doubt lead to mounting pressure for public condemnation. While it is legitimate to condemn acts aimed at spreading terror, such criticism makes it all the more difficult to maintain the trust of the local population who may view the perpetrators as heroes. On the other hand, endeavouring to uphold the law that confers protection on people suspected of having committed such crimes is sometimes viewed with suspicion by those who support the fight against terrorism.

The truth is that our task is far from easy and that humanitarian organisations may differ in their views of what neutrality entails. We face dilemmas and sometimes have to weigh different options, knowing that there are no perfect answers – this is why dialogue among humanitarian organisations can lead to more informed choices. But one thing we are sure of is that independent, neutral and impartial humanitarian action must not be allowed to become a casualty of all-out war.

Marion Harroff-Tavel is Deputy Director for International Law and Cooperation within the Movement, International Committee of the Red Cross.

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With us or against us? NGO neutrality on the line

Abby Stoddard, Center on International Cooperation

The humanitarian community is groping for a way to conduct its work in the face of post-9/11 US foreign policy. Navigating an uncertain course among military and for-profit actors in Afghanistan and Iraq, and confronted by intensifying security threats, NGOs may be forgiven for reacting with alarm to what they see as a gathering storm against non-governmental humanitarian action. From the White House, the State Department, USAID, and conservative think-tanks with close ties to the administration, the message is that neutral humanitarianism has no place within the framework of the 'global war on terror'. In the past, the mainstream US NGOs have often dismissed with irritation the European fixation with humanitarian principles, regarding such navel-gazing as of little practical value. In the face of the new US foreign policy, the neutrality question has suddenly become less academic, and US NGOs are facing some very difficult choices.

The scale of the challenge

In May 2003, USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios delivered his now-infamous speech to NGOs at a conference organised by the US umbrella grouping InterAction. In it, he roundly scolded NGOs for not clearly and consistently identifying their aid activities in Afghanistan as funded by the US government, and admonished them that they needed to demonstrate measurable results if they wanted to continue to receive USAID funding in the future.

Shortly after the speech (in a coincidence noted in press reports) a new website, 'NGO Watch', was launched by the conservative think-tanks the American Enterprise Institute and the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies. The website project, kicked off by a conference entitled 'NGOs: The Growing Power of an Unelected Few', contends that the largely left-wing NGO sector wields undue influence over US foreign policy and US corporations. The venture has prompted a more than usual degree of concern among humanitarian practitioners, not least because several senior administration officials come from the two think-tanks involved. The site's founders declare that, 'without prejudice', they intend to 'compile factual data about non-governmental organizations', and much of what is on NGO Watch is no different from the information posted on any number of websites and consortia rosters. Yet some in the US NGO community suspect that the NGO Watch project was designed as a tool for the administration to bully non-compliant NGOs, so that those who insist on openly criticising the US government's actions in Iraq and elsewhere will be held up for public lambasting on the site. The tone of the language about NGOs ('What are their agendas? Who runs these groups? Who funds them? And to whom are they accountable?'); its corporate sponsorship; and its underlying ideology indicate a heightened level of anti-NGO sentiment, uncomfortably close to official government circles.

How real is the threat to NGOs and humanitarian action? Insiders at USAID and others in the US humanitarian community dismiss fears as conspiracy theory-mongering – an over-reaction fuelled by Euro-humanitarian indignation. Yes, there are communication problems with the military, but USAID is a longstanding partner and protector of NGOs and fully understands the importance of their independence and the principle of neutrality, despite some surprising rhetoric from officials (Secretary of State Colin Powell's talk of NGOs as 'force multipliers', for example). Natsios comes from an NGO background himself, and was known not to mince words with the US government. Nonetheless, more seems afoot than just idle talk. The change in tone reflected in Natsios' speech appears deliberate and meaningful – as though USAID is at once both remonstrating with and appealing to NGOs to get on board lest both they and USAID lose out to the forces of political change. Its partners see USAID coming under growing pressure from the administration and a majority in Congress that is sceptical of the foreign aid enterprise, doubts that it can get results on the ground and questions whether it deserves its place at the foreign policy table.

Wider questions

While there may be no concerted right-wing plot to stifle the humanitarian community, three developments threaten to significantly affect mainstream US NGOs and humanitarian action generally: first, the urgency with which the US has linked humanitarian goals with the strategic agenda after 11 September; second, the increasing role of for-profit actors in the aid and reconstruction response; and third, the growth of the 'faith-based' movement in aid and policy circles.
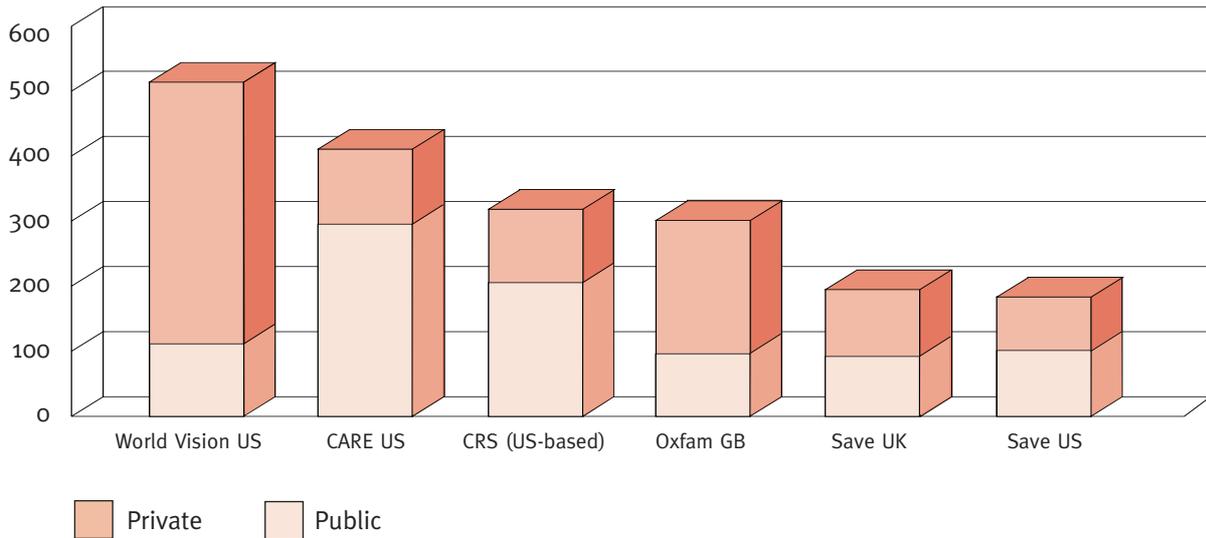
> **the largest US NGOs are not prepared to be seen as agents of the US government**

Aid and security

After 9/11, the act of providing relief and reconstruction aid has assumed a vital political importance to the US. At the same moment that the humanitarian community was reaching consensus on the failure of political co-option of the aid response, the US began to demand it to an unprecedented degree. In the late 1990s, European and US NGOs alike reinforced the importance of the neutrality principle, and stressed the point both to governments and the UN. With 9/11 this all changed; early on in the Afghanistan recovery effort, President George W. Bush complained to his National Security Council: 'We're losing the public relations war. We're not getting credit for what we are doing for the Afghan people'. As Natsios later put it to the NGOs, in

Figure 1: Public versus private funding for six major NGOs, 2001 (US$m)

the bluntest possible terms, 'The work we do is now perceived to affect the national survival of the US'.

Along with the well-known dispute over US military squads in civilian clothing delivering aid to Afghans, US NGOs have had to counter, with varying degrees of success, attempts by the US government to muzzle their press statements and gather information on local partners. Despite the traditionally pragmatic character of many US NGOs, and their willingness to find ways to work with political and military actors when the situation demands, the largest and most reputable are not prepared to be seen as direct agents of the US government.

Aid and profit

The second major trend is a burgeoning for-profit presence in post-conflict reconstruction. The cases of Iraq and Afghanistan are arguably anomalous in their political significance and the scale of reconstruction needed, but Natsios seemed to be putting the NGO community on guard for the future when he declared: 'Results count. And if you cannot measure results, if you cannot show what you've done, other partners will be found'.

And found they have been: the total awards to private-sector firms in Iraqi reconstruction are the largest USAID has ever implemented, dwarfing the sums granted to NGOs for smaller, more relief-oriented projects. To date, contracts with US corporations for civilian reconstruction in Iraq total upwards of $1 billion (the largest award, of up to $680 million over 18 months, has gone to US construction firm Bechtel). The provisional authority in Iraq has asked the US Congress for $20.3bn more, of which, if current funding patterns continue, only $0.3bn appears slated for non-profit grants (refugee assistance, human rights and civil society). Even in recovery sectors where non-governmental actors traditionally predominate, such as public health and education, the US government has contracted for-profits instead. NGOs' arguments that

demanding quick results detracts from their efforts and comparative advantage in building close partnerships and stable relations with the beneficiary community have held little sway.

Aid and faith

A third, more subtle shift in US aid policy has been the emphasis on faith-centred aid. Evangelical Christians are increasingly active in foreign humanitarian assistance, and are represented heavily in the current government. In the late 1990s they drove such pieces of legislation as the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which passed over Clinton administration objections, and the withholding of funding for the UN Population Fund for anti-abortion reasons. During this period, the faith-based agency World Vision overtook CARE as the largest US NGO, with annual revenues exceeding $700m, mostly from private sources. The widespread practice among evangelicals of tithing (giving 10% of income to church-sponsored charity) makes them a potentially much more lucrative source of private relief and development funding than the average US private donor, who directs only roughly one percent of donations to foreign causes.

Although USAID has long funded many faith-based NGOs, the new emphasis on them is another sign of the scale of the threat to the agency. Talk of abolishing or radically reforming USAID has been around for decades, but in recent years, especially with the Bush administration, it has taken on decidedly religious overtones. Shortly after Bush took office in 2001, long-time aid critic Senator Jesse Helms came out in favour of increasing foreign assistance – on the condition that USAID was abolished and future US contributions were funnelled directly through 'charities and religious groups'. The five organisations Helms cited as potential grant recipients all happened to be religious, save one (the five were World Vision, Save the Children, Hadassah, Catholic Relief Services and Samaritan's Purse). Helms said that he had modelled his

proposal on Bush's private charity and faith-based initiative promoted during the election campaign. Neither this nor past proposals has got through the legislative process, but there is chronic pressure on USAID. Under Clinton, the agency was restructured to come under the more direct control of the Secretary of State, and staff numbers were cut from 10,000 to 7,300.

Iraq: lessons still unlearned

The NGO gold rush repeated itself in Iraq, a situation not only morally fraught but also lacking in massive, life-threatening needs. There is, though, an alternative scenario, whereby the NGO community collectively agrees to present a united humanitarian face to the occupying power before an invasion, inventoried capacities and pooled resources, waited to assess needs, and then jointly agreed with the UN on the necessary interventions, maintaining as much distance from the military presence as circumstances permitted. This is of course far-fetched, not just because of funding reasons but also because of the lack of leadership and will among NGOs to collaborate effectively. Natsios' speech indirectly hit on a hard truth: the continued fragmentation of the aid community remains a weakness, and the humanitarian enterprise too often adds up to less than the sum of its parts. These are challenges that face not just US NGOs, but the entire community.

> ## the humanitarian enterprise too often adds up to less than the sum of its parts

The future

Much depends on the outcome of the next presidential election in 2004. Democrat front-runners have sharply criticised the Iraq invasion and Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive security, and have called for the US to cede control of civilian assistance programmes to the UN. But regardless of who wins, a complete rollback of the 'war on terror' is unlikely, and US NGOs need to take a hard look at themselves, their funding structures (nearly all receive over half of their funding from government sources) and their relations with the government generally. Despite genuine and public reservations about launching operations in Iraq, most US NGOs have entered the fray in one way or another. Nearly all the US NGOs polled by InterAction at the beginning of the crisis indicated that they would refuse all funding from the US military-controlled authority in Iraq, but one by one nearly all have done so now. The crisis of conscience that this has begun to trigger threatens to make the aftermath of Goma look paltry by comparison.

Abby Stoddard is an Associate at the Center on International Cooperation, New York University.

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Limits to neutrality in Iraq

Jo Nickolls, Oxfam

In Iraq, the lines between political and military actors have been blurred as never before. Aid has been co-opted as part of the coalition's political project in Iraq; few Iraqis distinguish between aid workers and personnel attached to the occupying powers, and some NGOs have become more or less contractors, providing services to the Iraqi population. In these fraught and politically-charged circumstances, it is almost impossible to be perceived as neutral.

With US or against US: the war on terror's challenge to neutrality

On 20 September 2001, US President George W. Bush stated that 'Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists'. Bush's doctrine – the 'with-us-or-against us' doctrine – denies the possibility of neutrality by simply vanishing it away. It defines the two sides of a conflict – 'terrorism' versus 'freedom' and 'civilisation' – then auto-

matically assigns all parties to one or the other: if you cannot side with Bush, you are for terrorism. The in-between of neutrality simply disappears, at least in the eyes of the US government.

The 1979 commentary to the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross offers the suggestion that, 'If anyone presents the Red Cross with the well known and destructive dilemma embodied in the phrase, "whoever is not with me is against me", may it always reply, "I am with all those who suffer, and that is sufficient"'. In many situations, this simple reply might be enough. When a humanitarian organisation feeds the hungry or shelters the homeless, it may be enough to 'be with' those that suffer. But is it sufficient in Iraq, where there are many layers of suffering and complex sets of perceptions about the causes of that suffering? Many Iraqi people claim that an element of their suffering results from the occupation of their country. 'Being with' such people and working to alleviate their suffering risks the perception that you have aligned yourself with the anti-Americanism that by Bush's definition is equivalent to terrorism.

Oxfam at work in Nasiriyah, southern Iraq

Challenges to neutrality in Iraq
The multiplicity of actors
In occupied Iraq, neutrality would certainly mean not siding with any armed actor. It would mean not siding with the US-led coalition, or with the US or British governments or any of their allies. It would also mean not siding with any Iraqi groups.

> ## Westerners are not seen as neutral – and why should they be?

With the complex and heightened sensitivities in Iraq, abstaining from politics is also a crucial part of neutrality. This means standing apart from the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, the Interim Cabinet of Ministers and any other political appointees. It means not being associated with any government or even with promoting any particular form of government. This entails not supporting the occupying powers' goal of establishing a US-style democratic government in Iraq. The relative merits of democracy versus other forms of government are not something a neutral actor would have a position on.

Aid as a political strategy
The strategy of the US-led coalition in Iraq included getting assistance to Iraqi people immediately after the fighting. During the occupation of the country, the delivery of aid has remained a key goal of the US-led administration. In April 2003, the military-run Humanitarian Affairs Coordination Centre in Jordan explained how important it was to get NGOs into the politically-important city of Basra in southern Iraq, because there was a need to show people quickly that life would get better now that Saddam Hussein had gone.

The desire to use assistance as part of a political and military strategy in Iraq is not limited to the military. In May 2003, Andrew Natsios, the Administrator of USAID, explained to NGOs that they were an arm of the US government: 'we need to show the people of Iraq an improvement in their standard of living in the next year or two'. Instead of focusing solely on legal obligations to meet the basic needs of the population, the US government is clearly seeking to meet political objectives. For example, the contract awarded by USAID to a private company for the rehabilitation of the education sector aims both to get children back to school, and to 'lay a foundation for democratic practices and attitudes among children'.

NGOs as contractors
Some NGOs in Iraq have long since abandoned traditional humanitarian principles and work as contractors, delivering services to the Iraqi people. Like private companies, NGOs that have signed US government 'cooperative agreements' (for which read contracts) to work in Iraq are unlikely to be perceived as neutral. Many arrived after the war, have mainly American staff and are effectively working for the US government. In addition to giving up the possibility of neutrality, these organisations may find it harder to explain how the principles of impartiality and independence are upheld.

For other NGOs, creating an individual identity has been made harder because perceptions of the whole humanitarian community in Iraq have been formed rapidly, and with very little information. It is difficult to see how one NGO can retain the perception of neutrality – or, more worryingly, independence – when similar organisations are closely aligned with the occupying powers.

Distinctions between foreign actors
Carving a niche as an individual NGO within the humanitarian world is difficult enough. But is it possible to at

least demonstrate that humanitarian organisations are different from the occupying powers in Iraq?

Certainly, the vast majority of Iraqis have no way of distinguishing between foreign people in civilian clothes working for the occupying forces and any other newly arrived foreigners. This makes it unlikely that humanitarian organisations will be perceived as separate. Foreigners are referred to collectively as 'the Americans', regardless of their origin, and are thus presumed to be complicit with the US-led administration.

This extends to the UN agencies. In September 2003, people in the town of Fallujah, west of Baghdad in the so-called Sunni triangle, explained to a journalist that the UN is 'controlled by America. It will never help Iraq. It's not independent'. In May, I asked a young American soldier if perhaps the distinction between humanitarian workers and the military wouldn't be better preserved if he moved his tank from inside the UN compound at the Canal Hotel. 'But I thought the UN was a branch of the US military,' he replied. Clearly he didn't realise that the UN was independent either.

The fact is that Westerners in Iraq are not perceived as neutral – and why should they be? Most arrived in the immediate aftermath of the war in April 2003. Some, including organisations claiming to be non-governmental, were accompanied on their way into Iraq by combat elements of the coalition military.

The appearance of collaboration between military and civilian actors and the resultant loss of perceived neutrality occurs in more subtle ways as well. International humanitarian organisations are some of the select few who are granted access to the ornate palaces of the former regime to talk with the US-led administration that now resides there. Many Iraqis are already angry at being excluded from the places where major decisions that determine their future are being made. Those queuing in the scorching sunshine at checkpoints outside the heavily fortified 'Iraqi Assistance Centre' in Baghdad must be particularly galled when NGO workers brandishing foreign passports are waved straight through the gates.

Taking a stand

At the start of 2003, Oxfam took a clear stand against the war in Iraq. On 28 January, Oxfam GB's director, Barbara Stocking, said that military action against Iraq could 'devastate the lives of millions of people … Oxfam believes war now to be unjustifiable'. Daleep Mukarji, director of Christian Aid, took a similar position: 'We believe that peaceful alternatives to conflict are not yet exhausted. All parties have a legal – and we believe a moral – obligation to seek the peaceful resolution of this dispute through the UN'.

Oxfam's stance at the beginning of the Iraq war was not neutral. But our humanitarian response remains independent and impartial. It is independent because we resist interference or directives on how to work in Iraq. And it is impartial because our response is based on needs alone and is conducted without discrimination. These principles of independence and impartiality are ones that many humanitarian organisations work hard to uphold. But in Iraq, demonstrating even these principles is difficult: the war on terror and the blurred boundaries between military actors, private companies and all the various humanitarian organisations there limit our ability to influence how we are perceived. The unprecedented circumstances in Iraq mean that NGOs may not uphold all humanitarian principles. But all humanitarian organisations must continually renew their commitment to humanity – to protecting life and alleviating human suffering.

Jo Nickolls is Oxfam's Policy Adviser on Iraq. She writes here in a personal capacity.

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Taking a stand: solidarity and neutrality in humanitarian action

Eva Bjøreng, Norwegian People's Aid

For most humanitarian organisations, the essential principles of humanitarian action are to be neutral, impartial and independent. Good impartial and neutral humanitarian aid reduces suffering. It works. People survive, who might not have survived otherwise. Neutral and impartial NGOs can operate and introduce resources in a conflict or war because they are expected to have no desire to win it.

In extreme situations, warring parties may allow *only* these neutral NGOs to operate.

But neutrality can also imply disinterest, both to the reasons behind the suffering that humanitarians try to relieve, and to the implications of their work for the future. Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) is independent, but it is not

Iraq: a disaster area

Since the formal end of the war in Iraq in May, humanitarian organisations have flooded in. Massive resources have been invested in humanitarian aid. More than most, Iraq's disaster is purely political and man-made. It did not start with the coalition's war. The country has been in an almost contin-uous state of war since the Baath party came to power in 1969: civil war against the Kurds, three international wars, genocides and mass deportations, a massive oppressive system of control and indoctrination and, on top of it all, 12 years of UN sanctions, which destroyed the economy. Between three and four million Iraqis lived in exile, and every tenth Iraq was either killed or injured by acts of war.

neutral and impartial; instead, its work is grounded in the idea of *solidarity* with the people it helps. NPA believes that, to respond properly, it is important to analyse the political and social factors behind suffering, and to under-stand the impact of assistance. It is important to see organisations as political and social actors: whoever controls and distributes resources in a society marked by scarcity, conflict, injustice or oppression plays a political role. Choices about who to help, where to help and what to do to help will have an impact on society beyond direct project results.

NPA's work in Iraq

NPA has been working in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq since 1995, beginning with rural reconstruction, rehabilitation and demining. In 2000, the agency reviewed its programme and realised that it needed to play a more high-profile and political role. NPA did a political analysis of the situa-tion of the Kurds in general, and in Iraq in particular, and established a political basis to guide its humani-tarian work. NPA clearly states its support for the Kurdish cause, and their democratic struggle to achieve rights as a people and to create democracy in Iraq. This position was made known to all NPA partners and local authorities in the area, and it was probably also known to the regime in Baghdad. By adopting this political basis, NPA was excluded from providing humanitarian assistance in any other part of Iraq as long as the regime was in power – it would not have been allowed to do so, and it would have been dangerous to try.

What has NPA achieved by so clearly politicising its work in Iraq? Has it made a difference?

An Iraqi woman collects drinking water

©Norwegian People's Aid

Although relatively calm and well-organised, the Kurdish-controlled area of north Iraq was in a state of emergency after the Kurdish revolt against the Baghdad regime in 1991. No political solution had been agreed, and people did not have any confidence in the future. The threat from Saddam was imminent. Although under Kurdish rule important political reforms were introduced, the area was marked by political and economic isolation and a lack of resources, contact and exchange.

The first thing NPA achieved by clearly taking a position was to establish confidence and clarity. NPA's agenda was clearly stated and could be discussed and chal-lenged with political leaders, local staff, partners and other stakeholders. The basis was solidarity with the people in Iraqi Kurdistan. The vision was a free and democratic Iraq, where the Kurds enjoyed their rights as a people. Everyone, the local team in particular, realised that NPA wanted to play a role that was different from most other humanitarian organisations, and wanted to contribute to political change. But this also required time spent explaining that it was possible to be polit-ical, but still independent, with no affiliation to parties in the area, in Norway or anywhere else.

Characteristics of NPA's work

Empowerment was a key word. This implied that NPA should aim to enhance popular partici-pation and the democrati-sation of Kurdish society, strengthen respect for human rights and enable men and women to influence the national and international social, economic and political developments affecting their lives. This implied an understanding both of the oppression faced by the Kurds and other opposition groups, and of the oppressive structures and traditions within Kurdish society itself, in particular the massive oppression of women.

In addition, it was agreed that NPA should actively advocate for the Kurdish cause and support the Kurds' own advocacy efforts, helping groups and organisations in Kurdistan to establish cooperative links and networks both within Kurdistan and Iraq, and overseas.

Post-revolution changes

The Kurdish revolution in 1991 was not enough to estab-lish a free and democratic society. What the Kurdish leaders had achieved, however, was to establish the framework within which civil society could emerge. After 1991, it became possible for people in Kurdistan to

organise themselves to advocate, lobby and conduct projects. Civil society, businesses and the government no longer overlapped as they had under Baathist rule, where party membership was the only route to influence. After 1991, some local organisations at least were independent from the dominant groups and local authorities. Even some of the organisations affiliated to political parties dared to confront those parties and their leaders on important issues of concern.

NPA established cooperative relationships with partner organisations that had brave ideas. In cooperation with them, the agency was able to offer human rights training to police, security and intelligence service personnel, local administration officials were trained in democratic management, research on the situation of women was done and violence against women became a focus area. Broad awareness-raising campaigns were conducted in rural areas, where social and economic rehabilitation projects were also carried out. NPA supported free media and advocated for overall political change and improvement.

The Iraqi dilemma

When the war began in March, there were serious and widespread concerns about the consequences for the civilian population and the implications for the status of international law and the role of UN. In Europe and the Middle East, millions mobilised against the war. This anti-war movement astonished the Kurdish-controlled north: people there understood the hostility to the US, but considered a war to be perhaps the only chance to end Saddam's rule. This was the Iraqi dilemma: to accept war and occupation for the sake of removing a terrible regime.

For many of the humanitarian organisations that started to work in Iraq after the war, the US occupation became a problem. How could agencies relate to the occupying forces and their civilian authorities? How could they ensure coordination without being seen as an element of the occupying power? Was this a hostile occupation similar to Israel's in the Palestinian territories, or was it 'a friendly liberation of the Iraqi people', as the US claimed?

The NPA had long stated that a free and democratic Iraq was one of its goals, and had worked closely with local partners to prepare the ground for a modern and free society in Kurdistan. When Saddam was removed, the coalition started using the same kind of vocabulary, speaking of freedom, democracy and human rights. Suddenly, the humanitarian community saw such talk as suspicious, as if using these terms in Iraq signified collaboration with the military occupiers and a violation of the principles of humanitarianism.

Would NPA's stated wish to play a political role and contribute to freedom and democracy in Iraq co-opt the agency to the occupying powers? The answer is clearly no. Since NPA first developed its more politicised strategy for Iraqi Kurdistan, its approach has been bottom-up; in close cooperation with local staff and local groups, it has developed a strategy to encourage positive change and empower people to participate and work to influence their social and economic environment. NPA is not a US ally. NPA tries to be an ally of the people of Iraq. A new and democratic Iraq is in the interests of the Iraqi people.

The question is not only what to do now, but how to do it. Change has been thrust on Iraq from above, and the much-needed de-Baathification of society will now take place. But, just as in Kurdistan, removing the people at the top will not automatically make a difference unless this is followed by bottom-up processes where people themselves actively participate in developing their own society. Hopefully, Saddam's removal will create enough space for civil society to grow and real de-Baathification to take place. But 35 years of totalitarian rule makes an impact on people. De-Baathification is not only about removing those linked to the Baath party. All Iraqis must open their minds and dare to question authority. Everybody must dare to let their employees and beneficiaries question their decisions. All public officials and security personnel must relearn how their job can be done. Everybody must dare to participate, and learn how to do it.

change has been thrust on Iraq from above

As a political humanitarian organisation, NPA sees a need to review and analyse the political and social environment in Iraq, to see if the social and political role it is playing is adequate and contributes to the overall aim of an empowered people within a democratic country where full rights are secured. As a political organisation, NPA will always be challenged because of its political stand. It should be able to answer the difficult questions regarding the political and social impact of its work. The same should be demanded of all neutral actors.

Eva Bjøreng is Secretary-General of Norwegian People's Aid. NPA is the Norwegian labour movement's humanitarian organisation. It works in 30 countries around the world, and has been in Iraq since 1995.

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Neutrality in humanitarian assistance: a case study from Zimbabwe

Chris McIvor, Save the Children (UK)

Zimbabwe has suffered a series of emergencies since independence in 1980. Flooding and drought have hit the country, most notably in 1992–93, when large areas received negligible rains. Appeals for international assistance raised generous amounts of support. At the same time, the positive relations that the government enjoyed with the international community meant that much of the aid was channelled directly through line ministries such as health, social welfare and agriculture.

The picture is very different today. Since 2000, many parts of the country have been stricken with drought. Zimbabwe as a whole has experienced a severe economic downturn. The mining and commercial agricultural sectors have collapsed and foreign investment and development aid have fallen. Meanwhile, the previously positive relationship between Zimbabwe and the international community has buckled under the weight of alleged human rights abuse, political oppression and controversial land reforms. At a time when half the population needs food assistance and a quarter of adults have HIV/AIDS, donors no longer trust the government to deliver aid in a neutral, impartial and equitable manner. In the highly-charged atmosphere of Zimbabwean politics, the issue of neutrality in particular has been widely debated and contested. This article explores some of the problems that agencies have encountered in their promotion of this principle, and looks at what needs to be done to make it more effective.

Contesting neutrality

In September 2002, the Zimbabwean authorities temporarily suspended the operations of Save the Children (UK), including a food aid intervention that benefited 125,000 people. It was clearly indicated that the programme would not resume until a new agreement between the agency and the government had been reached regularising Save's activities. This was despite the fact that the agency had 22 years of extensive and well-received work in Zimbabwe behind it. At the same time, and at the height of the food crisis, the process of registering internationally-respected humanitarian agencies was beset with difficulties and delays for reasons which were often unclear. While the activities of Save the Children have now resumed and several agencies have subsequently been registered, it is safe to say that the relationship between the government and the aid community has become much less harmonious than in the past.

Agencies' protestations of neutrality, specifically that aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint, have at times been met with considerable suspicion. The authorities have expressed concern that, for some agencies, the primary motive for assisting people in Zimbabwe has less to do with humanitarianism and more to do with the foreign policy objectives of the governments with whom Zimbabwe has conducted a war of words over several years. There are a number of reasons for this controversy and conflict.

> ## agencies' claims to neutrality have met considerable suspicion

The first is that dispensing aid to people in need is often a key means of reinforcing the legitimacy of a state in the eyes of its population. The Zimbabwean government's highly visible control and coordination of the 1992 aid effort was often cited in later elections as evidence of the ruling party's concern for those who had been affected. The political fragmentation that has beset the country has meant that much of that legitimacy has been questioned. The fact that the aid effort in the current emergency is much more evidently an 'external' intervention has created conflict. Much of the aid has been donated by those same countries that have been most vociferous in criticising Zimbabwe's political situation, only increasing these tensions. In one discussion over resuming Save the Children's emergency operations, a government official claimed that the aid delivered by the agency was an indictment of the government, aimed at highlighting its inadequacies.

Sacks of food aid await distribution at Save's Binga warehouse

Second, the recrimination and invective that characterise the relationship between Zimbabwe and the international community have also meant that the authorities are sensitive to any public expression of concern by agencies working in the country. What might previously have been regarded as part of the normal discourse between organisations and the government around a humanitarian issue is now viewed in Harare as an attempt to isolate the country further. Tensions have emerged, for example, around fears expressed by several agencies about the plight of 1.5 million farm workers, many of whom have lost their livelihoods as a result of land redistribution and farm closures. Such is the climate of suspicion that humanitarian concern on behalf of these people has been seen by some government officials as prompted by a political agenda, namely to discredit the land reform programme to the outside world.

A Save the Children aid distribution at Chunga in Binga District

These same officials have also pointed to the reluctance of some donors to assist resettled farmers, many of whom, on grounds of vulnerability, are also in need of food aid. Why should they by excluded if need alone is the criterion of assistance? Such double standards, it is argued, undermine the claims to neutrality of the aid community in Zimbabwe when expressing support for farm workers.

Third, many of the communities that are receiving humanitarian assistance are familiar with the organisations assisting them. Much of the aid is distributed by agency personnel who were previously involved with development activities in the same locations. These individuals, and their politics, are well-known within communities. Agencies, including Save the Children (UK), have stipulated in contracts with national staff that political views should never be expressed at emergency food distributions. Nevertheless, the very presence of such personnel has, in the eyes of some, undermined the claims to neutrality made by the organisations that employ them: 'Your organisation in London might be neutral, but on the ground you have national staff with political views that undermine that principle' was one comment passed during the suspension of Save the Children (UK)'s operations. This perception becomes more problematic still during the registration process for beneficiaries, when food aid recipients are targeted selectively. A community member who is excluded on the grounds that their livelihood status does not merit assistance may believe that the real reason is that the person tasked with registration is a member of an opposing political party.

Lastly, the principle of neutrality has also become a source of controversy at the level of community politics. In traditional Zimbabwean society, one of the obligations placed on local leaders is to assist their people in times of need. In return for discharging such an obligation, the legitimacy of the chief in the eyes of the population is considerably enhanced. Within such a system, the arrival of an aid programme, where beneficiaries are selected through a broad-based community consultation supervised by an external agent, has been viewed by some traditional leaders with suspicion. These concerns are reinforced by the fact that agencies have sought as much as possible to ensure that no political capital should be made out of such interventions. But if chiefs can claim no credit, they come to see the principle of neutrality as further undermining their role as guardians and benefactors of the poor in their communities.

What can be done?

To minimise the problems agencies are facing, more needs to be done to publicly disseminate the principles that inform emergency programmes. On reflection, the formulation of an agreement in 2001 between Save the Children (UK) and local authorities, which emphasised the agency's commitment to neutrality, was flawed because little attempt was made to discuss its provisions and win support from the people tasked with enforcing it. This lack of information dissemination locally has meant that agencies' insistence that neutrality must be respected is often interpreted as a condition on aid imposed by an organisation with a political agenda. The fact that it is in conformity with an internationally-recognised set of standards is rarely appreciated, because agencies have taken insufficient time to promote this realisation among councillors, chiefs and other officials.

The principle of neutrality, in company with the other provisions stipulated in the Code of Conduct, provides a basis of accountability not only to donors but also to the intended beneficiaries of emergency programmes. If conformity to these principles depends not just on the willingness of agencies to uphold them, more needs to be done to inform aid recipients of what the code means to them. Very little of this has taken place in Zimbabwe. Communities may be informed about ration rates and the

place, time and frequency of distributions, but the standards that agencies should uphold in their operations are rarely discussed. Unless communities themselves begin to press for these standards to be realised, including the prohibition on furthering a political or religious position through aid deliveries, too much depends on the goodwill of implementing agencies to enforce them. Feedback structures at local level are needed so that people who believe that a standard has been infringed have a clear, transparent and independent mechanism of registering their complaints.

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feedback structures are needed at local level

What can – should – agencies working in Zimbabwe do when neutrality is actually undermined? During the early phase of the food crisis, several agencies met to discuss their concerns around monitoring humanitarian principles in such a politically-charged environment. Nevertheless, when SC (UK)'s operations were suspended, no collective response was forthcoming. This was partly because no agreement was reached on what circumstances might provoke a response by other agencies in other locations if any one member of the group had their activities undermined. This lack of clarity has compromised organisational solidarity in the current crisis: individual agencies have become vulnerable to local pressure, and some officials believe that, if put to it, the aid effort will continue regardless of what standards are infringed.

While pragmatism, experience and accumulated local knowledge are often more useful than a set of rigid rules around humanitarian principles, good practice guidelines

on this issue would be welcome. To achieve this, humanitarian agencies need to document and analyse the challenges that face them in their pursuit of standards in complex emergencies, so that others can benefit and learn from this experience. A principle such as neutrality needs more solid practical literature behind it, especially documentation at the margins where it is tested, so that field staff tasked with its implementation can do more than merely recite its provisions.

Chris McIvor has been programme director for Save the Children (UK) in Zimbabwe for the past five years. Before that, he was director of programmes for Save the Children in the Caribbean and Morocco. He has written extensively on emergency and development issues, including child rights, children and the environment, the rights of disabled people, and Zimbabwe's commercial farm-worker communities.

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Humanitarianism, Islam and the West: contest or cooperation?

Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, political advisor to the UN Special Representative for the Great Lakes region

Islamic charities have developed steadily since the early 1980s, starting with modest aid and relief activities in cities such as Cairo, Tehran, Algiers, Beirut and Gaza. In the early 1990s, the more ambitious and successful started to develop significant international relief programmes. The Saudi-based International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), for instance, has projects in nearly 100 countries. As they move further afield, Islamic NGOs have found themselves working alongside the major Western players in the international aid system: Christian NGOs, the Red Cross Movement, international secular NGOs and UN agencies. This article explores some of the tensions that have emerged, particularly between Islamic agencies and their Christian counterparts.

Proselytisation and the Christian mission
Since the end of the 1990s, there has been a substantial revival in the power and influence of Christian NGOs, especially in Central Africa, South-east Asia and Latin America. In response to Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998, for example, the greatest resources were deployed by the Christian humanitarian NGO the Love of Christ Brigade. Thousands of Christian NGOs and consortia operate across the globe; one of the largest Christian networks, Caritas, comprises 154 Catholic agencies. Caritas is based in the Vatican, receives funding from the Catholic Church and applies Vatican policies in its work.

Christian NGOs are frequently politicised, and often have evangelical aims. The Lutheran World Federation 'seeks to

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strengthen the links between the faithful and the community and to spread the message of Christ' by supporting education, development and medical aid programmes, often accompanied by religious instruction. During the 1980s, World Vision distributed millions of bibles to refugees in Khmer camps (usually Buddhist strongholds) in Cambodia; bible-reading is compulsory in the schools that the organisation funds and manages, and its staff have even reportedly promised American visas to converts.[1] Almost three-quarters of the 500 NGOs operating on the Cambodia/Thailand border have sought converts.[2] In hospitals in Nigeria, US fundamentalist Protestants have practised the forced baptism of Muslim children and the saying of Christian prayers at Muslim patients' bedsides. The newsletters of these missionaries explain that their hospitals are designed to be a bulwark against Islam and a place of evangelisation. Sections of the Muslim population (Muslims are in the majority in northern Nigeria) reacted strongly against these activities, refusing to work or receive treatment in these hospitals.[3]

A 'Christian plot against Islam'?

The aims of Christian evangelisation are, of course, in open conflict with one of the main vocations of Islamic NGOs: spreading Islam in countries or areas deemed amenable (such as southern Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kenya, Uganda, the Philippines, Thailand and the US); and reviving Islam in areas considered its natural home, such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, Palestine, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Somalia.

Some Islamic NGOs have acquired legitimacy and support by using concerns around Christian evangelisation to build a new conspiracy theory against Islam, presenting themselves as a bulwark against the perceived expansionism of both confessional *and* secular Western NGOs. In 1997, for example, Dr. Ahmed Sonoussi, the head of the Afghan office of the Lajnat al-Dawa relief organisation, wrote a widely disseminated memo criticising what he called 'the malicious activity of the crusaders' who, through relief work in Afghanistan, were seeking to 'poison the minds of Afghans and gradually convert them to Christianity'.[4] Sonoussi later admitted that his memo was a deliberate exaggeration designed to mobilise public opinion in the Muslim world and obtain more funds for his cash-strapped organisation. Nonetheless, the Taliban hardened its attitude towards Western humanitarian actors, and encouraged the return of Islamic NGOs. The premises of Christian NGOs International Assistance Mission and SERVE were closed in August 2001 and their expatriate personnel expelled, and eight expatriates and

16 local staff of the German Christian NGO Shelter Now International were arrested for proselytising. Taliban raids on the NGO's premises found staff showing a film on Christianity to an Afghan family, as well as Bibles and other religious books, and audio and video material in local languages.[5]

Islamic challenges

Challenges to the proselytising of Christian NGOs have grown in line with the increasing power of Islamic NGOs. During the 1980s, the presence of secular NGOs in Muslim countries was tolerated because these agencies provided massive amounts of aid and expertise that Islamic organisations were not in a position to supply. But from the end of the 1980s, Islamic NGOs have been less prepared to acquiesce in the presence of Western NGOs in territories occupied by Muslims. Intimidation of Western personnel, threats against their personnel (and their families), pressure on the local authorities, the mobilisation of the local population and local and national religious and political leaders and appeals to the national media, are all employed to force these agencies to withdraw.

Islamic NGOs can enter countries where access is difficult for their Christian counterparts

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Working with Muslim communities has become increasingly problematic for Christian NGOs – especially Protestant ones, for historical, political and philosophical reasons the most active in evangelisation. As a consequence, these organisations have shifted their main theatre of operations, either to regions where there is a Christian predominance or bias, such as Central America, the Great Lakes area of Africa, Southern Africa and the Far East, or where there is still a high proportion of adherents to religions other than either Christianity or Islam, such as animists in western Sudan, central Nigeria and Chad. Areas bordering on the Islamic world (Liberia, Sierra Leone, southern Sudan, Uganda, Nigeria and Central Asia) are considered to have strategic importance in stemming the advance of Islam.

Islamic NGOs have also attempted to control the aid delivered by Western international NGOs. The Egyptian government, encouraged by Islamic NGOs, has obliged Western agencies to work in partnership with local NGOs. Drawing on their powerful networks and strong support base, Islamic NGOs are increasingly arranging partnerships, which can reduce the role of international NGOs to that of mere funders of indigenous Islamic organisations. These partnerships may be concluded with four aims in mind: preventing secular Western NGOs from working in the field; enabling indigenous Islamic NGOs to obtain international recognition and legitimacy; asserting identity ('it is Islamic NGOs who are working with our communities and are the most concerned about their fate, not Western NGOs'); and acquiring knowledge, resources, experience and expertise.

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1 Interview with Karim Laouabdia, Director of Médecins sans Frontières, Paris, 23 June 1998.

2 Laouabdia, interview.

3 Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Un *outil de travail pour les organisations humanitaires face au radicalisme islamique: typologie et image réciproque* (Lausanne: Institut roman de pastorale, 1994), p.74.

4 Unsigned and unpublished paper given to the author by Ahmed Sonoussi, Peshawar, September 1997.

5 Le Monde, 5 September 2001.

An Iraqi woman carries a Red Crescent aid parcel home, Safwan, southern Iraq

©Reuters/Yannis Behrakis, courtesy www.alertnet.org

greater acceptance within the international aid system. Sheikh Ali Hashemi, religious adviser to the UAE head of state, declared in 1997 that it was the duty of Muslims to give their *zakat* (a levy used for charitable or religious purposes) to humanitarian NGOs, including Christian agencies.[7] Islamic Relief and Christian Aid worked together in Croatia, as have NGOs linked to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Caritas International in Jerusalem. In Bosnia, cooperation between the Bosnian Islamic NGO Merhamet and the NGOs Caritas (Catholic), Dobrotvor (Orthodox) and La Benevolencija (Jewish) – despite its limited scope – won all four agencies the John XXIII international peace prize, awarded by Pope John Paul II during a visit to Sarajevo in April 1997.

Islamic NGOs may at times be able to enter countries where access is difficult for their Christian counterparts; in some instances, they are the only organisations able to bring aid. Some NGOs promote this as what the marketing industry calls a 'unique selling point'. In February 2001, the president of the NGO Islamic Relief, Dr. Hani al-Banna, declared that 'Once again, British Muslims have carried the torch in the response to a humanitarian disaster. This time, it's Chechnya'. Western NGOs, he claimed, refused to go to the region for fear that their expatriate personnel would be kidnapped or murdered.[6] Despite the overwhelming presence of American troops in post-Saddam Iraq, Islamic NGOs, especially those based in the Middle East, have a larger presence than ever before, and have been gathering support for their Iraq programmes on the basis of their privileged access to Muslim land.

From conflict to cooperation?

Not all Islamic humanitarian actors agree with this position of opportunistic hostility towards Western NGOs. Some advocate reconciliation and others, more concerned with the immediate impact on communities requiring relief, simply believe that efficiency in the field requires partnership. Many Muslim donors are unconcerned by these rivalries. A group of pious Yemenis from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) made a donation of €50,000 to MSF rather than an Islamic NGO during catastrophic floods in Yemen in 1996 because they did not trust local Islamic NGOs to deliver the aid in an independent and efficient way.

Some Islamic NGOs, with the backing of some religious leaders, see it as entirely appropriate to develop further links with their Christian counterparts as a way of gaining

6 Text available on www.muslimnews.com, 25/2/2001.
7 Interview with Ali Hashemi, 10 November 1997, Abu Dhabi.

However, these are exceptions. Whether deliberately or not, Western NGOs exclude Islamic agencies from debates and meetings in the field. There is no international forum where Islamic NGOs might expect to meet the major private Western humanitarian agencies. When important issues are on the agenda or when emergencies require rapid decisions, Western NGOs tend first of all to seek consensus amongst themselves. At times of great crisis, the four major secular NGOs, CARE, Save the Children, Oxfam and MSF, tend to take major decisions and decide policy amongst themselves, rather than within international coordination bodies, which are deemed too bureaucratic. Those few coordination bodies that do exist, such as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in Geneva, have practically no representation from Islamic NGOs: in 2003, only three of ICVA's 80-plus membership were recognised Islamic NGOs (IIRO, ISRA/IARA and Human Appeal International).

Islamic NGOs are struggling to raise funds from their regular donors

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A dialogue of the deaf?

Amongst both Islamic NGOs and Western secular NGOs, simplistic and stereotypical images persist. Islamic NGOs are often seen as proselytising organisations, the allies of Islamist states, run by zealous volunteers and humanitarian in name only. Western NGOs are seen as vulgar throwbacks to the Christian missions of the past.

The very concept of a secular NGO exceeds the understanding of some Islamic humanitarian actors, who find it

hard to distinguish between secularism and atheism. They do not understand (or do not accept) that a humanitarian gesture, whatever its origin, could be made outside the scope of religious values, considering that religion is the guarantor of morals, charity, good behaviour and virtue. Islamists cannot conceive of self-respecting Western humanitarian NGOs as anything other than religiously inspired. Consequently, in the field, non-faith-based NGOs are penalised precisely because they are secular, i.e., from their point of view, by reason of their neutrality. Yet if faith-based NGOs are considered by Islamic NGOs as clearly identified historic enemies, and if secular NGOs are rejected out of hand, how can a dialogue take place?

Where there is genuine contact, the effects are positive. In the Horn of Africa, for example, regular meetings in Nairobi between Western and Islamic NGOs operating in Somalia have enabled each to become familiar with the other. IIRO took part in these meetings, and the information it provided was valuable because it was working in a part of Somalia to which Western NGOs had no access. The Kenyan authorities suspended IIRO's licence following the attack on the American Embassy in Nairobi in 1998. When its activities resumed six months later, the IIRO representative's return to meetings was welcomed with applause.[8]

The impact of 9/11

Developments since 9/11 have had profoundly negative consequences. Islamic NGOs have been accused by

Western governments of being hot-beds of terrorism amid a climate of deep suspicion towards organised, non-governmental Islam. While a handful of Islamic NGOs did stray into militant political extremism, where violence was accepted as another way of 'defending' Islam, the majority remain genuinely focused on purely humanitarian objectives. Nonetheless, Islamic NGOs of whatever stripe are struggling to raise funds among their regular (mainly Muslim) donors, who have become nervous about being seen as linked to any kind of organised Islam. Reductions in traditional sources of funding may force mainstream Islamic NGOs to look elsewhere, including to more dubious international Islamic networks. Meanwhile, Muslim populations in remote areas of the world, to whom only Islamic NGOs had access, have been severely deprived of humanitarian aid.

The ostracising of Islamic NGOs has meant a loss of contact with their Western counterparts, widening the gap between them. Expressions of solidarity such as seen in Nairobi demonstrate that confidence grows in line with the increase in direct and continuous contact on the ground. In the wake of 11 September, this slow but steady rapprochement has suffered a severe setback.

Abdel-Rahman Ghandour is a political advisor to the Special Representative of the UN for the Great Lakes region. He has worked for the Lebanese and International Red Cross and was for seven years MSF's head of mission in the Middle East. This article is adapted from Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire: Enquête sur les ONG islamiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002).

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NEUTRALITY

Companies and advocacy NGOs: differences or shared interests?

Luc Zandvliet, Collaborative for Development Action

Corporations owe a debt to humanitarian NGOs involved in advocacy and human rights. These NGOs have brought important issues to the attention of companies, and have showed them that their corporate practices do not reflect the expectations of their customers or shareholders, or of society at large. This may have been hard for some companies to accept, but the language firms use in their public relations and their willingness to listen to outside opinions reflect the changes that have taken place inside these organisations as a result of NGO pressure.

This is especially the case for companies exploiting natural resources (oil, gas, mining). In this industry, companies have been forced to explore new business opportunities in areas that are politically, economically and socially risky, because deposits in relatively safe and politically stable countries have already been explored. Many new areas overlap with areas where humanitarian actors are active.

The presence of corporations in places of social and political tension or conflict has forced many NGOs to develop policies and approaches for how to deal with them. Companies can be active in a war economy, but they can also be legitimate firms that happen to operate in an area of tension because that is where the resources are. Many 'legitimate' companies are committed to having a positive impact on the communities where they work. They see the need, and are willing, to spend considerable resources to achieve this objective.

Some NGOs have chosen to work with these companies in order to serve the interests of local communities, for example by implementing development projects paid for, and close to, corporate operations. Others feel that the interests of local communities are better served if the NGO supports local communities in applying pressure to get companies to withdraw from such areas.

This article is about the relationship between companies that claim to be concerned about the well-being of local communities and NGOs that claim to represent the development and human security interests of these communities by adopting an anti-corporate stance. It is based on three observations.

1. Discussions with many companies in the extractive industries as well as with NGOs that are concerned about the impact of corporate activities show that both groups have shared interests around the well-being of local communities.
2. Despite these shared interests, mutual perceptions impede constructive engagement.
3. Local communities pay the price for this lack of engagement.

This signals the need for both NGOs and corporations to start a discussion about how they can engage with each other in ways that represent the interests of local communities.

corporations owe a debt to NGOs

Shared objectives

Although the mandates of NGOs and companies differ, they also share many of the same objectives. These revolve around providing a better quality of life for local communities, contributing to increased physical security or to economic development in the areas where they work. Some companies are explicit about this in their vision statement; energy firm Unocal's vision statement defines its goal as 'To improve the lives of people wherever we work', a commitment also noted publicly on the firm's website. Some allocate levels of resources (staff and money) to community development that rival or exceed NGO capacities; community engagement is no longer a token activity. For example, the Porgera mine in Papua New Guinea, operated by Canadian gold-mining company Placer Dome, employs no less than 130 people to deal with communities around the mine. The budget for community development of Shell Nigeria and its partners in the Niger Delta was $67 million in 2002. The quantity of resources spent does not necessarily increase the quality of the relationship between a company and the local community. It is, however, an indication of intent and commitment.

Clearly, the increased awareness by companies of their community impact has not happened overnight. There have been both positive and negative incentives for companies to change their approaches. On the negative side, lawsuits, consumer boycotts and shareholder activism have served as wake-up calls for some companies. In addition to activism in their home countries, companies are increasingly confronted with sabotage, assaults on staff, roadblocks or other obstructive behaviour by local communities. Often, these actions are undertaken by local communities because they perceive

that this is the only way to attract company or government attention to improve their poor living conditions.

On the positive side, companies increasingly recognise the business case for working with local communities in a way that positively affects the lives of local people. They are aware that, in coming years, society will increasingly expect corporations to have sustained, positive developmental impacts in the areas where they work. Leaving a positive legacy for local communities is becoming vital to obtaining contracts from other governments that wish to avoid social unrest due to corporate practices in their own countries. Sometimes, national governments verify a corporation's positive or negative record with local communities in other countries where it has worked.

Opposing perceptions

Because both companies and NGOs claim that they have the interests of local communities at heart, one would assume that they would discuss possibilities for cooperation. A review of some major companies shows that the opposite is the case. With some exceptions (the oil firms Shell, BP and Statoil are examples), there is virtually no regular contact between companies and the NGOs who are critical of their operations. Rather, they meet only when there is an immediate issue at stake. These sparse and often confrontational or defensive contacts lead to set positions and adversarial assumptions.

Companies and advocacy NGOs make essentially the same charges against each other.

- They each accuse the other of having a hidden agenda ('anti-globalisation' or 'greedy profit-making').
- They each claim that the other is unaccountable.
- They each see themselves as powerless relative to the other.
- They each assume that it is impossible to change the behaviour of the other.

These perceptions, expressed both by company executives and NGO advocates, demonstrate the gap that exists between the two. They also explain why it is difficult for the two entities to start discussions around shared interests.

there is virtually no regular contact between companies and their NGO critics

There are other obstacles that both groups need to address to overcome their polarised stances. Companies group all NGOs into one category without regard for the differences between them. Thus, they conclude that all NGOs aim to harm corporate interests. Such a narrow perspective feeds into the corporate assumption that it is best to avoid contact with NGOs as much as possible. The

defensive tone of corporate web sites, press statements and brochures is not helpful in opening discussions with NGOs, nor does it reflect the concerns and dilemmas that are often thoroughly discussed within a company working in very challenging circumstances.

For their part, NGOs sometimes make claims or allegations on behalf of local communities that justify their own mandates, but that are not necessarily shared by the communities they claim to represent. For example, if international NGOs fund local NGOs it puts these local groups in a vulnerable position when they disagree with their sponsor over its strategy and public statements. Local NGOs are also not always in touch with, or aware of, the opinions of local communities in remote locations that are most affected by corporate activities.

Many NGOs feel more comfortable keeping their distance from companies. They fear that engagement will be interpreted by their constituencies as 'legitimising the devil'. For their part, companies fear that engagement risks giving NGOs information which can then be used against them.

Local communities pay the price

Both of these attitudes are problematic. They do not serve the interests of the communities about whom both groups say they care. Worse, the lack of constructive interaction may actually harm local communities. For example, gas companies in Burma have made an explicit commitment to eradicating forced labour by the Burmese military from a defined area of operation. Some NGOs have information about alleged ongoing forced labour within that area. However, they do not convey the details of such allegations to the company, in part in order to build the case against the continuing presence of the firm in that country. However, this approach does not represent the interests of the local people. If there is ongoing forced labour, it should be stopped (rather than simply reported). If there is not ongoing forced labour because of the company's presence, its withdrawal may increase the risk to local people. In addition, the continuing division between companies and advocacy NGOs may represent a missed opportunity to test the sincerity of the company's broader claim to want to make a positive difference to local communities.

The need for engagement

NGOs have been successful in opening the eyes of some companies to corporate practices that can have negative impacts on local communities. Companies such as oil and chemicals firm Total, gold-mining company Newmont and Unocal are reviewing their practices worldwide in order to respond to, and anticipate, changing social expectations. They are increasingly seeking the advice and input of NGOs to help them work in difficult countries, for which there are no standard approaches. However, most companies find that the NGOs that were instrumental in helping to analyse and voice the problematic aspects of a company's operations have no answers when firms ask their advice.

Four steps, taken by NGOs and companies together, could start constructive engagement.

1. Gain agreements over facts that can easily be verified, but that are subject to debate (for example, if a company compound is protected by landmines, or a company makes contractual use of paramilitary security forces). As long as there is no agreement over facts, the more important discussion of what these facts *mean* in relation to the behaviour of a company cannot occur.
2. Ensure that local communities are broadly represented. Public discussions between companies and NGOs held in local villages will increase the accountability of both.
3. Agree on mutual expectations. As one of the consequences of the communication gap, companies assume that NGOs expect them to induce significant changes in the countries or areas that they work in; ensuring, for example, that human rights abuse is eradicated. Unable to live up to these expectations, companies often see no point in aspiring to them. In fact, the majority of NGOs realise that such expectations are unrealistic, and instead want to see a company doing its utmost to be a positive force in a given country.
4. Agree on how positive corporate impacts can be assured. NGOs have difficulty clarifying exactly what a company should do to make its presence in a certain country 'acceptable'. A focus on grand expectations makes NGOs less sensitive to acknowledging the smaller changes that occur and that can, cumulatively, lead to significant shifts in corporate behaviour. It allows companies to complain that they do not get credit for their efforts, and that NGOs will never be satisfied no matter how hard they try. Establishing agreed benchmarks towards which a company can work could enable firms to develop meaningful plans, and could allow NGOs to hold corporations specifically accountable for programmes that fall short.

Conclusion
Many companies need further encouragement to include the well-being of local communities in their day-to-day decision-making. However, those that do care about the communities with whom they work have difficulty determining where and how to start. Engagement between advocacy NGOs and companies that take social responsibility seriously can help develop innovative tools to use the leverage of companies in ways that benefit local communities, rather than harming them. This may be one way to put a more humanitarian face on an increasingly global corporate presence.

Luc Zandvliet is Director of the Corporate Engagement Project at the Boston-based Collaborative for Development Action (CDA). The Corporate Engagement Project helps companies to identify opportunities for constructive engagement with local communities, governments and NGOs in areas of social or political tension.

Web resources

Several websites are dedicated to issues around corporate social responsibility and links between firms and NGOs.
Corpwatch: www.corpwatch.org.
NGO Watch: www.ngowatch.org.
Collaborative for Development Action Corporate Engagement Project: www.cdainc.com/cep.

In the line of fire: surveying the impact of small arms on civilians and relief workers

Robert Muggah, Small Arms Survey

One Sunday evening in August 2003, a group of armed men held eight relief workers at gunpoint at their home in the Burundian capital, Bujumbura. The assailants, armed with pistols and assault rifles, threatened to kill one of the expatriates, and demanded that the group hand over all its cash. No one was injured but, as the OCHA Situation Report describing the incident observed, 'the psychological impact on those present, mainly volunteers, is of grave concern'.

It is generally acknowledged that the availability of small arms affects the quality and quantity of humanitarian and development assistance, and an array of UN reports and studies have highlighted the dangers armed violence poses to relief personnel. But there remains a surprising lack of evidence to prove what is intuitively known: that aid workers are frequently targeted and exposed to a high risk of death and injury in the course of their work. This article considers some of the findings of a recent victimisation survey initiated by the Small Arms Survey and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. It emphasises the views of workers in the line of fire, and considers a number of entry-points for constructive engagement with the small-arms issue.

The scale of the problem
Over 220 UN civilian staff have died as a result of malicious acts since 1992, and at least 265 have been taken

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A Liberian government soldier poses with a machine gun, Monrovia, June 2003

hostage while serving in UN operations. In 1998 alone, 27 UN staff members were killed in the field, the first year that more UN civilians have been killed than military personnel. Thousands of relief and development workers have been targeted over the same period, and many hundreds killed. Following the devastating attacks on the UN in Baghdad in August 2003, in which 23 people died, the UN Security Council voted unanimously in favour of a resolution to increase the protection of aid workers in conflict zones. The final version of Resolution 1502 condemns violence such as kidnapping, rape and murder against UN and other humanitarian workers, and demands that states prosecute those crimes. It also classifies attacks on aid workers as war crimes, to be punished accordingly.

Over the past decade, considerable energy has been devoted to highlighting the consequences of armed violence, including small arms-related violence, on humanitarian and development personnel. Even before the introduction of Resolution 1502, the UN had acknowledged that virtually every department of the UN system is exposed to the direct and indirect consequences of the unregulated availability of arms. Risks of armed violence are not limited to UN workers. According to the UN Secretary-General's report *Safety and Security of United Nations Personnel* of 2000: 'threats against NGO staff can … directly affect UN humanitarian and assistance programmes, especially since conflicting parties often do not distinguish between UN and NGO personnel'.

A number of research studies have examined this issue in more detail. In 1999, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) highlighted the implications of unregulated weapons proliferation during and after wars, as well as the long-term psychological effects of victimisation on ICRC delegates. A range of studies have highlighted the implications of the widespread civilian possession of small arms, the frequent interruption of operations and constrained access to beneficiary populations, and the pervasiveness of intentional violence against aid workers.

Other epidemiological studies have established trends in mortality and morbidity among humanitarian workers and peacekeepers. A study that investigated the deaths of 375 UN and NGO aid workers and UN peacekeepers between 1985 and 1998, published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2000, found that 'weapons, rather than motor vehicles, pose the greatest threats. Not only do young inexperienced workers die but veterans as well … Both expatriates and national staff share the risks, with death among the latter group probably greatly underreported'. Some aid organisations have begun to improve their safety and security management, mostly improving incident reporting, research, training, advocacy and coordination. But there are still too many aid agencies where senior managers fail to see the problem, or do not feel responsible or able to respond.

The study

The Security and Risk in Humanitarian and Development Action Study began in 2002 and will finish in 2006. It was led by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Small Arms Survey, in collaboration with a number of international NGOs (CARE, Oxfam GB, Médecins du Monde, Concern Worldwide, World Vision, UNDP, Handicap International, Merlin and the Save the Children Federation), and local partner NGOs. Over 600 questionnaires were distributed in 39 countries and territories, in a variety of languages, in hard copy and electronic form. A particular focus of the study was South-east Asia and the Balkans. The study will be undertaken again in 2004, focusing primarily on the Middle East and the Great Lakes region, as well as Afghanistan and Angola. Special emphasis will be placed on increasing response rates from UN personnel: in order to facilitate their involvement, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and the Small Arms Survey signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD) in New York in 2003.

a large proportion of respondents said that levels of civilian possession were 'moderate' to 'very high'

The operational context

In order to generate a clear understanding of how respondents perceive the context in which they work, they were asked to describe the security environment using a four-point scale, from 'little' or 'no' violence to 'widespread armed conflict'. The survey found that respondents worked in a variety of security environments. Predictably, these were not rated similarly across countries; Sri Lanka and the Philippines were on average rated as being the most violent or conflict-prone, while Thailand and Laos were rated as having the lowest levels of armed violence.

The survey also found that the prevalence of small arms availability and misuse shaped the assessments offered by respondents.

Humanitarian and development workers reported that a large number of groups – including organised criminals, insurgents and civilians – possessed weapons *regardless* of the security context. A sizable percentage of respondents estimated that levels of civilian possession were 'moderate' to 'very high'.
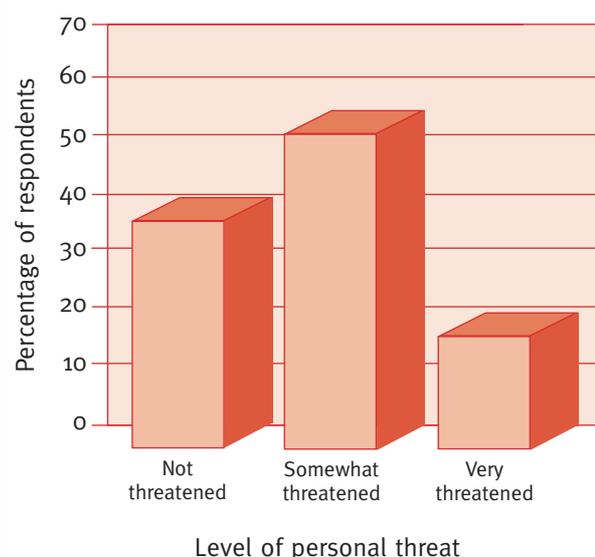
Victims of small arms availability and misuse

The survey also found that civilians are deliberately targeted (leading to unintentional death and injury), and that small arms are frequently used for criminal and coercive purposes. Overall, the highest proportion of weapons-related death and injury among civilians was attributed to handguns. In areas of widespread conflict or war, assault rifles surpassed handguns as the leading cause of weapons-related death and injury among civilians. Respondents also appear to routinely encounter a variety of small arms – mostly handguns and assault rifles – in and around 'programme' areas.

The survey's two focus regions – the Balkans and South-east Asia – revealed important differences in the impact of small arms on operations, personnel and civilians. In general, respondents from South-east Asia tended to report working in more violent or conflict-prone environments, and felt that small arms were more prevalent and more widely used. Respondents from both regions frequently reported seeing handguns, but respondents in South-east Asia were much more likely than their Balkans counterparts to report having seen assault rifles. They were also more likely to indicate assault rifles as the leading cause of death and injury among civilians; to note the targeting of civilians with assault rifles; and to indicate awareness of unintentional death or injury of civilians due to assault rifles.

Relief and development operations were reported as being adversely affected by the availability and use of small arms. Frequently, obstacles such as evacuations, suspensions or delays, and inaccessible beneficiaries, were associated with violent security environments and higher estimates of small arms prevalence and misuse. Nearly three-quarters of personnel working in areas with 'very high' levels of small arms availability reported recent suspensions or delays in operations. South-east Asian respondents more frequently reported operational hindrances than did respondents in the Balkans. Moreover, they rated armed attacks on relief workers and armed conflict between belligerents as more significant hindrances to operational effectiveness. Yet respondents from South-east Asia also expressed less negative attitudes towards small arms. It is commonly believed that the Balkans has more of 'gun culture' than societies in South-east Asia. It is conceivable that the risk threshold of Balkans respondents is higher than their counterparts in South-east Asia.

The overwhelming majority of respondents felt personally threatened by small arms. Perceptions of personal threat

Figure 1: Perceptions of the threat from small arms

Figure 2: Security training for expatriate and national staff

are heightened not only in areas characterised by higher levels of violence or conflict, but also where the civilian possession of small arms is seen to be more prevalent. In addition to perceptions of personal threat, a large number of respondents reported that they or their colleagues had experienced serious security incidents, including armed intimidation, armed robbery, armed assault, detention and kidnapping. Many respondents reported colleagues having suffered either non-fatal or fatal small arms-related injuries within the previous six months.

Despite working in dangerous environments, many personnel indicated that they had not received any security training within the organisation for which they currently worked. The frequency of reported security training did not always correspond to the level of violence in a given environment, to the estimated prevalence and misuse of small arms, or to the level of personal threat

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expressed. In many organisations, national staff are half as likely as expatriates to receive security training.

The importance of training cannot be overstated, particularly as the survey revealed that those that had received it typically viewed it as being helpful. Security training or awareness is also associated with an increased tendency for individuals to take precautions, such as walking with others or limiting local travel. The vast majority of respondents were unfamiliar with basic safety procedures associated with guns and ammunition, such as applying safety locks or safe storage. Those who received security training were no more knowledgeable about small arms safety than those who had not.

Conclusions

The operational and policy implications of this study are multi-faceted. In addition to encouraging a debate within and between the humanitarian and development communities about ways to confront the unregulated availability and misuse of small arms, an array of pragmatic interventions could usefully contribute to improving the security of staff and civilians alike. For example, although most agencies report incidents, coverage and analysis of this data should be encouraged. Agencies could also consider internal security reviews to assess how their staff perceive a host of issues – including small arms. Many agencies would also benefit from the inclusion of small arms availability and misuse as early-warning indicators or as factors in conflict mapping exercises. Finally, more attention could be directed to small arms in risk assessments, training and debriefing.

This article is dedicated to the victims and survivors of the attack on the UN in Baghdad, particularly internationally-recognised refugee expert and friend, Gil Loescher. We follow his and others' lead in their efforts to make the world a safer and more humane place.

Robert Muggah is a Senior Researcher at the Small Arms Survey, Geneva. *In the Line of Fire: Surveying the Perceptions of Humanitarian and Development Personnel of the Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons*, by Ryan Beasley, Cate Buchanan and Robert Muggah, is available at www.smallarmssurvey.org/copublications.htm or www.hdcentre.org/Programmes/smallarms/sasurvey.htm

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Further reading

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People In Aid: championing effective people management

Jonathan Potter and Ben Emmens, People In Aid

As the last issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* showed, there is widespread support for the principle of being held to account for one's actions towards others. Ultimately, this accountability improves the quality of humanitarian action. Yet with attention focusing on accountability to beneficiaries, partners and donors, there is sometimes a tendency for accountability to staff and volunteers – a key stakeholder group – to be overlooked.

The humanitarian sector relies on the expertise and experience of staff and volunteers in its endeavours to alleviate poverty and suffering. Evaluations consistently emphasise that it is staff and volunteers that make the difference. ALNAP's Annual Review of 2003 states explicitly: 'Last year the Annual Review concluded that humanitarian staff compensated for inefficiencies and failings in the sector. The same is true this year.'

People In Aid

People In Aid began in 1993, as part of an effort to address the issue of accountability to staff and volunteers. Spurred on by the findings of Rebecca Macnair's

course, it seems morally right to focus on 'staff', and this is consistent with the sector's people-focused, consultative and participative values. But it is equally important to remember that staff are a major contributor to programme effectiveness and operational 'success'.

This link between people and performance is increasingly coming under scrutiny, by donors as much as agencies. While many factors affect an organisation's performance, People In Aid seeks to contribute by helping employers become more effective in the way they respond to and manage their staff, thus benefiting the individuals concerned and, ultimately, the organisation itself. The recognition that people are central to the achievement of an organisation's mission is essential, and provides both the starting point and the driving force for the revised Code of Good Practice.

The key underlying messages which have informed the revision, and People In Aid's recent activity, include:

- A people focus. It is important to ensure that, while individual and organisational (and indeed team) needs are met, staff are not seen as impersonal human capital.
- The status of human resources management inside the agency. There are internal and external pressures to ensure that the consideration of human resources issues percolates throughout the organisation, starting with the people formulating the long-term corporate strategy.
- Quality. The quality of human resources management inside the agency contributes to the quality of service delivery. This requires a look at the whole spectrum including policy, practice, communication, training and monitoring.
- Host-country staff. Raising the overall quality of human resource management throughout an organisation, without deliberate or inadvertent discrimination, is increasingly important.
- Collaboration. If agencies can cooperate in areas such as security, then why not on human resources-related matters or policies?

The revised Code

In revising the Code, People In Aid was concerned with a number of factors. First, it had to be recognisable as the successor to the Code of Best Practice, so there are still seven fundamental principles covering all aspects of people management, each enlarged by a series of indicators. Second, it had to reflect current good practice, which meant ensuring that the revision working group had the requisite range of experience and views, and garnering good practice case studies from as wide a range of sources as possible. Third, it had to remain accessible and easy to use, which meant incorporating comments from the agencies which had used the original Code.

Two particular areas where greater clarification was necessary were the way in which categories of staff were referred to in the Code, and the matter of standards.

paper *Room for Improvement*, published as Network Paper 10 by the HPN's previous incarnation, the Relief and Rehabilitation Network (RRN), a code of practice for managing staff was developed as an inter-agency project, drawing on input from British and Irish agencies, the UN family, continental European and US networks and many other organisations and individuals. The Code was launched in 1997, again as an RRN Network Paper. The *Code of Best Practice in the Management and Support of Aid Personnel* became a key tool for agencies concerned with improving their human resource management.

After the Code's publication, there was an ongoing need to disseminate it and support agencies working with it. As a result, in 1999 People In Aid became a fully-fledged NGO, its aim to promote good practice in the management and support of aid personnel. In September 2003, People In Aid replaced the original Code with a revised and updated version, the *Code of Good Practice*.

Today, People In Aid is a global network with around 40% of its members based outside the UK in, for example, the US, Canada, Australia, Germany, Ireland, Nepal and India. The original Code, specifically, was piloted by agencies based in the UK and Ireland, and implementation of the revised Code is being discussed with agencies based in Switzerland, Denmark, the UK, Australia, Honduras, the US and Nepal.

A people focus

The People In Aid Code was established because staff needs were recognised and considered important. Of

The Code's audience is now explicitly broader, and unhelpful categorisations of staff have been removed wherever possible. Any perception that the Code was only for emergency relief agencies employing Northerners as expatriates was always incorrect. But to reinforce the inclusive nature of the Code, the emphasis is now on staff as a single entity, irrespective of where they have been recruited, where they are based, and under what terms and conditions they may be working. The wide range of perspectives brought together to revise the Code also ensures that it is relevant and of potential benefit to every agency involved in humanitarian relief, development assistance or advocacy. The scope for local application taking into account cultural or legal norms remains, but the intention is clear – the Code applies to any and every size, origin and type of agency, irrespective of the staff they employ.

Another perception was that the Code offers standards. It certainly is a quality standard, but there are no standards to be found in the Code. Because this was a Code created for the sector by the sector, it sets out the areas of human resources deemed important for the effective fulfilment of the mission. People In Aid can supply benchmarks (for example, the percentage of staff costs allocated to training or time permitted for rest and relaxation periods), but the Code itself stands as a tool which encourages an agency to set, and work towards, its own targets. The value of the tool is reinforced through the social audit process, which remains the mechanism by which the Code's implementation is verified.

In addition to these two key areas, three other changes merit brief mention.

First, the Code has changed its title from 'best practice' to 'good practice'. This is in response to feedback from users, and reflects the fact that best practice, although desirable, is not always considered attainable. Good practice responds to realities in the sector; it is more pragmatic and more measurable.

Second, a guiding principle has been written which makes explicit what is generally accepted: that people are central to the achievement of our mission. What agency could not include this principle (or at least the spirit of it) in their core values or corporate strategy?

Third, improvements in good practice are primarily reflected in the wide variety of case studies. These emphasise the accessibility of the revised Code, and demonstrate that improvements to the way people are managed and supported are happening. They also remind us that good practice already takes place in agencies of all types and sizes. While the Code, in 1997, was a major contributor to raising the sector's awareness of key areas such as health and safety and security, the revised version places greater emphasis on learning and training, recruitment and selection, the need for consideration of people to permeate all organisational plans and budgets, employee responsibility to the organisation and the monitoring of diversity and equal opportunities.

The Seven Principles

The Seven Principles are set out in logical order. For the organisationally-minded, the list goes from Principle 1 to 7. For the people-focused, it goes in reverse. The health, safety and security (Principle 7) of staff is ensured by the training (Principle 6) which follows effective recruitment (Principle 5). None of these processes will be effective without mechanisms to communicate with staff (Principle 4) about their role in the organisation (Principle 3) and without the policies to support them (Principle 2). All of this requires a budget and a plan, which derive from a central strategy (Principle 1).

One of the Code's strengths is that it is an integrated approach to increasing the overall effectiveness of human resources management. The Code links activities back to

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The Seven Principles of the Code of Good Practice

Guiding Principle
People are central to the achievement of our mission

Principle 1
Human resources strategy
Human resources are an integral part of our strategic and operational plans

Principle 2
Staff policies and practices
Our human resources policies aim to be effective, fair and transparent

Principle 3
Managing people
Good support, management and leadership of our staff is key to our effectiveness

Principle 4
Consultation and communication
Dialogue with staff on matters likely to affect their employment enhances the quality and effectiveness of our policies and practices

Principle 5
Recruitment and selection
Our policies and practices aim to attract and select a diverse workforce with the skills and capabilities to fulfil our requirements

Principle 6
Learning, training and development
Learning, training and staff development are promoted throughout the organisation

Principle 7
Health, safety and security
The security, good health and safety of our staff are a prime responsibility of our organisation

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organisational planning, and deals with them holistically. For example, a breakdown due to work-related stress is not just an issue for the individual, but should prompt a look at organisational culture or policies such as health and safety to prevent further incidents.

Implementing the Code

One of the unique features of the Code is the implementation process. This is part of a 'reality check' for an agency, to ensure that policies and procedures are rooted in experience, and allows stakeholders, particularly staff, to gauge the organisational capacity of an agency.

In a sector where monitoring is a mantra, it may seem excessive to insist on a robust accountability mechanism for the Code, yet agencies called for this at the outset. Social audit, a process which is simple and relevant, was chosen as it reinforces the principles of communication and transparency which are key values of our sector and which are themselves part of the objectives of the Code's implementation.

In the experience of People In Aid and those agencies which have implemented the Code, there are benefits to being verified as compliant. These extend beyond staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. Donors, partners, peers and even potential staff or volunteers recognise the steps an agency is taking to improve its human resource management. For those agencies that have worked through the implementation process the benefits have been tangible, and lasting improvements have been made, both for people and performance.

People In Aid's ongoing contribution

As a network, People In Aid continues to facilitate inter-agency dialogue on human resource issues and support improvements in human resource management. The immediate priorities are:

- to ensure that materials are prepared which will help implementing agencies as they find an area where they need to improve;
- to use the revised Code and enhanced support capacity to increase the number of agencies around the world which are implementing the Code. At the time of writing, People In Aid is collaborating on this aspect of its work with agencies headquartered in six countries;

- to spread the Code more widely. Translations into French and Spanish have been done, and People In Aid is looking into the linguistic and cultural translations likely to be required by, for example, Southern NGOs. The role of partnerships between Northern and Southern NGOs in human resources management is also being examined; and
- to continue to raise awareness of human resources issues, and to facilitate the exchange of good practice in the sector.

If the original Code is anything to go by, the revised version will be shared with agencies around the world, and will be used for a wide variety of purposes. Future revisions will again respond to trends and comments, and it is interesting to speculate as to the changes in the sector which will need to be addressed. Who will NGOs be sharing humanitarian space with? What will litigation from employees have forced agencies to do? How much more of a role will Southern NGOs play? Will more Northern NGOs be heading South? These and other questions will undoubtedly transform the way agencies themselves function, and the way in which human resources management is delivered.

Jonathan Potter is Executive Director of People In Aid, and **Ben Emmens** is Human Resources Services Manager. Copies of the People In Aid Code of Good Practice can be obtained by e-mailing info@peopleinaid.org, or can be downloaded from www.peopleinaid.org.

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Humanitarian action: in need of a steer or an anchor?

Adele Harmer, Humanitarian Policy Group

One of the most difficult challenges facing the humanitarian community is maintaining the integrity of the traditional principles of humanitarian action in the face of the urgent and bitter struggles of the 'war on terror', specifically in Afghanistan and Iraq. Another is keeping attention

and corresponding resources focused on humanitarian concerns in other parts of the world. While the 'war on terror' is absorbing a significant proportion of public funds, it arguably represents a small part of the world's humanitarian problems. In terms of number of deaths,

malaria, HIV/AIDS, poor nutrition and other preventable or treatable diseases, alongside direct casualties of conflict, constitute far more significant areas of concern.

In the light of these challenges, there have been calls for a 'new humanitarian coalition', bringing together state and non-state actors, including the UN and its agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs, to respond collectively to the challenges faced in these new theatres of war. This article explores the findings and recommendations of recent studies which look at the potential for greater governance of the humanitarian sector. Is a better institutional steer or a firmer anchor needed in these new and highly politicised waters? What entities provide this function today? Could proposed changes be effective, and if so for whom? What resistance would there be in this peculiarly unregulated sector of human endeavour?

Governing the humanitarian system

The recent popularity of the term 'governance' in the humanitarian sphere derives from an earlier body of literature and a policy narrative that emerged in the development community in the early 1990s. Governance in the development context is primarily focused at the national level, and is concerned with the quality of institutional structures. This is seen as key in determining a country's ability to develop, economically and socially. Similar questions have been explored in the humanitarian sector, concerning governments' capacity to prepare for, manage and mitigate disaster-related risks and vulnerabilities.

The broader question for humanitarians is how the international humanitarian system as a whole is governed. This is less about reaffirming the well-rehearsed principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, and more about how leadership and strategic direction is articulated for common humanitarian goals; how norms, rules and standards are established; how policies are developed, implemented and monitored; and how all these things reflect the wishes of state and non-state humanitarian actors, and actors in headquarters and the field.

There are myriad mechanisms to 'govern' the work of various parts of the system: UN humanitarian agencies have their own inter-governmental legislative bodies, like the Executive Committee of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); NGOs have governing councils, and there are umbrella consortia such as ICVA, Interaction and the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR). Donor governments have parliaments and taxpayers, and all actors, in theory, have their beneficiaries. But it is not clear who is responsible for bringing all these individual entities and constituencies into a more coherent whole.

The UN is the closest we have. Bodies like the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) have a critical role to play. However, the extent to which they provide leadership and

establish rules and standards is worth examining. How well do these bodies hear the distant voices of humanitarian NGO practitioners in the field? How are the humanitarian concerns of member states of the G-77 captured outside of the General Assembly in New York?

there are myriad mechanisms of 'governance'
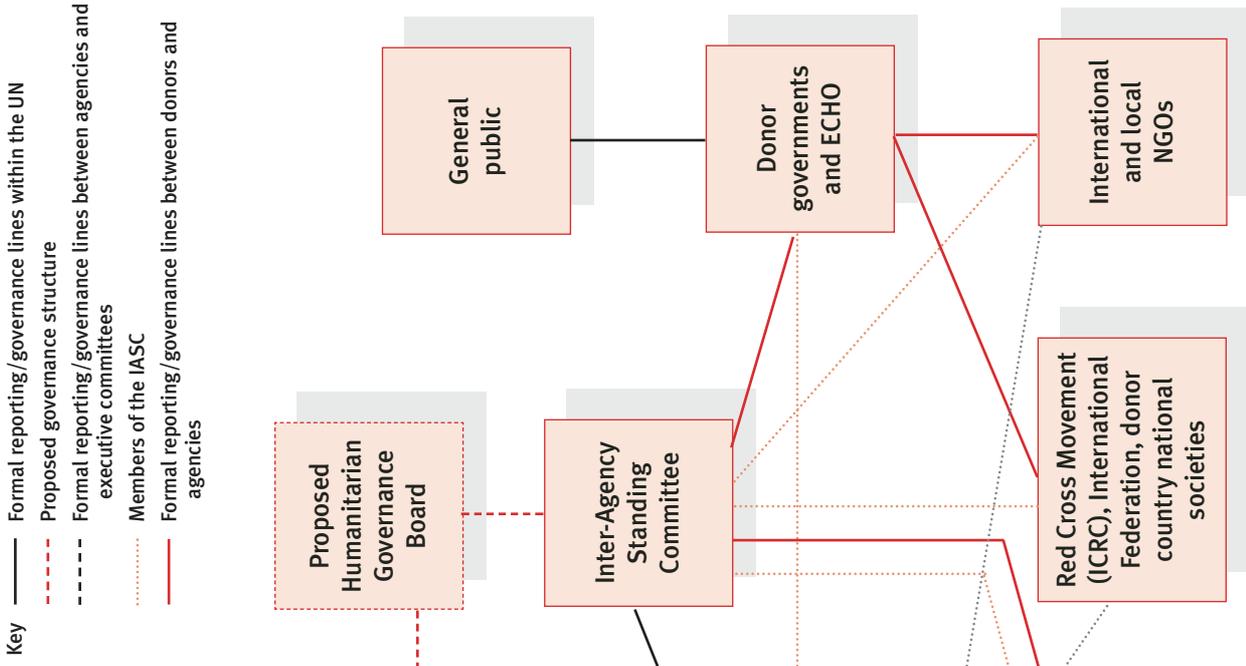
ECOSOC

The key player in all this is ECOSOC, the inter-governmental legislative body for all UN economic and social policy, including humanitarian policy. ECOSOC coordinates the work of the UN's specialised agencies and its functional and regional commissions, and issues policy recommendations to the UN system and to member states. ECOSOC is a 'principal organ' of the UN; it has the same official status as the General Assembly and the Security Council. The General Assembly is generally regarded as the most important body as it approves all money spent under the UN's regular budget; thus, while ECOSOC might endorse policy on a particular matter of humanitarian concern, the finances to support implementation need to be approved by the General Assembly's Administrative and Budgetary Committee. All UN humanitarian agencies, including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), report to the General Assembly (on financial matters) and to ECOSOC (on policy and programmes).

ECOSOC, while influential in setting themes, does not adequately reflect the interests of the broader humanitarian community. While ECOSOC is mandated to consult widely with registered NGOs, as well as academics and the business sector, there is no official representation for non-state actors. ECOSOC's humanitarian resolutions reflect its size and the diversity of member states. While geographic diversity is a comparative strength, it also means that decisions can be vague and tend to reflect the lowest common denominator. In terms of providing

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The 'Humanitarian Segment' in ECOSOC

Each year, ECOSOC holds a four-week substantive session in July, alternating between New York and Geneva. The session includes a 'Humanitarian Segment', introduced in 1998. This raises issues of general interest and concern not only to the UN system, but also to the wider humanitarian community. Decisions have provided the basis for a variety of innovations that have added capacity and coherence to aspects of humanitarian response. The 2003 session, held in Geneva, drew on some of the key humanitarian developments of the previous year, particularly on global humanitarian financing; how humanitarian needs are assessed; the factors determining donor decision-making; global humanitarian assistance flows; and the implications of changes in humanitarian financing for the UN humanitarian system.

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Figure 1: Governing the humanitarian system

Key

— Formal reporting/governance lines within the UN
- - - Proposed governance structure
– – – Formal reporting/governance lines between agencies and executive committees
······ Members of the IASC
— Formal reporting/governance lines between donors and agencies

UN Security Council

UN General Assembly

UN Economic and Social Council

UN Secretariat

Office of the Secretary-General

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Executive Committees or Governing Boards

Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs

UN humanitarian agencies

Proposed Humanitarian Governance Board

Inter-Agency Standing Committee

General public

Donor governments and ECHO

International and local NGOs

Red Cross Movement (ICRC), International Federation, donor country national societies

strategic direction and establishing rules, standards and policies to regulate the humanitarian realm, the infrequency of meetings, the weakness of language and the inability to effectively represent non-state actors all suggest that ECOSOC is not the governing body of choice.

The IASC

The IASC was established in June 1992 to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian assistance. According to a recent review, it is the most representative humanitarian forum yet established. It has a system-wide reach, and is particularly notable for promoting an equal partnership between the UN and non-UN actors. Chaired by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (who is also the head of OCHA), it brings together a range of humanitarian actors, including UN operational agencies, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), consortia of major international NGOs (ICVA, Interaction and the SCHR), the Representative of the UN Secretary-General for the internally-displaced and the Red Cross movement (though the Red Cross maintains a distance from the policy statements issued by the IASC and its subsidiaries).

The IASC has six core objectives:

- To allocate responsibilities among agencies in humanitarian programmes.
- To identify gaps in mandates or lack of operational capacity.
- To resolve disputes or disagreements about and between humanitarian agencies on system-wide humanitarian issues.
- To advocate for common humanitarian principles to parties outside of the IASC.
- To develop and agree system-wide humanitarian policies.
- To develop and agree a common ethical framework for all humanitarian activities.

A recent review suggests that the IASC has periodically shown itself to be effective in the articulation and promotion of policy and guidelines relating to the activities of its members. In the past decade, the committee has developed policy statements, guidelines and recommendations on a broad range of subjects, from staff security, field coordination and the use of military and civil-defence assets, to post-conflict transition, gender issues and sexual exploitation and abuse.

The extent to which these policies, guidelines and recommendations are adopted and implemented by the IASC's membership depends in part on the IASC's reach and the willingness of members to adhere to policy-setting beyond their individual mandates and profiles. In particular, it has been noted that the IASC has not managed to interact with official donors as strategic actors, nor effectively to replicate its structures or spirit at field level. It has limited direct linkages with national NGOs, and operational actors within international NGOs, as distinct from consortia, are underrepresented. These weaknesses contribute to the IASC's limited capacity to influence policy and issues of ethics and principle across the system.

Defining humanitarian action: the Good Humanitarian Donorship meeting, Stockholm, June 2003

The Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative was launched at an international meeting on 15 and 16 June 2003 in Stockholm. Representatives of donor governments, UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other organisations involved in humanitarian action gathered to reflect on donor behaviour, analyse challenges in the humanitarian system and lay the foundations for good humanitarian donorship. The meeting agreed a definition of the core objectives of humanitarian action as:

protection of civilians and those no longer taking part in hostilities, and the provision of food, water and sanitation, shelter, health services and other items of assistance, undertaken for the benefit of affected people and to facilitate the return to normal lives and livelihoods.

A new approach?

None of these key bodies – the ECOSOC Humanitarian Segment, the IASC or the myriad humanitarian contacts at field and headquarters levels – provides strategic direction and oversight for the entire system. It has been argued that the links between the wider humanitarian community and the UN system are too diverse and disparate, and that a closer and more defined relationship is essential.

A proposal to establish a Humanitarian Governance Board, put forward by the team responsible for examining the impact of changes in financing on the UN humanitarian system (Dalton, 2003; see references and further reading below), is one attempt to narrow this gap. As proposed, the Board would be independent, with direct access to the UN Secretary-General, although it would not be a UN entity, and it would have a small secretariat.

The Humanitarian Governance Board would have two principal objectives:

- To provide the humanitarian community with overarching strategic objectives. These would be agreed with the IASC, which in turn would have responsibility for implementing them (the IASC's role would be enhanced by having field-based 'country teams'). The strategic objectives would reflect issues and concerns introduced by ECOSOC's Humanitarian Segment.
- To promote and foster accountability practices. This would involve the UN system submitting its overall work to the scrutiny of the proposed Board, which would be mandated to comment on the system's achievements and effectiveness.

As for its composition, there are three proposed alternatives:

- a cross-section of major humanitarian actors, including representatives from disaster-prone countries, international NGOs and inter-governmental organisations and government donors;
- a core group of 'eminent persons' – supported by a small, independent secretariat; or
- an expanded ECOSOC Humanitarian Segment, involving a representative number of ECOSOC participants, with a secretariat that reflected the interests of the broader humanitarian community.

The success of a 'Humanitarian Governance Board', however designed, would depend upon those represented on the Board maintaining principled positions, and upon the willingness of state and non-state actors to sustain a commitment to agreed strategic objectives. In the current climate,

the latter seems ambitious. Perhaps a more modest, albeit long overdue, aim would be to agree upon a common definition of the objectives and activities of humanitarian action – neither the UN nor the IASC has one. The main stumbling-block has been a definition that would not allow the flexibility that humanitarian assistance needs. Yet without a consistent and shared definition of humanitarianism it is likely that humanitarians will find it increasingly difficult to distance themselves from the implications of political or military interventions, as in Iraq and Afghanistan. Adopting the definition established at the Good Humanitarian Donorship meeting in June 2003, which focused on the core objectives of humanitarian action and was endorsed by the IASC, would be an important starting-point.

Adele Harmer is a Research Fellow in HPG.

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Testing times for ECHO

Tasneem Mowjee, independent consultant

The European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) faces some of its greatest challenges since it was set up in 1992. These reflect broader changes within the European Commission and the European Union more generally, with the accession of ten new members in 2004 and discussion of a new Constitutional Treaty.
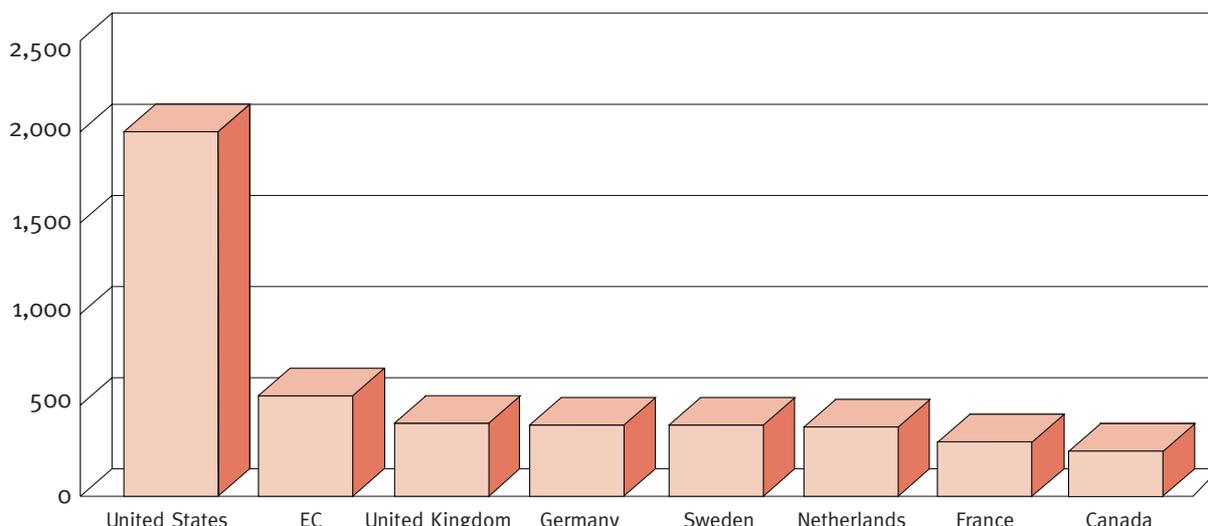
Mandate
When ECHO was established, it was charged with responsibility for the coherent administration of humanitarian aid, emergency food aid and disaster prevention and

preparedness activities. It was also supposed to raise the profile of the European Community's humanitarian aid effort. It became a legal entity with the adoption of Council Regulation 1257/96 in June 1996. The Regulation defined humanitarian aid, and gave ECHO a far more detailed mandate. According to the Regulation:

Humanitarian aid comprises assistance, relief and protection operations on a non-discriminatory basis to help people in third countries, particularly the most vulnerable among them, and as a priority

Figure 1: The top ten DAC donors, 2001 (US$m)

2,500	
2,000	
1,500	
1,000	
500	
0	United States EC United Kingdom Germany Sweden Netherlands France Canada

those in developing countries, victims of natural disasters, man-made crises such as wars and outbreaks of fighting, or exceptional circumstances comparable to natural or man-made disasters for the time needed to meet the humanitarian requirements from these different situations.

Aid can continue 'for the time needed to meet the humanitarian requirements resulting from these different situations'. Amongst the objectives of humanitarian aid operations, the Regulation includes providing 'the necessary assistance and relief to people affected by longer-lasting crises' and carrying out 'short-term rehabilitation and reconstruction work'.

This wide-ranging mandate has meant that ECHO funded activities in the so-called 'grey zone' between short-term emergency relief and development. This raised a number of familiar conceptual and administrative problems, and the Commission sought to refocus ECHO on its 'core mandate'. In April 2001, a second Communication on linking emergency and development activities set out a new strategy whereby different aid instruments would operate simultaneously in a protracted crisis. Actually operationalising this has, however, proved difficult: decision-making tends to be slow, choosing implementing partners is not straightforward and it has proved difficult to mobilise resources through the appropriate instruments. Although ECHO has developed criteria for determining when it should leave a country, other Commission instruments have either not mobilised in time, or have failed to continue funding activities that were supported by ECHO. In Sudan, for example, ECHO took a long-term view of humanitarian aid and supported the health infrastructure. When the Country Strategy Paper (CSP) was negotiated, setting the framework for European assistance, funding for ECHO's activities in the health sector was not included. Instead, the CSP incorporated a 'Humanitarian Plus' programme of activities, funded and managed by the EuropeAid Cooperation Office (AIDCO).

(AIDCO was established in January 2001 to manage the administration of rehabilitation and development projects.) Although the experiment is regarded as a success and has been applied in other countries, including Angola and Burundi, there is reluctance to institutionalise it. Therefore, ECHO and AIDCO continue to debate handover procedures.

by 1994, ECHO had become one of the world's largest humanitarian aid donors
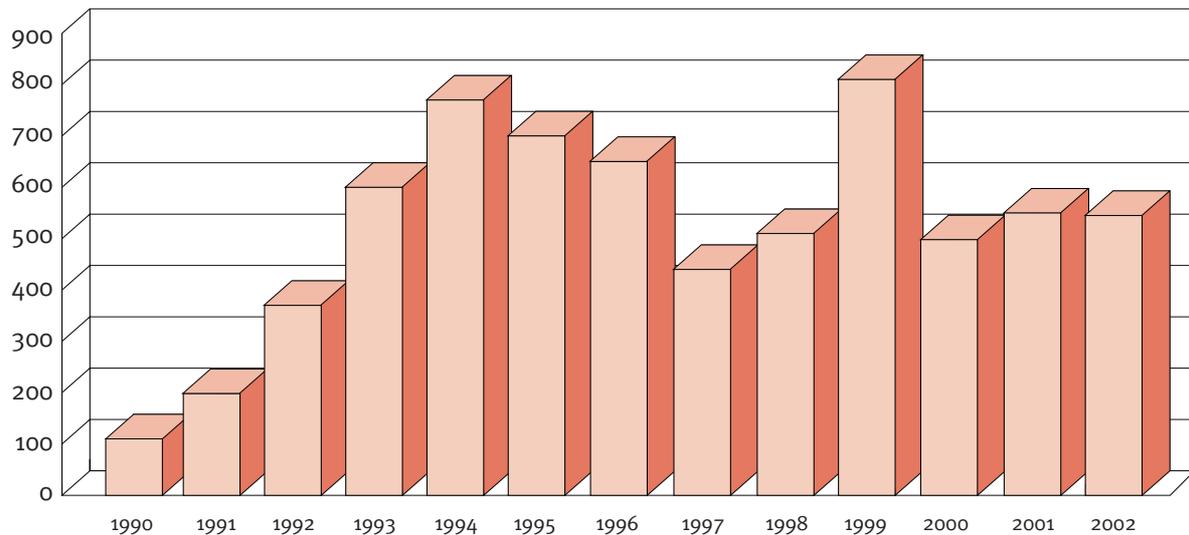
Funding

By 1994, at the time of the Great Lakes crisis, ECHO had become one of the world's largest humanitarian aid donors (Figure 1 shows that it is the second-largest humanitarian donor, after the US). Its budget then declined, only to increase to record levels in 1999 in response to the Kosovo crisis. At that point, ECHO's humanitarian aid stood at €800 million ($852m). The budget has since declined again, to around €500m ($447m) (see Figure 2).

ECHO's regional focus

Table 1 shows the percentages of ECHO's budget allocated to different regions between 1993 and 2001. The former Yugoslavia has been an important focus, receiving over half of ECHO's total budget in 1993 and 1999. In other years, the area received a share of ECHO's budget similar to that of the Asian, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.

Implementing partners

When ECHO was established, the Commission expected it to build up its own capacity for direct action in the field. In fact, most of its funding is channelled through European NGOs, UN agencies and the International Red Cross

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Figure 2: EC humanitarian aid, 1990–2000 (€m)

Bar chart showing EC humanitarian aid (€m) from 1990 to 2002.

organisations. As Figure 3 shows, the proportion of ECHO's budget spent through European NGOs has risen substantially, reaching a record of 65% in 2000. This has remained high, despite the appointment of the pro-UN Poul Nielson as Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid in 2000. There are several possible reasons for this. One is visibility: ECHO can obtain more visibility by funding NGOs than from large-scale UN programmes, where it is difficult to distinguish the contributions of the various donors. Other reasons include negative perceptions of the UN's performance; the view that funding NGOs directly rather than through UN agencies, which often subcontract NGOs anyway, is better value for taxpayers' money; and the identification of shortcomings in UN security.

Framework Partnership Agreements

ECHO provides funding to all its implementing partners through a contractual agreement, known as the Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA). This was introduced i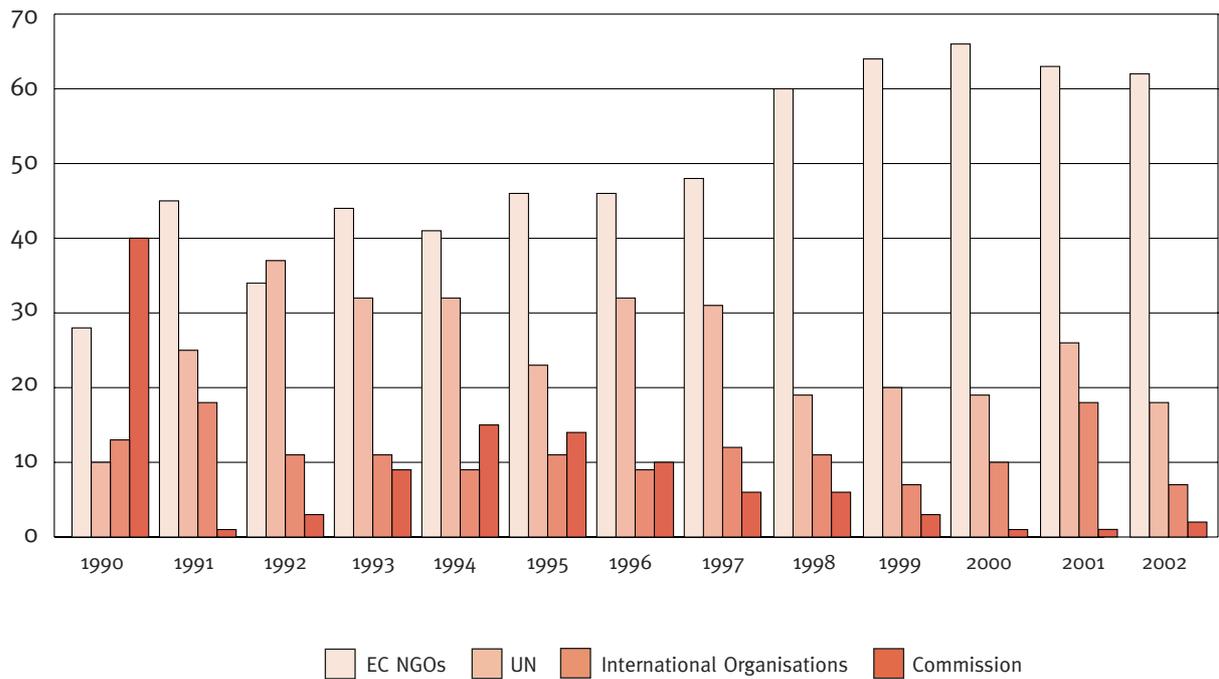n 1993 because the Commission's normal procedures were too cumbersome for emergency responses. However, NGOs encountered difficulties with the FPA and, after lengthy negotiations, a revised version was introduced in January 1999. By the beginning of 2000, this also began to be revised to comply with a new Commission-wide Financial Regulation and to incorporate ECHO's emphasis on quality in humanitarian aid. The new FPA was expected to come into force on 1 January 2003, but this has been delayed until January 2004 for administrative reasons.

UN agencies have argued that the FPA is unsuitable for their programme approach. Therefore, after lengthy high-level discussions, an umbrella Financial and Administrative Framework Agreement (FAFA) was signed on 29 April 2003. ECHO was asked to develop implementing measures to comply with the agreement. In addition, in 2000, ECHO initiated annual 'Strategic Programming Dialogues' with major partners like the UN agencies. These enable ECHO and its partners to discuss their priorities and strategies for the forthcoming year.

Table 1: ECHO humanitarian expenditure by region, 1993–2002 (%)

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Former Yugoslavia	63.32	35.25	33.90	28.48	23.00	23.78	55.70	20.00	15.00	8.00
ACP Countries	16.51	42.41	30.60	42.34	43.00	29.52	15.70	35.00	33.00	39.00
CIS	8.48	11.90	19.86	8.14	7.00	7.63	6.70	10.00	n/a	n/a
Eastern Europe	0.13	0.35	0.42	0.25	2.00	2.75	0.22	n/a	11.00	8.00
Asia	3.68	3.38	5.70	8.11	12.00	12.08	10.90	16.00	20.00	26.00
Iraq	3.55	2.94	3.59	4.49	4.00	2.70	0.20	n/a	2.37	2.42
N Africa/Middle East	0.20	0.46	0.72	3.18	4.00	6.18	2.50	10.00	8.86	9.47
Latin America	2.02	2.81	3.95	2.90	5.00	9.93	6.00	6.00	7.00	4.00

Figure 3: ECHO's main implementing partners, 1990–2002 (%)

Legend: EC NGOs | UN | International Organisations | Commission

Global Plans

In 1994, ECHO introduced funding strategies, called Global Plans, for longer-term crises. Global Plans usually cover a 12-month period. Once a funding decision is made, no additional funds are available unless another emergency occurs. Global Plans are a useful mechanism for ECHO because they allow it to take a proactive approach, rather than simply responding to requests for funds on an *ad hoc* basis. They are also easier to administer than individual contracts because only one funding decision is required. Global Plans should also improve field-level coordination amongst implementing partners.

Challenges

In 2004, ten countries are due to become members of the EU: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. They bring with them their own histories, cultures, attitudes to development and political priorities. Some will have to move from being aid recipients to being donors committed to the EU's development policy; in 1999, for example, Poland received $519m in development assistance from the EC, but is expected to commit 0.39% of its GDP to overseas aid by 2006. Although acceding countries are required to accept development policy as it stands, major differences could lead them to push policy in new directions over the longer term. To accommodate the Commissioners from new member states, the draft Constitutional Treaty proposes giving them different voting rights. This raises the possibility that the humanitarian aid Commissioner may not have voting rights. This could relegate humanitarian aid to an insignificant policy position, or make it easier for other policy areas to co-opt it.

One of the greatest challenges facing ECHO is the development of a European foreign and security policy, and the draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. While there is a separate section in the Treaty devoted to humanitarian aid, some provisions give cause for concern.

- The sections on development and humanitarian aid are placed under Title V, which covers the EU's external action. This raises questions about aid's independence from the EU's wider policy goals overseas.
- Article III-223 (2) states that humanitarian aid operations will comply with international humanitarian law, in particular the principles of impartiality and non-discrimination, but the principle of neutrality is notably absent.
- Article III-223 (5) provides for the establishment of a European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps to enable young Europeans to contribute to the Union's humanitarian action. As Nielson has pointed out, this undermines work to professionalise humanitarian aid and risks putting untrained young people into dangerous situations.
- Article III-210 (1) outlines the tasks for which the EU may use civilian and military means. These include humanitarian and rescue tasks alongside military advice and assistance, conflict prevention and peace-keeping, together with combat in crisis management. The Article states that all these tasks 'may contribute to the fight against terrorism'. This raises the prospect that a military force engaged in peace-making or counter-terrorism may also be involved in delivering humanitarian aid.

The draft Treaty raises some alarming questions. So far, NGOs have failed to persuade the Convention drafting the Treaty to accept a more principled, independent approach to humanitarian aid. A coalition of NGO groups has produced a document outlining the changes which NGOs should request ahead of ratification in 2004. Given that some member states have signed up to the Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship, elaborated in Stockholm in June 2003, NGOs should find it easier to persuade them to apply these to the draft Treaty. Whether this will result in positive changes remains to be seen, and 2004 is likely to be a testing time indeed for ECHO.

Tasneem Mowjee is a London-based independent researcher.

References and further reading

The draft Constitution is available at the Europa website: http://europa.eu.int/futurum/constitution/index_en.htm.

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Reducing the risk of natural disasters: the policy and practice of institutional donors

Sarah La Trobe, Tearfund

The developing world has witnessed a significant increase in human and material losses associated with 'natural' disasters. The number of people affected by these disasters was three times higher in the 1990s than in the 1970s, and economic losses were five times higher. This upward trend in disaster losses is expected to persist with the continued expansion of populations, environmental degradation and climate change. The threat that disasters pose to development gains has increasingly been acknowledged by donors, governments and financial institutions, yet still insufficient attention is being given to disaster risk reduction.

In early 2003, Tearfund undertook research to gain a better understanding of how institutional donors are responding to this issue. Interviewees included representatives of the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the governments of the US, Canada, the UK, Sweden and Switzerland, the European Union (EU) and the UN. This article reports the key research findings.

The lack of a 'preventive culture'
The majority of donors canvassed for the research are convinced that risk reduction in the form of disaster preparedness and mitigation is essential to protect vulnerable communities from natural hazards, and to safeguard development. A World Bank interviewee observed: 'If we are in the business of reducing poverty … one of the mechanisms for this is reducing risk'. Donors also claimed that risk reduction is a cost-effective intervention in countries vulnerable to disasters. The observation of one informant from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) at USAID was representative of many: although the cost-effectiveness of disaster mitigation and preparedness cannot be proved, 'There's no doubt in our

minds that spending money on good mitigation and preparedness activities more than pays off'.

Despite such convictions, however, the research concluded that risk reduction remains a relatively low priority within donors' relief and development planning and programming. As an independent consultant put it: 'It is hard to find institutions willing to say, "Let's invest now for deferred benefits later to prevent something that may not happen"'. This position is a persistent enemy to the development of a preventive culture, in which risk reduction is accepted as a necessity in disaster-prone regions.

The need to 'mainstream' risk reduction
Both donors and consultants offered a variety of explanations as to why donors award risk reduction such a low priority. The most frequently-given was that risk reduction is not 'mainstreamed' into development; in other words, it is not systematically integrated into all development programmes. Other explanations included a lack of knowledge of what risk reduction is and how to do it; the fact that neither relief nor development sectors within donor organisations 'own' risk reduction as their specific responsibility; and the fact that risk reduction competes with other pressing development needs. These three key issues are referred to in the research as 'Knowledge', 'Ownership' and 'Competition'. The research proposes that these three issues are not, in fact, additional to the mainstreaming problem, but symptomatic of it. Paradoxically, whilst each issue is an *effect* of the primary problem of lack of mainstreaming, each also acts as a *barrier* to solving it.

Knowledge
Development specialists within donor organisations frequently fail to integrate risk reduction into their work

because they lack awareness and understanding of what it entails, both as a concept and in practice. Contributing to and perpetuating this lack of understanding is the fact that most organisations fail to communicate effectively between sectors and departments. The majority of risk reduction specialists interviewed for the research were located in humanitarian aid departments, and their knowledge of the issue was not shared with development departments as a matter of course.

Another factor contributing to confusion surrounding the concept and practice of risk reduction is that it is very broad in scope. There is a wide range of preparedness and mitigation activities (across a number of sectors),

Flooding in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, October 2001

and a wide variety of agencies work in this field. This broad scope, or as one informant put it this 'nebulousness', can prevent risk reduction from being recognised and reported on as such. For example, the European Parliament has mandated the EC's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) to spend 15–20% of its budget on disaster preparedness, but as one ECHO informant noted, achieving this target 'depends on what we are defining as disaster prevention'.

Finally, the breadth of terminology used by the disaster management community to describe risk reduction can also contribute to a lack of understanding of the issue. While science has, undoubtedly, contributed much to reducing the scale of disaster losses, the use of complex mathematical formulas to understand risk and vulnerability can hinder practical implementation in the field.

The research recommends that individuals with a sound understanding of risk reduction (often those within the humanitarian aid sector) should communicate more effectively with relevant development departments. This may require adopting developmental language, and emphasising the links between disasters and poverty. Well-documented case studies, although context-specific, are useful in demonstrating to development sectors both what is meant by disaster risk reduction, and how it can be implemented. Although risk reduction cannot stand alone if it is to be effective, a separate disaster risk reduction unit may be necessary, to pilot projects, develop case studies and training materials and ensure the dissemination of these throughout an organisation.

Ownership

Neither relief nor development sectors within donor agencies fully 'own' risk reduction as their specific responsibility and, consequently, the issue falls between relief and development processes.

Looking at the subject from the perspective of the relief sector, many of the concepts associated with the design and delivery of risk reduction projects demand a developmental approach and mindset over a period of time far longer than the average relief intervention. An interviewee from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) observed that, although the SDC's humanitarian aid department is Switzerland's mandated implementing agency for disaster risk reduction, it cannot provide the long-term approach that preventive action requires. Similar observations were made by individuals from other donor organisations. Consequently, there is a general acceptance within the disaster management community of the need to increase the level of 'ownership' of risk reduction among development sectors – which arguably are in a stronger position to reduce disaster risk on a global scale.

However, as with relief sectors, risk reduction does not sit particularly comfortably with development specialists, who tend to perceive disasters as an unfortunate detour on the developmental path. In so doing, they fail to draw a link between the shortcomings of development and inherent underlying risks represented in the form of a disaster. An informant from the Humanitarian Affairs and Conflict Division of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) informed us that his development colleagues do not view disaster crises as integral to their work, but 'a kind of anomaly to it'.

Another barrier to ownership is a perception that pro-poor development by its very nature reduces the risk of disaster, and hence the development community *already* 'owns' the problem. This was put to us by an informant within the UK's Department for International Development (DFID):

The poor tend to be the most vulnerable members of society – hence they are often worst affected by disasters. Therefore, if your development brief is really pro-poor, and you are really tackling the root causes of poverty through your work, then surely you are reducing people's exposure to disaster risk.

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There is a logic to this, but also significant dangers. Some key mitigation requirements are not naturally related to protecting livelihoods, yet retain life-preserving importance. Second, the 'pro-poor development' approach can play down the importance of specific actions needed to reduce disaster risks. For example, every child being educated in a seismically active area needs to be taught basic seismic preparedness measures, yet this cannot safely be assumed to be part of development work.

Competition

Whilst many donors believe that much more can be achieved in the field of disaster prevention, implementing risk reduction measures in vulnerable regions remains a struggle. This is in part due to competing priorities.

Attempts by humanitarian aid departments to undertake disaster prevention are hampered by the rising number of disasters and increased pressure to respond. As an informant from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) observed: 'The scale of human needs in the world today is so overwhelming, simply meeting humanitarian needs exceeds all the systems we have in place'. The answer to this problem is to mainstream risk reduction into development work, so that human and material resources for it can be increased. However, the need to engage with other important issues was frequently given by donors as a reason why more development finances could not or should not be invested in risk reduction. An interviewee from the UN Development Programme (UNDP) asserted that the priority given to the issue by the UN is 'not a misrepresentation in relation to … the [global] scale of problems and issues'.

Whether the current level of priority awarded to disaster risk reduction vis-à-vis other development needs is a 'misrepresentation' is a fundamental question. Unsurprisingly, local communities finding it difficult to survive on a daily basis may view disaster preparedness as an unaffordable luxury. However, at a macro level, is a similar attitude of non-engagement acceptable? Non-engagement can be due to a number of valid development problems, such as trade and debt. However, it can also be due to invalid political priorities. As one consultant asserted, disaster risk reduction is sometimes ignored or its application delayed because of 'confusing, conflicting, and unacceptable priorities as expressed by the affected country'. Whereas risk reduction is constantly fighting to prove its worth, politicians rarely raise the question of the costs and benefits of emergency relief programmes. This could be due to the high visibility of relief work, and the profile a government can acquire through being seen to respond to major disasters.

Addressing the issue of competition requires the development and dissemination of case studies and cost–benefit analyses to demonstrate the validity of risk reduction in development programming. It also requires building risk reduction initiatives into the existing context, agenda and priorities of developmental strategies. In this way risk reduction will be viewed less as competing with other development needs, and more as an integral and vital

part of development itself. Our SIDA interviewee stressed the need to ensure that the risk reduction dimension is included in SIDA's description of the meaning of poverty. If we manage this, he argued, 'it would be such an integral element we wouldn't need to see it as one area that competes with others'.

Conclusion

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, agreements on local, national and international disaster preparedness and mitigation were included in the Summit's Plan of Implementation. While this was encouraging, time-bound targets for implementing the agreements were lacking, raising the question of how they will be implemented and monitored. There are also questions around how the Millennium Development Goals will be attained without a significant and widespread increase in investment in disaster prevention within the world's most vulnerable countries.

A primary reason why donors do not give risk reduction the attention it deserves is because they fail to systematically integrate it into development planning and programming. Risk reduction must be viewed as an integral element of sustainable development, rather than an ad hoc activity for special circumstances. Clearly, the greatest progress needs to be made in development sectors of donor organisations in terms of understanding, owning and addressing risk reduction. However, relief sectors have a dual responsibility. They must seek to mitigate disaster risks where possible within relief interventions, and they may need to take the lead in promoting and developing a strong corporate understanding of the issue within an organisation.

Failure to mainstream risk reduction has long been the subject of discussion within the disaster management community, and as such Tearfund's research does not make a new discovery. However, by identifying the main impediments to mainstreaming and proposing practical steps towards overcoming them, the research aims to encourage new and more effective risk reduction action by donors and other organisations, particularly:

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- moves to integrate risk reduction into all development programming in disaster-prone countries, including the development of practical tools for community-based risk assessment to assist development professionals in their analysis and reduction of risks; and
- support for individuals and units focused on making this happen.

Institutional donors recognise that natural disaster preparedness and mitigation in certain contexts is cost-effective in preventing loss of life and livelihoods and safeguarding development. Failure to invest in risk reduction, therefore, is both illogical and morally indefensible. As our UNICEF informant observed: 'the longer we delay in addressing risk reduction and preparedness, the greater the impact, scale and cost of emergencies'.

Sarah La Trobe is Tearfund's Public Policy Officer, Environment and Disasters. This article also appears in Development Bulletin no. 63; see http://devnet.anu. edu.au.

Facing up to the storm: how local communities can cope with disaster

Tom Palakudiyil and Mary Todd, Christian Aid

Of all regions of the world, Asia is the most vulnerable to natural hazards. India is among those countries most at risk, with an estimated 25 million people a year affected by disaster. Given the scale of this risk, it might be assumed that the government, both at national and state levels, would recognise the priority need for comprehensive disaster management planning. Yet even in states such as Orissa and Gujarat, which are vulnerable to multiple natural hazards, this is far from the case. As elsewhere, there is a top-down approach to disaster management, with a lack of planning and preparedness by governments, not to mention ineffective coordination and communication at all levels. There is no recognition of the value of utilising the skills and knowledge of communities, which do much to address the immediate devastation in the initial hours after a disaster. Typically, relief stocks are distributed without any overall coordination, resulting in remote villages being completely ignored and roadside communities receiving multiple supplies. In the process, self-reliant communities are forced into dependency. An equally negative impact is the destruction of many years of development gains.

Between 1991 and 2000, the total number of reported disasters rose dramatically. There were more disasters in 2000 (759) and 2001 (712) than in the whole of the previous decade. In the ten years to 2001, 95.6% of those affected lived in countries of low and medium human development. As the number of disasters facing the world mounts, is it inevitable that they leave behind a trail of helpless victims dependent on the generosity of a benevolent state or aid agency? Can disaster management be integrated with development? Will governments, donors and aid agencies realise the importance of a community-based approach to disaster management?

This article explores these questions by reviewing experiences from India's two most recent major disasters, the Orissa supercyclone of October 1999 and the Gujarat earthquake of January 2001. It is based on the Christian Aid book *Facing Up to the Storm: How Local Communities Can Cope with Disaster*. *Facing Up to the Storm* argues that when communities, including poor ones, are placed at the centre of disaster management initiatives, and their traditional knowledge and skills are valued and utilised, their ability to survive and recover faster is increased. After all, in the vital first 48 hours following disasters, it is communities that save most lives and that support each other. There is therefore an obligation to further strengthen their self-reliance.

how often are years of development gains destroyed by a single disaster?

Preconditions for a community-based approach

Facing Up to the Storm examined some of the preconditions for making community-based disaster management effective.

1. Make disaster management part of development

It is crucial that comprehensive hazard mapping and risk assessment is undertaken by governments, in consultation with all stakeholders. This is an essential prerequisite for comprehensive disaster management planning. An equally

important part of a comprehensive strategy is the need to address the underlying causes of disasters. This can begin with incorporating risk reduction into rehabilitation and recovery measures. Livelihood support is central to this. However, it also requires long-term approaches. What could make a difference? Recognising how crucial it is to integrate comprehensive disaster management within all development initiatives can and does produce different outcomes. How often are years of development gains destroyed by a single disaster? Yet by building community participation into all development as well as disaster management planning, the perceptions of poor communities, which are often the beneficiaries, are taken into account.

2. Make people 'disaster aware'
Education and awareness-raising about natural hazards and their likely impact can be just as valuable as ensuring the provision of hardware such as satellite phones. These activities form an essential part of disaster preparedness.

3. Strengthen communities to withstand disaster
By respecting traditional skills and knowledge, and ensuring community participation in assessing vulnerabilities and capacities, it becomes clear where valuable external expertise can be introduced. In the recovery and rehabilitation phase, livelihood support initiatives are increasingly prioritised. Strengthening and diversifying livelihood options forms an important part of many development programmes.

Promoting community-based disaster management
There are three key elements in promoting community-based disaster management.

1. Help communities work alongside local government
Building an effective community-based approach is time-consuming, and needs to be sustainable. To provide addi-

tional support, it is necessary to utilise structures that already exist. Raising people's awareness is crucial so that they can demand that their institutions perform the roles for which they were established.

2. Introduce methods of communication
Orissa and Gujarat are clear examples of the vital need for disaster-resilient means of communication, such as satellite phones. In addition, early-warning systems need to be comprehensible to all, in order that evacuation, for example, can be initiated before catastrophe strikes.

3. Create structures for coordination
Unless full state-led coordination plans exist before a disaster, it is extremely difficult to coordinate effectively afterwards. Duplication and many parallel structures often result, causing much confusion. Effective coordination encompasses government, civil society and the private sector, all of whom need to be drawn in on a consultative basis.

Examples on the ground
The case studies presented here and in the book show how a commitment by agencies to a community-based approach can lessen the impact of disasters. In some cases, people were able to resume their livelihoods within a matter of days. In villages where agencies using a community-based approach undertook response and later recovery and rehabilitation, from the outset they included the community in decision-making and implementation, respecting their skills and knowledge. The community prioritised its most vulnerable members, and identified which livelihood schemes should be taken up. This way of working is not, however, easy. Personalities, power relationships, the marginalisation of women and minorities – all these factors have to be addressed. In order to build strong community organisation, agencies need to allow significant time and commitment.

Each of the case studies illustrates a different approach. Thus, micro planning was the core of the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI) initiative in Orissa. Micro planning involves planning with, and within, the community, and respects and draws on people's knowledge and ability to cope. Through careful and lengthy discussions, the community identified what it wanted to achieve, took control of the entire process and prioritised livelihood options. These included forming self-help groups, fisherfolk rehabilitation and the creation of a village-level health system. The Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA)'s Orissa relief programme involved community members taking on distribution tasks. With the focus on building a community perspective, defined by CASA as a recognition of a group's resources, strengths and weaknesses, they worked with communities to identify what rehabilitation support they would prioritise, and who the beneficiaries would be. In one village with its own community organisation, the roads and village were clean within a week, damaged houses repaired within a month, and within two months fields were prepared for the next crop. In the work of both of these agencies, local knowledge, skills and leadership structures were respected.

The experience of Gram Vikas, a long-established Orissa NGO, has been in working with tribal people. Gram Vikas is committed to building community consensus as the prerequisite for all its initiatives, and this is central to its long-term approach to preparing for disaster. Its Rural Health and Environment Programme (RHEP), premised on community ownership of processes and outputs, focuses on shelter, sanitation and drinking water. Its approach in the wake of the Orissa supercyclone created a community able to resume its day-to-day life within days of the cyclone impact. Earlier work on drought proofing and water harvesting was similarly rooted in gaining community consensus, which better ensured the sustainability of these initiatives.

In Gujarat, the Delhi-based NGO Sustainable Environment and Ecology Development Society (SEEDS) started with traditional building skills. Earthquake-resistant components were incorporated into low-cost housing reconstruction, and communities gained a valuable asset in the upgraded skills of its masons, from which other communities can also benefit. In this case, as in the others cited, communities contributed with materials, labour and other inputs.

Conclusion: widening the scope

These community-based principles work elsewhere as well. The Bangladesh Red Crescent has some 32,000 village-based volunteers in coastal districts trained in preparedness skills, such as warning, rescue and evacuation. These volunteers are equipped with radios to monitor weather bulletins, and with megaphones to issue warnings. Similarly, in Mozambique following floods in 2001, primary-school teachers worked as flood monitors. With further community training, volunteers undertook data collection, risk mapping and planning. In the Solomon Islands just last year, communities using traditional responses survived a uniquely devastating cyclone – they fled to mountain caves just as their ancestors had done.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' answer to emergencies. However, what should be understood is that effective overall disaster management must be rooted in the community. From prevention and preparedness through to response and rehabilitation, it is essential that not only the planning but also the implementation of the entire process, including how resources are used, must be controlled by the community. This can transform how communities face future disasters.

Tom Palakudiyil is Christian Aid's country representative in India. He coordinated the organisation's response to the Orissa supercyclone and the Gujarat earthquake. **Mary Todd** is a freelance consultant. She was formerly a capacity-building officer in Christian Aid's emergencies unit, specialising in disaster mitigation and preparedness. She has worked in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

Facing Up to the Storm: How Local Communities Can Cope with Disaster, by Tom Palakudiyil and Mary Todd, was published by Christian Aid in July 2003. The book can be downloaded entire or in parts from Christian Aid's website: www.christianaid.org.uk/storm.

Enhancing assistance to populations in difficult environments
An ODI study

Providing effective levels of assistance to populations in protracted crises, or in stable environments where the recipient government is not willing and/or able to assist the poor, has long been a challenge for both the humanitarian and development communities. The central tenets of contemporary development policy are, generally, pro-poor, targeted and based on partnership with governments in poor countries. While the commitment to using aid to reach the poorest and most vulnerable has deepened, paradoxically greater stringency regarding aid procedures and a focus on aid effectiveness have made it harder to reach the poor using traditional development aid mechanisms. Humanitarian assistance has often become the 'default' instrument in these environments. The resultant volatility and low volume of aid committed in these environments has meant that the basic needs of populations are not being met.

There is international debate around how bilateral donor governments and multilateral institutions can improve assistance in these difficult environments. Policy-makers are looking for new ways of using aid to protect and support populations, while avoiding reinforcing governments whose behaviour can often make achieving these goals more difficult. New approaches include adapting financial instruments and alternative institutional and programming approaches.

The Overseas Development Institute has been commissioned by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to review the debate and the new approaches, and to provide recommendations for future aid management in these environments. The study will draw on statistical work on indicators of performance and the correlation with poverty outcomes and aid flows. It will examine in detail a number of country case studies, including Sudan, Rwanda and Malawi, as well as a comparative analysis of different states in India. A forthcoming report on the study will be available in January 2004. The study team welcomes input from those with relevant experience and interest; contact Adele Harmer (a.harmer@odi.org.uk).

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Beyond the headlines: an agenda for action to protect civilians in neglected conflicts

Amelia Bookstein, Oxfam GB

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, the leaders of the major international powers have focused on what they perceive as the greatest threat to global security: the combination of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

This is clearly wider than US policy alone: at the G8 summit in France in 2003, the leaders of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US agreed that this combination represented the greatest current threat to world security. In Europe, the current draft of the constitution for the European Union (EU) dangerously entangles humanitarian relief in the counter-terrorism agenda. The EU Security Strategy, proposed by High Representative Javier Solana at the Thessaloniki summit in June 2003, is also largely framed in terms of counter-terrorism and the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Across the world, governments and leaders have made the fight against terrorism their stated priority, and have channelled billions of dollars into actions defended by these arguments. The rhetoric of 'the war on terror' has been used to justify crackdowns on refugees, firing on civilians as suspected terrorists and increased arms flows to states with precarious human rights records. The independence of humanitarian organisations and their ability to operate in contentious areas are also under real threat.

Terror and the world's neglected wars

Although the threats from terrorism are real, terror is nothing new for millions of people caught up in the world's seemingly intractable conflicts. Rebels and governments alike have been terrifying civilians for years in too many civil conflicts. Oxfam and our partners already witness mass destruction: from Sudan to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Indonesia, millions of people are killed, raped, injured or forced to flee their homes.

Direct attacks on civilians are part of the harsh reality of most conflicts across the globe. From Liberia to Uganda, Chechnya to Colombia, international humanitarian law is not adequately upheld by combatants or enforced by the international community, and the suffering of civilians

Suffering in a neglected war: an IDP camp in Ituri, eastern DRC

©A Bookstein/Oxfam

continues unabated. For decades, these conflicts have caused much more death and destruction than terrorism. The attention given to the 'war on terror' threatens to eclipse this suffering still further, as warring parties fight with impunity.

From its work around the world, Oxfam has observed the high human cost as the international community abandons civilians to struggle through conflict unaided. We believe it is time to refocus international attention on the conflicts that kill and impoverish millions of people year in and year out – conflicts in most ways unrelated to events since 2001. The international community currently responds to these crises in an inconsistent way in terms of both political and diplomatic commitment, and humanitarian aid.

Nearly half of all funds given by donor governments in 2002 to the UN's 25 humanitarian appeals went to just one country, Afghanistan – a desperately poor place, but one that was also top of the list of priorities in the 'war on terror'. The remaining 24 had to struggle by on what was left. This pattern of funding recurs year after year. The British government's announcement in October 2003 that it planned to reallocate funding from Latin America, Eastern Europe and Central Asia in order to pay for the reconstruction of Iraq is just the latest example of this trend.

While Oxfam is not advocating a reduction of funding to any emergency where there is need, the challenge is to provide funding without diverting resources from the millions of people affected by other emergencies. Donors must come up with new funds for new emergencies, and provide guarantees that they will not siphon off money from lesser-known crises to the one in the spotlight.

War, peace and protection

We also know from our experience of working in dozens of conflicts that what civilians in war need is not primarily money, but peace. But until peace is possible, ensuring the protection of civilians is crucial. All governments have duties under international humanitarian law to protect civilians from the worst ravages of war, to allow them to live free from violence, coercion and deprivation. Yet the international community is failing to provide that protection for most children, women and men in conflict.

There is no one-size-fits-all action to protect civilians, but international engagement is critical. There is a range of actions that the international community must pursue more consistently:

- Strong diplomatic pressure on warring parties to adhere to international humanitarian law in all conflicts. All military action must preserve the immunity of civilians.
- Political support for difficult negotiations to secure access for civilians to humanitarian aid behind the lines of fire.
- Refusing to tolerate abuse by allies in the 'war on terror' or in any other conflict situation.
- Ensuring that humanitarian aid is distributed based on need, not politics. This is the responsibility of donors and multilateral organisations, as well as humanitarian agencies.

The need for protection: civilians and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict

This incident took place in Gaza in May 2003. Samia and Majda Daloul, 20- and 21-year-old sisters, were on their way back from meeting the woman their brother intended to marry. Their brother, Fayis, their sister-in-law Nawal and her daughter, three-year-old Rawan, were all in the family car.

There was another car behind their Volkswagen, but they barely noticed. Nor did they hear the Israeli Apache helicopter. But they felt a bump when a rocket exploded behind them. Fayis ordered everyone out of the car. But Samia was already dead. Majda went back to the car to get her sister's body. A second rocket hit, and she too was killed.

The family was not the intended target of the attack; two Hamas militants in the car behind were. They too were killed. Altogether nine civilians were killed.

Both Palestinian and Israeli civilians are suffering from the conflict. In June 2003, some 60 people died in the space of a fortnight, including 17 killed by a suicide bomber on a Jerusalem bus. More than 2,300 Palestinians and 700 Israelis have died since the second Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation started in September 2000.

- Ensuring that humanitarian needs and risks are assessed to the best standard of practice. Humanitarian agencies and the UN have a duty to ensure that needs assessments integrate methodologies across sectors to allow for a more precise measurement of need and risk.
- In extreme cases, it may be necessary to contribute resources or troops to a UN-mandated mission to enforce a ceasefire and to protect civilians.

Terror and war: the LRA in Uganda

Since the mid-1980s, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels group has devastated the lives of the Acholi people of northern Uganda. The LRA maintains its numbers by abducting and brutalising children, incorporating them into its ranks. One million people are currently displaced by this conflict. The following is an interview by an Oxfam worker in northern Uganda with 'Sarah', an LRA escapee:

I was taken … when I was 13 … Seven of us were taken, four boys and three girls. I was with the rebels for two years. We made camp. I had to do the cooking. After about a week I had to become the wife of the soldier. That's what happens to the girls … We were trained, and eventually I was given a gun and a uniform. I had a gun for seven or eight months.

I escaped on one of our missions. Our group was told to go to a trading centre to take food, money and children. I had my friends. They said 'Sarah, today let us escape.' I said 'No, I don't know this place.' I persuaded my friends to move towards another centre which I knew. We went to a village and took some chickens. We cooked, slept and continued. There were about 15 of us. We were all girls. We told the others, and asked them if they would escape. In the end, only three of us escaped. The others said they wouldn't go back because their parents weren't there – they were dead. That's why rebels kill parents.

Since 1987, Oxfam has been helping people affected by the conflict in northern Uganda to meet their basic needs by supplying items such as blankets, sleeping mats and seeds and tools; in addition, Oxfam supports water and sanitation activities, malaria control and shelter construction. Oxfam is also working with others to advocate for a just and lasting solution to the conflict.

E N D P I E C E

- In all cases, states must act to prevent the supply of arms from fuelling conflicts or contributing to the abuse of human rights.

All the threats to human security must be addressed in a way that reinforces the foundations of the international multilateral system and upholds international humanitarian law designed to protect civilians.

Since 2001, the UN Security Council has once more been overwhelmed by geopolitical events, rather than rising to the challenge. Some trends are deeply worrying. If governments act unilaterally or in narrow coalitions, without the support or sanction of the Security Council, they not only undermine the legitimacy of their immediate actions; they also weaken the multilateral system, which is the only means of organising concerted action against widespread violence against civilians.

The world needs multilateralism in order to address widespread death and suffering. The leadership of the UN Security Council is crucial. Despite the failures of the Security Council to fulfil its vital mandate to uphold international peace and security, it remains the only body that can authorise actions, such as Operation Artemis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, that can be indispensable to save lives. Such interventions are, at times, desperately needed; they are practical proof of the existence of a committed international community that seeks to protect civilians wherever they are threatened.

It is essential to support and enhance this multilateral system. Any further moves must strengthen, not undermine, the agreed rules and standards to protect civilians. Concrete steps like the ones outlined above must be taken now to redress the damaging trends which have been set since 11 September.

The challenge is great, and it is not simply for the warring parties. It is a challenge for all governments, all signatories to the Geneva Conventions, all donors, and the UN as a collective body. To ignore this challenge would be to abandon the historic undertaking that was made at the end of the Second World War: that we, the peoples, are committed to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. The international community must fulfil this pledge, and pursue all possible means to protect civilians from the worst ravages of conflict.

Amelia Bookstein is a Policy Advisor for Conflict for Oxfam GB.

References and further reading

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Writing for HPN

All the articles and papers published by HPN are written by HPN members, readers or others working with national and international NGOs, UN agencies, government and donor institutions, or by academics, independent consultants and others. HPN is pleased to consider articles and papers for publication submitted by anyone involved in some way in humanitarian action.

Humanitarian Exchange contains articles on practical experience, institutional initiatives and policy developments. Each issue also has a special feature of articles on a particular theme or country/region. Articles are about 2,000 words long. We prefer them to be submitted in English, but can also accept drafts in other languages. Correspondence with authors is however in English. **Network Papers** examine specific issues or experiences in the humanitarian field. They are 12–15,000 words long. We prefer them to be submitted in English, but can also accept drafts in other languages. A summary is however required in English and correspondence with authors is in English. **Good Practice Reviews** review operational experience of good practice in the key areas of humanitarian activity. GPRs are developed in close consultation with HPN and a peer review group of experts.

Articles and book reviews for HPN's website (www.odihpn.org) are between 500 and 2,000 words long, and can be submitted in English at any time. Submissions may be sent electronically to hpn@odi.org.uk or posted to HPN, Overseas Development Institute, 111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD, UK.

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ENDPIECE

New publications from the HPN

Good Practice Review 9
Disaster Risk Reduction: Mitigation and Preparedness in Development and Emergency Programming
John Twigg
January 2004

Natural disasters – disasters resulting from natural hazards such as cyclones, droughts, floods, earthquakes, landslides and volcanic eruptions – are widespread and numerous in developing and middle-income countries. They can cause great loss of life and immense damage to communities, infrastructure and national economies. At the same time, much can be done to protect vulnerable communities against disasters.

This Good Practice Review is for those working with vulnerable people, wherever they may be, and before, during and after disasters. It is intended for practitioners: principally project planners and managers working at sub-national and local levels, mostly in NGOs but also in local government and community-based organisations (CBOs). It is also aimed both at people working on long-term development programmes and those involved in emergency management.

Detailed analysis covers every aspect of risk management, from terms and concepts to project planning, monitoring and evaluation. Chapters cover the special needs of marginal and vulnerable people, such as children and the elderly, and the particular demands of urban risk. There are also sections on information, education, policy-making and the role of local knowledge and indigenous skills. The analysis is supported throughout by detailed case studies and illustrative examples.

Network Paper 43
Housing Reconstruction After Conflict and Disaster
Sultan Barakat
December 2003

Housing is essential to the well-being and development of most societies. It is a complex asset, with links to livelihoods, health, education, security and social and family stability. Housing acts as a social centre for family and friends, a source of pride and cultural identity, and a resource of both political and economic importance. Housing is also an extremely vulnerable asset, and the destruction of homes or their loss through displacement or dispossession is one of the most visible effects of conflict and natural disaster.

This paper argues that housing reconstruction should be a more prominent element in post-conflict and post-disaster programming than is currently the case. Housing interventions face significant challenges that cannot simply be wished away. But if agencies are going to continue to do housing reconstruction in the aftermath of conflict and disaster, then there is a clear need to find ways of doing it better.

Humanitarian Practice Network

The **Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)** is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policymakers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience.

HPN's aim is to improve the performance of humanitarian action by contributing to individual and institutional learning.

HPN's activities include:

- A series of specialist publications: *Humanitarian Exchange* magazine, Network Papers and Good Practice Reviews.
- A resource website at www.odihpn.org.
- Occasional seminars and workshops bringing together practitioners, policymakers and analysts.

HPN's members and audience comprise individuals and organisations engaged in humanitarian action. They are in 80 countries worldwide, working in northern and southern NGOs, the UN and other multilateral agencies, governments and donors, academic institutions and consultancies. HPN's publications are written by a similarly wide range of contributors.

HPN's institutional location is the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), an independent think tank on humanitarian and development policy. HPN's publications are researched and written by a wide range of individuals and organisations, and are published by HPN in order to encourage and facilitate knowledge-sharing within the sector. *The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or the Overseas Development Institute.*

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