MEAN TIMES

HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN COMPLEX POLITICAL EMERGENCIES—STARK CHOICES, CRUEL DILEMMAS

by

Michael Bryans, Bruce D. Jones and Janice Gross Stein

Report of the NGOs in Complex Emergencies Project

Coming to Terms, Volume I, No. 3
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REPORT OF THE NGOs IN COMPLEX EMERGENCIES PROJECT

MEAN TIMES

Humanitarian Action in Complex Political Emergencies – Stark Choices, Cruel Dilemmas

The NGOs in Complex Emergencies Project was begun in late 1995 with the goal of gaining insight into the new and unique challenges presented to the humanitarian non-governmental sector by complex political emergencies. In the course of its work the Project conducted three case studies and generated three additional working papers, as well as a final report. Publication of the case studies is forthcoming.

Case Studies

The Case of Rwanda, by Bruce D. Jones, July 1997

The Case of Sierra Leone, by Ian Smillie, September 1996

The Case of Somalia, by Bruce D. Jones (with Mark Bradbury), November 1997

Working Papers

Behind the Rhetoric of the Relief-to-Development Continuum, by Mark Bradbury, September 1997, material from this paper was used in “Normalizing the Crisis in Africa,” by Mark Bradbury, Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, February 1998.


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MEAN TIMES
NGOs in Complex Emergencies Project Final Report

From the early 1990s, humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have with increasing frequency been working in distinctly hostile environments. Commonly called "complex emergencies," these multi-dimensional humanitarian crises usually involve some combination of mass population movement, severe food insecurity, macro-economic collapse, and acute civil and military conflict including even genocide. The Project discusses the complex emergencies in Somalia (1992-93), Rwanda (1994) and Sierra Leone (1996), catastrophes echoed in Cambodia, Sudan, Bosnia, Liberia, Kosovo and Chechnya.

Work on this report began in 1995 when any professional humanitarian looking for understanding of or solutions to the problems created by complex emergencies would have found little comfort. Analysts were preoccupied with technical and operational problems — an incomplete approach — or were engaged in theoretical arguments that were of little practical use. Our multi-disciplinary research effort was driven by the expectation that detailed examination of a number of complex emergencies, from the perspective of the NGOs involved, would provide an analysis generally absent. It would also help to inform an important discussion of what humanitarians in general, and NGOs in particular, can do, should do and should not do, in such circumstances.

Analysis of the case studies demonstrates that, while the non-governmental community has been the object recently of much criticism that is unfair and, at times, irrational, there are serious deficiencies for which NGOs are responsible and which individually and jointly, they must address. NGOs in complex emergencies work under conditions where the privatization of assistance and the unwillingness of national powers to engage in political/military action has created a security vacuum and cut off the secure space in which victims of conflict and humanitarians can exist. Yet, the long-standing, and highly desirable international humanitarian ethic, as expressed in the rendering of assistance to the poorest of the poor in the midst of conflict, remains a powerful commitment. The report concentrates on the perverse and unintended consequences of emergency relief in predatory contexts, as well as on the steps humanitarians should begin to take to measure the negative consequences and consider appropriate strategic and political responses.

The essential realities facing humanitarians and populations under threat present a somber picture for the future:

- Complex emergencies will continue to occur because most cannot be prevented.

- The core dilemma for humanitarians, from which all the others arise, stems from the security vacuum engendered by the emergency itself and the unwillingness of internationally sanctioned, legitimate forces to address the need for security.

- The international community, acting through the UN system and other multilateral groups such as NATO, the EU and the OAU, have not demonstrated a consistent and predictable willingness to fill the security gap or provide sufficient resources for others to do so.

- Humanitarian organizations in general, and the non-governmental sector in particular, are locked into a set of intractable dilemmas. They face externalities of humanitarian relief that will continue to occur as long as victim populations (and humanitarians attempting to assist them) must confront complex emergencies in situations of woefully inadequate security. Under these
conditions, humanitarian organizations in general, and NGOs in particular, can only attempt to do the least harm.

The Project report offers three core recommendations to address problems created by the new climate in which humanitarians find themselves. All are made with full knowledge of exigencies faced by the non-governmental community in the world as it is:

First, if NGOs hope to make progress on broad humanitarian policy issues generally and on any of the other recommendations set out below, they need to enhance their political analysis and policy development skills. Significant investment in these areas will be required if they are to have voice in humanitarian matters commensurate both with the mandate and responsibilities that have been thrust upon them, and with the unique vision the humanitarian ethic represents.

Second, NGOs should consider the privatization of security for humanitarian purposes. The notion of an independent, volunteer security force not affiliated with any single nation, and available explicitly to further humanitarians ends was not the subject of our research, and remains largely unexamined elsewhere. Since the core dilemma humanitarians face is the ability of predators to prey on civilians and NGO staff at will, and since nations and the UN are increasingly hesitant to furnish the necessary means to provide that security, it is worth exploring whether in the face of the privatization of assistance, the privatization of security is also appropriate.

Third, in the effort to do the least harm, NGOs should begin to take seriously the option of withdrawal or disengagement. A new political humanitarian ethic needs to be developed which assists NGOs to understand when the humanitarian ethic compels withdrawal, not presence. NGOs need to be able to identify the situations in which it is only their willingness to suspend delivery and disengage which offers a chance to regain sufficient leverage to retain control over delivery and management of relief supplies, and to re-convert presence into genuine protection. As important, beyond individual situations, strategic disengagement successfully managed (or even threatened) could cover a period of time send crucial signals to future would-be perpetrators of violence hoping to use relief resources for their own purposes.

Since states will not shoulder their responsibilities either bilaterally or through the UN, since then need for humanitarian action will almost certainly grow, and since the humanitarian ethic as expressed through NGOs remains strong, the humanitarian non-governmental sector — like it or not, ready or not — is now a serious player in the international system. In shouldering the responsibilities commensurate with its potential new influence, NGOs will have to develop sophisticated understanding of the political and economic environments in which they work, and invest appropriately in building new strategic capacities. Absent such investments, NGOs will be unprepared to face the stark dilemmas which humanitarian action presents; lives will unnecessarily be lost, blighted and put at risk; and the world will be deprived of a humanitarian vision to which the non-governmental community is uniquely equipped to give voice and provide substance.
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ......................................................... 1  
Project Methodology ............................................... 2  
Core Assumptions ................................................... 3

HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN THE MIDST OF  
FAILING, FAILED AND PATHOLOGICAL STATES .................... 5  
The Changing Political-Economy of International Assistance ............ 5  
The New Face of Humanitarian Action — Civil War, Genocide  
and the Politics of Blood ........................................... 6  
Neutrality in the Face of Evil ....................................... 10

CONFRONTING THE NEW POLITICAL REALITY OF HUMANITARIAN WORK ...... 11  
Current Critiques .................................................. 12

COPING WITH CRITICS, DILEMMAS AND MISTAKES .................... 20  
The Allure of Conflict Prevention .................................. 20  
Mitigation and Alternative Operational Responses ....................... 27  
Mean Times Ahead ................................................... 29

POLITICS AND THE HUMANITARIAN ETHIC: Three Modest Proposals .......... 30  
Cats, Minnows and Owls ............................................ 31  
Securing the Humanitarian Space ................................... 33  
Disengagement — A Last Option for Causing the Least Harm ............... 37

CONCLUSION .......................................................... 41

CONDENSÉ:  
Des Temps Difficiles: Les ONG et les situations d’urgence complexes — Rapport Final ........ 43
INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, international NGOs have participated in, and increasingly been at the forefront of, a succession of humanitarian emergencies fueled by conflict. Each one seems to have exceeded its predecessor in intensity, duration and breadth of misery. Peacekeepers, diplomats and relief workers (from NGOs and UN organizations alike) have been forced to invent wholly new practices and abandon well-rehearsed procedures. Yet, the results have been at best mixed, much of the time perverse and, especially for those who are supposed to benefit, far too frequently inadequate.

The NGOs in Complex Emergencies project arose out of a recognition that there was a recurrent and clearly unsolved set of related dilemmas confronting humanitarian NGOs generated by these so-called “complex emergencies.” There were also less analytical and more visceral motivations. In the closing months of 1994, CARE Canada was one of many NGOs engaged in emergency relief work with Rwandan refugees in Eastern Zaire. It was, as has been movingly described elsewhere, a horrific experience. CARE staff, like workers from other NGOs, went about their work employing skills and practices learned under the most difficult circumstances during a dozen different disasters around the world. Tens of thousands of lives were saved. Comfort and compassion were brought to many more.

Yet the Rwanda catastrophe plunged CARE, and other NGOs, into an intractable predicament. Any agency running a refugee camp in Eastern Zaire using tested and most advanced methods of refugee camp management, was to find itself by late autumn 1994 providing assistance with the aid of indigenous workers (“local capacities”) who had been involved in the mass genocide in the months before. Without anyone realizing it, humanitarian agencies had engaged mass murderers and war criminals by the score as local staff, and the perpetrators of the genocide had reimposed a murderous authority over hundreds of thousands of non-combatants under the noses of the international community.

A more perverse outcome from humanitarian “good works” is difficult to imagine, and it provoked at CARE Canada, and elsewhere, a great deal of introspection as well as a search for solutions, information and understanding. There was little to be found, and what there was reflected preoccupation with the technical and operational (useful to be sure, but not adequate in the circumstances) or was embedded in academic and theoretical debates and thus of little practical use. None of the “actors” involved in humanitarian work in complex emergencies — major bilateral donors, UN agencies, NGOs or their consortia, media pundits or scholars — knew what to do. One of the consequences has been an explosion of scholarly writing, self-critical crisis post-mortems, international conferences, and sustained criticism of the humanitarian non-governmental organizations by the media and by critics of relief work. From the outset of this Project, however, it was evident that there was a compelling need to draw from various pools of

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1 Usually defined as multi-dimensional humanitarian crises with interlinked political, military, and social factors most often arising from internal wars and carrying international implications. They always involve some combination of mass population movement, severe food insecurity, macro-economic collapse, and acute civil and military conflict including genocide.
knowledge if there was to be any hope of bridging the gap between the analytic and the practical. The Project’s methodology, the multi-disciplinary nature of the team, and the deployment of research and writing resources all reflect this understanding.

Project Methodology

The research phase of the project was driven by the nature of NGO relief and development work: labour intensive activities employing field staffs in often remote areas, focusing on the lowest level of organization (village, family), refugee camp management (including food, medical and social services) community-based health, agriculture, micro-enterprise, and primary education. Studying what actually occurs at a micro level would yield unique insights into the nature of complex emergencies and what NGOs can and should do in such circumstances.

The study draws on three principal case studies as well as from ongoing tracking of other complex humanitarian operations in Africa. Somalia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone are some of the best known instances where political violence led to a large-scale humanitarian disaster requiring multi-dimensional response, and form the major case studies. Liberia and Burundi share some of these characteristics, and have been the location of important humanitarian programs; Eastern Zaire was the site of a multi-faceted response to a complex emergency, and the place where the political issues surrounding such response has been most vociferously debated. Tracking of the last three cases has provided the team with material to illustrate, expand, and challenge its arguments.

The choice of the cases had a number of motivations. The need to have enough variation in order to draw generalized conclusions led us to choose crises at different points along the “crisis” timeline: Sierra Leone (then, incipient state failure); Rwanda/Zaire (on-going crisis); Somalia (post-emergency aftermath of large-scale intervention). Also considered was available expertise and documentation: one team member had specialized knowledge of Sierra Leone; CARE Canada had possession of particularly good documentation on inter-NGO communications during the fall 1994 Rwanda crisis; and another team member was an ongoing participant in the multi-donor inter-agency assessment of emergency assistance to Rwanda which provided some critical insights.

The scope of study is limited to post-Cold War conflicts in Africa. The African setting is deliberate and important. Africa in the dying years of the Cold War, and since, has become, for a complex set of reasons, a lacuna in the global security community’s collective attention. The reverse side of the international community’s lack of interest in post-Cold War Africa is the amplification of the role played in its politics by the non-governmental development and humanitarian communities.

This phenomenon is mostly usefully understood not as NGOs “filling a gap” — as if they suddenly decided to go there — but rather as a product of severe climate change. Simply put, the non-governmental sector found itself working in a political-security vacuum created by the decline of interest on the part of the major powers. In a vacuum, previously well-defined structures come apart. Ready or not, willing or not, organizations and people were swept into roles and relationships they had not experienced or expected, an essentially accidental phenomenon
(especially in early days) for which, as we shall see, the NGO community has drawn attention and no small amount of criticism.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on African examples, the pathologies explored and dilemmas tackled in these crises have important antecedents in the humanitarian responses to civil war in Cambodia, Vietnam and Nigeria-Biafra, among others. Sudan stands in the background of this report, shadowing and at times illuminating the argument, as the longest-running complex humanitarian operation of our time, although its pre-Cold War beginnings keep it just outside of the scope of the study. Humanitarian responses in civil wars outside the African continent — especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya and the former Yugoslavia — have also to a greater or lesser extent been subject to the dilemmas and pathologies explored in our case studies, and material from these events has informed our thinking.

**Core Assumptions**

**The primacy of the humanitarian ethic**

The Project rested on two interrelated core assumptions: The first is the primacy of the humanitarian ethic. The vocabulary of the international system and the entire humanitarian structure in such situations can hardly be accidental: bilateral donors respond to international appeals of agencies such as the WFP and UNHCR. The language rests in the context of charity, and a major form of charitable expression (in absolute dollars it is the major form) is through national governments acting as donors. The other important form of charitable expression (much smaller in nominal dollars, but yielding capacities and results not achievable otherwise) is through charitable NGOs.

It is hardly an accident that most international NGOs are charitable organizations. Charities exist for the purpose of capturing and focusing the benevolent impulses of large numbers of individuals for useful ends. Individuals want to help others in need; giving money to an NGO is an expression of that charity. It is also an act of solidarity in that donors choose a charity in part based on identification with the individuals the organization in turn sends to deliver the assistance — “I can’t go, or I don’t have time, or it’s too scary, but I can help someone else go.”

All our interviews, and all the information we gathered showed that whatever else people involved in humanitarian work believe, and regardless of where they are in the system, they believe first of all that helping to prevent people from dying in large numbers is *ipso facto* a good thing to be carried out without much hesitation. As a general rule, doing something is better than doing nothing.

As described, the humanitarian ethic is associated with several distinct traits which can be more or less useful depending on the circumstances. In operational terms, one trait is to manage chaos through forcing one’s way through seemingly impossible obstacles. It means understanding that humanitarian action, by definition, depends on speed (these are *emergencies*) and that those who
would slow down the action for sober reflection are probably getting in the way. The darker side of a certain necessary humanitarian “pig-headedness” is that much like veterans of military combat, humanitarian workers tend to be very skeptical and wary of criticism from outside the profession. The “if you haven’t been there, then you cannot understand” attitude, if unchecked, can reinforce — as anyone with more than passing acquaintance with the military profession can attest — a fearful, self-referring isolation which puts its members beyond criticism and their work above analysis. While some of the tendency to isolation stems from the sort of “wagon circling” to be found in any profession, a large factor behind the humanitarian world view must lie in the grim nature of the work itself. Veteran humanitarian workers have confronted death, disease and destruction in ways few others have done.

Accepting the irrational and the essential messiness of life

The second core belief is more fatalistic and in some ways the opposite of the first. Good humanitarianism rests on knowing that everything cannot be mapped, not all problems can be solved, that one can never completely “get it right.” Humanitarianism is, at its core, irrational — what good can come to oneself by helping people four thousand miles away — but one does it anyway because it is the right thing to do.

The inevitable messiness of operations in the field poses an acute and sustained challenge to any confidence in the efficacy of “management” and “coordination” when it comes to humanitarian action. In a curious and ironic way (ironic because it is only in recent years that NGO workers and military personnel have chosen to actively engage each others professional cultures) the humanitarian world view resembles that of the military. Both are put, or put themselves, into situations where acting on the basis of partial information is the only way they can act at all. Neither activity is like running an aircraft factory; one cannot wait to tidy up all the bits before turning out the product. Both face the “fog of war.”

It also means that as an interdisciplinary team (no one more so than the political scientist on the project) we have come to regard some, though not all, of the recent criticism of NGO actions as misguided. Too much of the ex post facto criticism is based on knowledge those who took the actions did not and could not have had at the time, and even more important, it is based on knowledge no one in such a position is ever likely to have. The NGOs in Complex Emergencies Project was designed from the outset to be more helpful.

Readers looking for a manual for improved operational practices and better coordination will also be disappointed. It is assumed that humanitarian agencies are using the best available practices in their operations or are professional enough to find out what they are and adopt them quickly. This report is about something else; it is about how to cope with a fundamental dilemma — doing good work in the face of those who would do evil.
HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN THE MIDST OF FAILING, FAILED AND PATHOLOGICAL STATES

The set of dilemmas we have identified for study arise not from particular failures or weaknesses in humanitarian conduct, or corruption in financial or management practices—these are present to be sure, but in no greater number than any other sphere of life. Rather, they stem from a fundamental change in the security environment in which an ever larger proportion of humanitarian action takes place. The new humanitarian security dilemma has its roots in the essential characteristics of contemporary complex emergencies.

The first lies in the nature of insurgency and counter-insurgency strategy in modern civil war. In such conflicts, human populations are themselves targets and shields, battlefields and battle tools, strategic resources and strategic objectives. Increasingly, the results are military and political actions which are in basic conflict with — indeed, their aim is to prevent or undo the effects of— emergency relief and the protection of civilians. It is in this fundamental clash of logics that one can find a main source for the perverse and distorted results that have caused such upheaval in the humanitarian community, most of the opprobrium generated in the media, and most important, misery for innocents and non-combatants.

Secondly, the dilemma is made acute by the repeated unwillingness, failure, or incapacity of the major powers to act through the UN Security Council or otherwise to devote sufficient responses to the military and political dimensions of these wars. The result is quite literally a power vacuum, with war victims, refugees and their would-be rescuers left with wholly inadequate security.

The Changing Political-Economy of International Assistance

As noted earlier, nations of the continent of Africa have been especially neglected by the rest of the world. While Somalia became an exception at a particular stage of its emergency, it was this exception that appeared to set the rule of neglect in stone. So negative were the experiences of the UN and more especially the US “military humanitarian” missions in Somalia — and so limited the strategic goals behind them in comparison to the apparent costs — that Somalia set a “Mogadishu line” (active engagement) which the US and other Western forces were thereafter unwilling to cross in the African context (or just about anywhere else).

This report reinforces a core argument developed by recent policy studies that humanitarian operations are increasingly being used to fill (partially and unsuccessfully) a policy vacuum left by inaction on the part of responsible states. One measure of this phenomenon lies in the fact that in 1996, more aid to Africa was channeled through NGOs than through official development

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assistance programs. Western government aid agencies are still the principal source of those resources, but in complex emergencies in particular, NGOs are increasingly a principal conduit of assistance and so face an ever larger share of the dilemmas humanitarianism in such contexts generates.\(^3\)

NGOs have therefore become a critical resource for saving lives. For several of the worst months of the Somali famine in 1991, for example, a handful of NGOs and the ICRC constituted the only international relief presence in the country. In Sierra Leone, NGOs provided relief in parts of the country deemed off limits by the UN. In Rwanda-Eastern Zaire, a flood of refugees was met largely by NGOs, the best of which saved tens of thousands of lives. In Burundi, where military activity kept the UN out of important regions of the country, NGOs were again the front-line in the delivery of humanitarian relief assistance. Consequently, NGOs have been confronting civil war, state failure, as well as ethnic and even genocidal projects of various sorts, that are unlike anything they have encountered before.

The New Face of Humanitarian Action — Civil War, Genocide and the Politics of Blood

The staggering (if still underdetermined) numerical tallies of the dead in Somalia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone convey only the basest notion of the human costs of this form of warfare. Repeated mass displacement of civilian populations, wholesale ravaging of economic capacity, the psychological impact of mass violence and insecurity and the shattering of societal bonds are among its other legacies.

Frequently described in terms of “state failure” and “state collapse,” the phrases which attach themselves to such crises convey images of sudden, unexpected events where state structures suddenly crumble under internal and external pressure, leaving a humanitarian catastrophe in

\(^3\) This phenomenon is one part of a wider structural change within the international relief system. NGOs have proliferated in concert with decisions by donors to disburse ever larger amounts of official development assistance (ODA) in general, and emergency relief in particular, through them. Some have referred to the process as one of “privatization” of humanitarian assistance. [Nick Stockton, “NGOs: Humanitarian Cure or Cure?”, *DHA News* No. 14, May/June 1995, United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, New York]. From this perspective, the growth is a direct outcome of the restructuring of the state and welfare systems by northern donors during the 1980s. The UN describes the process in different terms with Secretary General Koil Annan writing of the increased role of NGOs as arising from “two interlocking processes: the quest for a more democratic, transparent, accountable and enabling governance and the increasing preponderance of market-based approaches to national and global economic management.” [cited in John Stremlau, *People in Peril: Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Preventing Deadly Conflict* New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1998, p. 52]. The Commission on Global Governance recorded 28,900 international NGOs in 1995. The OECD recorded a rise in northern development NGOs between 1980 and 1993 from 1,600 to 2,970. In 1994 UNDP estimated there were 50,000 southern NGOs [World Disaster Report, New York: United Nations Development Program – UNDP, 1997, pp 11-17]. Between 1976 and the mid-1980s, the European Commission increased the proportion of its emergency funding for NGOs from zero to 40 percent, with a corresponding reduction in bilateral emergency aid from 95 to 6 percent between 1976 and 1990. The proportion of ODA channelled through NGOs by the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) increased by 28 percent between 1988/89 and 1991/92 [J. Burton, *NGOs and Relief Operations: Trends and Policy Implications* London: Overseas Development Institute, 1994].
their wake — much like a natural disaster. Our case studies suggest something more nuanced. Earthquakes don’t pursue their victims or attack their rescuers.

**State failure, state pathology**

The term state failure has more analytical purchase when we realize that the same words are used with two separate meanings. First, the word “failure” can refer to the abrogation of responsibility by those who wield power within the state. Second, “failure” can refer to a lack of capacity on the part of the state to secure its territory, enforce policy, or maintain a monopoly on coercive violence. Taken together, these two meanings of failure convey something of the long-term processes through which complex emergencies eventuate.

State failure in the first sense develops over time, as the state increasingly attacks segments of its own population. These attacks can be overt, as in the case of the Somali government bombing sections of northern Somalia, or less direct, as in the concentration of economic and political power in an unrepresentative and corrupt oligarchy in Sierra Leone and Rwanda. The “failure” to secure the basic rights of citizens, to protect citizens, to fulfill essential international legal responsibilities, eventually promotes organized political opposition to the state and its abrogation of responsibilities.

As these attacks mount and gain coherence, the second form of failure comes into play: a withering of the state’s capacity to enforce its own policies and politics, and the loss of the monopoly over coercive violence. In some cases the process can culminate in a seminal event, such as the flight of Siyaad Barre from Somalia, or the military victory of the RPF in Rwanda. Though as Sierra Leone’s sad course illustrates, the decline can be gradual, relatively uneventful (in grand political terms), yet involve just as much misery.

Even in these instances, however, a broader pattern holds: the contest over politics and power continues after the collapse of the formal state. Thus we have the drawn-out competition for resources typical of Liberia and Sierra Leone and increasingly characteristic of Somalia, Burundi, and Zaire-Congo.

“Pathological” is the appropriate word to describe one of the cases examined in the Project’s research. The emergency in Rwanda was clearly not a product of state failure comme les autres. Whereas in Somalia, state failure had been the failure of the state to use its legitimacy or successfully impose its authority on groups within the national territory, the dynamics of state collapse in Rwanda were radically different. Here the state itself — captured by militants after the assassination of the President — turned on a portion of its own population, with genocidal intent. The horrific efficiency of the genocide testifies to the fact that state machinery was active enough not only to act directly against a portion of its own population, but also (and it is a vital distinction) to mobilize and motivate one group to inflict mass murder on another. Thus, in the case of Rwanda, state failure has a different meaning: the radical failure to fulfill its legal and moral
responsibilities to its citizenry, and the corruption of the concept of state protection into one
directed at the destruction of a “threatening” element of society.

There is added poignancy to the fact that while the genocide in Rwanda produced a massive
humanitarian emergency in the form of horrific human rights violations, this was not the
“emergency” to which the international community responded on an unprecedented scale. The
second emergency was created, indirectly, by the July victory of the RPF over the Rwandan regime,
and, directly, by the successful efforts of the fleeing members of the former Rwandan regime to
create a population base for themselves (mostly in Eastern Zaire) comprised of a million and a
half-terrified Rwandan Hutus, when it became clear that the genocide (the first emergency) had
not succeeded.

The “new” post-cold war civil wars

Conflicts arising from either kind of “state failure” involve forms of political, military and socio-
economic action which present radical challenges to NGOs and other humanitarian agencies —
in fact, to the humanitarian ethic in general — because the human costs the agencies are there to
address are not incidental to the strategic goals of the conflicting parties. Indeed, they are in many
instances its essential currency. Insurgency and counter-insurgency entail political and economic
control over elements of the civilian population, inflicting costs on those populations, forcing
movements en masse and, in some cases, the killing of non-combatants for political or military ends.
As our case studies show, in the internecine struggle for dominance in the political arenas of
Somalia and Sierra Leone, and even more so in the openly genocidal landscapes of Rwanda and
Burundi, civilian casualties were not “collateral damage” but measures of strategic gain.

All over Central Africa in the 1990s insurgent military campaigns have been fought from behind
population shields. And the inevitable counter-insurgency strategies of beleaguered governments
have put into practice the Maoist doctrine, “if you can’t kill the fish, remove the water,” resulting in
the shielding population being forcibly removed, interned, or killed. In Somalia and Sierra
Leone militias and army units alike looted communities, destroying or carrying away available
resources, engaged in scorched earth tactics against the local infrastructure, and attacked not only
those civilian populations who showed signs of supporting the other side, but also those who
preferred no side at all.

The increase in what the humanitarian community calls the “internally displaced” is telling, and
reflects an essential pathology of post-cold war civil wars. Here conflict no longer revolves round
the control of the state (which has collapsed or imploded), but local resources and “ways of life,”
where political authority is fragmented, where the economy is based on predatory relationships
often defined in terms of ethnicity and blood, and where neutrality and non-involvement is an unacceptable position.4

In summary, modern internal conflicts typical of the cases we examined exhibit characteristics which threaten the very basis of traditional humanitarian action:

- the root causes grow from the twin crises of the withering of state capacity (or its direction to pathological ends) and the failure of development;

- social control over elements of the population as a key strategic objective of internal war, with violence and coercion directed towards civilians as a major tactical weapon, not merely a by-product of other military activity;

- many of these wars fought for control over resources become cyclical and self-perpetuating in nature, as violence generates profit for those who wield it most effectively — which often means most brutally.

There is an historically important caveat to introduce here: the extreme characteristics of conflict described above are “new” only for humanitarian organizations, not for perpetrators or victims. The German-Russian war between 1941-1945 bore all the hallmarks of ferocious violence with civilians deliberately targeted to catastrophic effect. The main humanitarian organization extant at the time, the Red Cross, was effectively excluded from the entire region for the whole period, and the killing went on mostly unobserved and with a few notable exceptions, entirely unhindered. Past civil wars too bear many of the hallmarks of predatory internal conflicts that feed what we now call “complex emergencies.” The terms “village pacification” and “hearts and minds” evoke North Vietnam’s savage war with American forces in the south, and the Bolshevik’s “exemplary terror” campaign against “kulak” peasants who sided with opponents to Soviet rule devastated the Russian countryside in the early 1920s.5

The difference for humanitarians today is access: In the years since 1945, a putative (if indifferently exercised or enforced) right to access to refugees, as well as other deniers in the armour of national sovereignty have been created in the form of various international treaties and charters. As well, large multilateral organizations and NGOs have unprecedented technical means to obtain information and gain access, while collapsing states have increasingly less influence on activities

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4 While not a central theme of this paper, it is important to note that the increase in the numbers of so-called internally displaced reflects an increased inability for populations in distress to seek asylum across borders and become “refugees” with access to certain political and humanitarian rights. In the view of Mark Bradbury, [see Project Working Paper] the trend marks the increasing tendency for the international community to politically and economically disengage from these new conflicts, to attempt to contain their effects, and to ensure that the costs are “internalized” within the affected communities.

within their borders including those NGOs might wish to undertake, assuming they are willing to face the attendant risks.

**Neutrality in the Face of Evil**

A gruesome logic arises from understanding the face of conflict in complex emergencies. If the causing of distress to certain groups through classic terror-by-example (Sierra Leone, Algeria, Cambodia) deliberate starvation (Somalia), systematic rape (Rwanda, Bosnia), forced displacement (Bosnia) evengenocide (Rwanda-Zaïre) is what delivers political and military power to those employing the techniques, then from their perspective any attempt to counter or mitigate the intended impact must constitute an unfriendly act. If the war is over sea lanes and you sink my ships, you are my enemy. If the war is over who controls the people in the three surrounding parishes, and you (the humanitarian) attempt to protect and offer comfort to those people, your efforts to challenge my control makes you my enemy. The clash of logics is profound and has implications across the range of humanitarian activities.

For humanitarians, access to refugees, victims, and the displaced is not just an international legal right, it is the very oxygen humanitarianism has survived on heretofore. The humanitarian ethic stems from a 19th century logic of protecting non-combatants from the consequences of war. However, in post-cold war civil wars, while there may be non-combatants in a formal sense, there are few non-participants. Indeed, as we have seen, non-involvement is actively, and often brutally discouraged.

Collectively then, civilians are a source of economic extraction, a military shield, a bargaining chip, and a strategic objective for the other side. In its most extreme manifestation, humanitarians become at best another source of economic extraction, either directly through theft and hijacking, or indirectly through manipulation of distressed populations. At worst, humanitarians are an obstacle to be overcome, increasingly through violence. Violence and the threat of violence (intimidation) prevents humanitarians from providing resources to populations in need thus keeping them dependent on one side or another.

Herein lies the terrible new dilemma for those who embrace the humanitarian ethic. An aid organization’s effectiveness derives from its ability to control scarce resources and direct their use: food, medical supplies, information, agricultural implements and other things which sustain life in difficult circumstances. In the political-military context of contemporary civil wars, aid workers and the populations they are there to help are most likely to be targeted for attack or forced extraction when the humanitarians are doing their jobs successfully (the events of Autumn 1994 in Eastern Zaïre, and July through December 1992 in Somalia, are compelling examples).

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6 The murder of the Rwandan Boy Scouts assisting NGO camp managers in Eastern Zaïre in the fall of 1994 was the clearest possible message from militia leaders to the humanitarian community that it would tolerate no alternative authority structures. [See Project Rwanda Case Study.]
Since control over populations has become an essential strategic goal, they are the battleground. The volume of misery thus created is overwhelming, in turn stimulating the need for outside assistance. The humanitarian ethic compels response (whether adequate or not is beside the point, since the dilemma exists at whatever level of assistance) and the resources deployed can either be so misdirected as to defeat even the most determined efforts at proper management or, at the limit, these resources create an economy which even if well-managed in conventional terms, becomes the fuel for continued and renewed warfare.

Our research, and that of others, has identified many such cases:

- Resources channeled into Somalia by UN agencies and NGOs became part of a complex political economy of warfare between rival militias and rival clans. Raw theft of those resources was but part of the equation, but equally significant was the ability of various militias to use force and the threat of force to compel NGOs into a series of arrangements which saw them hire, for purposes of guarding relief supplies, some of the same forces who were the source of the humanitarian crisis in the first place.

- More directly, and more distressingly, UN and NGO resources in eastern Zaire were subject to political control and taxation by the forces that ran the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Less by theft and diversion than by controlling distribution of relief supplies and the flow of information, Rwanda’s *genocidaires* turned UN-managed and NGO-operated refugee camps into a political base and resource mine for continued and renewed genocidal warfare, both within Zaire and in western Rwanda.

- In Sierra Leone and Liberia, conflict analysts and medical NGOs learned that they could plan by following the pattern of food deliveries: when food was distributed to a village or displaced persons camp, the militias would quickly attack to seize the relief supplies, killing dozens of villagers as they did so.

- And most disastrously, when the post-genocide Rwandan regime sought to break the *genocidaires* control of the camps, civilian refugees became moving shields between two armies, and NGOs were at times manipulated into helping these armies enact their warring strategies. Relief supplies and NGO presence were used to lure starving refugees out of hiding in the forests of Zaire, and into traps where they were massacred. NGOs were transformed from sources of protection into resources for destruction.

**CONFRONTING THE NEW POLITICAL REALITY OF HUMANITARIAN WORK**

In the context just described, humanitarianism is both part of the problem and the solution, and the resulting dilemmas show every indication of becoming worse as the number of complex emergencies multiply and as the “Mogadishu line” continues to hold. Humanitarian resources are easily and so far unavoidably, drawn to a greater or lesser extent into the political economy of
conflict. This is not to argue that NGOs have lost their neutrality; rather, and perhaps more controversially, it is to argue that in the context of recent African wars, and post-cold war civil strife generally, neutrality itself has become a political position, whereby the “neutral” provision of resources distorts military and political outcomes by its presence.

Current Critiques

The perversion of outcomes associated with humanitarian responses to recent complex emergencies has given rise to a broad band of strong criticism of humanitarianism and humanitarians. In fact, however, these critiques trace back as far as the relief operations in Biafra-Nigeria, Eritrea and Cambodia. There and elsewhere, humanitarian agencies have come under fire for engaging in operations which facilitated the processes of war.\(^7\)

Recently, the critique has been amplified in three ways. First, in the academic world the critiques has been substantiated through careful and thoughtful research. Second, in Western capitals, complaints about emergency assistance by NGOs which started as internal dissent have moved into the political mainstream and the popular press. And third, in the countries in which they operate, aid agencies have come under unprecedented physical attack by conflicting parties — ICRC lost thirty-five staff in the Great Lakes region in 1996 alone, and the Caucasus region has proven an exceedingly dangerous place to be a humanitarian worker.\(^8\) The cumulative effect is that emergency assistance has never been the subject of so much external scrutiny and internal reflection.

The critiques of humanitarians are both strategic and technical. On the technical side, they relate to the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of aid interventions. Lack of effective coordination, poor information management systems, disproportionately high costs, and poor technical standards are commonly voiced concerns in evaluations of humanitarian programs. In Rwandan refugee camps in Zaire in 1994, it is estimated that as many as 80,000 people may have died due to poor standards of health provision.\(^9\) In Somalia, it is estimated that up to 240,000 lives were lost due to delayed action by the international community. Furthermore, while the international response focused on food aid, perhaps 70 percent of deaths could have been averted through public health programs.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) Boston, et al. *Rwanda Joint Evaluation Study #3*

However, the more significant set of critical observations of humanitarianism are strategic in nature. They raise central issues such as the responsibility of humanitarian agencies, humanitarian standards and ethics, whether their activities cause more harm despite all the good they might do, and the ways in which humanitarianism can become intertwined with national foreign policies and military agendas.\textsuperscript{11}

Recent critical analyses of humanitarianism share a limited number of related themes. We do not try to address all these in detail, but rather to identify those which raise the broadest strategic concerns among those who must grapple with contemporary humanitarian dilemmas.

\textit{Major national donors use humanitarian action and emergency relief as a substitute for international political action.} Where humanitarian relief is used to manage or contain a crisis—as in the former Yugoslavia—NGOs, as the preferred channel for relief aid, become instruments of foreign policy. “Containment through charity”\textsuperscript{12} is one label that has stuck. The uneven allocation of relief to different populations in distress over time and between countries, and the high level of wastage that is regarded as acceptable suggests that humanitarian responses are not based only on need, but also on the geo-political and economic considerations of donors, and the financial and institutional imperatives of aid agencies.\textsuperscript{13}

Allocation of resources to crises which bear little relation to the gravity of the situation, but rather responds to the national agendas of major donors, competition among NGOs, and the idiosyncrasies of UN “Res Reps,” NGO country directors and UN agency headquarters officials—are problems to which NGOs and their funders (institutional and private) should pay and in fact are paying, increased attention. We discuss later in this report examples in our case studies of these sorts of perverse outcomes. However, if the goal is to address the fundamental dilemmas his report identifies, then it is crucial to draw a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the fact that containment through charity occurs, and on the other, conclusions and recommendations that follow.

\textsuperscript{11} Some of the critiques of international humanitarianism are almost caricatures. Alex de Waal and Michael Maren, for example, both describe a humanitarian non-governmental sector that is systematically heartless, corrupt, incompetent and self-serving. (Michael Maren, \textit{The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity}. Free Press, 1997.) These accounts, which contain specific criticisms that are valid and important, nevertheless miss the larger context in which contemporary humanitarian action is unfolding. There is no better example of misrepresentation of context, than in De Waal's description of events in Eastern Zaire following the genocide in 1994. He argued that in the circumstances of genocide, aid workers must help their victims and under no circumstances aid the perpetrators. Yet De Waal remained effectively silent on how this ideal state of affairs is to be achieved, and ignores the starkly cruel dilemmas that those individuals and agencies on the ground at the time found themselves facing. See \textit{The Guardian}, October 20, 1996.


\textsuperscript{13} Mark Adams and Mark Bradley, guest editors, \textit{Anthropology in Action} special issue on refugees and conflict, 1995, p.33.
The issue can be expressed in simple economic terms: does humanitarian assistance have opportunity costs? If national and multi-lateral resources had not been directed through NGOs or the UN humanitarian system, would these resources have been otherwise used for more powerful and effective mechanisms to resolve conflict and preserve lives? For the "relief is a substitute for real action" critique to have analytical weight the answer must be yes, yet our research identified not a single instance where such was demonstrably the case. Governments and multilateral donors do undertake humanitarian actions; they do take credit for such actions in the face of clear failure to take potentially more effective alternative measures. Yet there is no evidence that if somehow prevented from undertaking the former, they would entertain the latter.

The "containment through charity" issue can present serious credibility problems for the humanitarian community generally. All too often journalists point to obvious difficulties and inefficiencies of a particular relief operation, judge it to be a failure, condemn the participants (NGOs and the UN agencies) as incompetents and opportunists, and then propose as an alternative the very sort of political and military action which experience shows the international community is simply not willing to take.14

**NGOs are financially irresponsible, are not accountable, and their actions are “poisoning the humanitarian well”:** Those who level these criticisms see the proliferation of NGOs in complex emergencies as problematic in areas of financial and ethical accountability:

- The multi-donor evaluation of the Rwandan crisis could not, for example, locate a third of the 170 NGOs registered, and some $120 million of funding went unaccounted for.15

- The multiplicity of actors involved in humanitarian work, with diverse mandates and claims, is undermining humanitarian values and principles.16 The proliferation of NGOs has eroded the purity of the "humanitarian space" wherein NGOs of dubious provenance negotiate access to civilians with warring parties regardless of their legitimacy or the Geneva Conventions, and thus endanger the ICRC’s work of protection.

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14 See Kevin Toolis, “Africa’s famine is very big business," *Guardian Weekly*, September 6, 1998 for an example of this logic at work.


• Beneficiaries' rights come second to those of the aid agencies evidenced by the fact that military protection (if any) goes to aid workers and not the victims of the emergency.17

The issue of financial accountability and NGO practices is serious but essentially technical. Determining and implementing “best practices” should be the first priority for any professional group, and the best humanitarian NGOs are professional, expert organizations. There are well-known examples of incompetence and even malfeasance. However, our research identified no systemic problems, and there is no evidence of which we are aware that would put agencies carrying out humanitarian action into a special category of behavior less efficient or less accountable than any other occupational group.

Indeed, given the conditions under which such work occurs, the necessarily rough and ready nature of the contractual arrangements NGOs often have with their national and multilateral partners, and the relatively low wage paid to a typical NGO field staff, the relative paucity of financial and ethical problems is remarkable. In short, humanitarian NGOs certainly need pay no less attention, but no more, than other publicly-funded organizations intent on doing better work with the resources available.

With respect to the proliferation of agencies and the apparent decline in respect for “neutrality,” both phenomena can be traced not to more NGOs in the field, but to the shredding of the security envelope in which they work. From 1945 through 1985, decolonization was rapid, the number of national governments quadrupled, an extensive UN apparatus for assistance was created, and, at least in wealthier countries, the charitable ethic was extended to international action. It is this expansion of the charitable ethic beyond the domestic to the international arena which has made possible the large increase in international non-governmental organizations.

In the last decade, since the end of the Cold War, the disengagement by the West from poorer countries has helped to create the conditions ripe for failed and pathological states, has left the international community with little inclination to engage directly with the resulting problems, and no inclination at all to provide the security that would aid the victims and reduce the violence. The result is what we typically see in any African crisis in the last ten years: NGOs funded by national governments, domestic publics and the UN working in situations of vicious civil strife, with little or no protection — and with what little there is going only to protect aid workers.

Much of the current critique of humanitarians suggests that NGOs are responsible for these problems, whereas the problems and the failure by the major powers to respond hastened existing NGOs into emergency situations and created the necessity — and no doubt the opportunity — for new organizations to form. It is hard to credit complaints about the proliferation of the non-

17 In Somalia UN and multinational troops protected only aid workers, and the only Somali gunmen disarmed were those working as bodyguards for the humanitarian organizations. The broader militia holding sway over the population were essentially ignored. [See Project Somalia Case Study]
governmental sector in the face of national and international abandonment of so much of the frontline attempts to resolve international conflict and civil strife.

**NGOs and the “marketplace” for the delivery of humanitarian services**

A related and much under-explored reality of the international humanitarian system is the economic relationship between NGOs and their institutional funders. While most NGOs are able to marshal resources from their charitable constituencies — private or individual donors — in the context of assistance during an acute crisis, these private or internal funds comprise a fraction of the resource flows needed. An NGO’s internal resources — typically raised from individuals and small “mobilizing” institutions such as trade unions or charitable foundations — is indispensable for capacity building, donor education, research and development: all the things necessary for an NGO to be on the scene and ready to work. The internal funds are also essential during a relief operation to provide resource liquidity and fill in the inevitable funding shortfalls inherent to crisis operations.

While there are occasions when NGOs have been forced by circumstances to operate entirely on their own resources, by and large, in the thick of a complex emergency NGOs function as contractors and implementers on behalf of multi-lateral agencies. And here the relationship is embedded in a peculiar (and rarely encountered) economic structure of “oligopsony” — many sellers, few buyers. In the humanitarian marketplace, the buyers are national and multi-lateral aid organizations, and the sellers are the NGOs. Absent an implementing contract from one of the UN agencies, it is likely that very little relief will be delivered by that NGO. During a typical complex emergency a humanitarian NGO can obtain the necessary funds to do its work from one of (at most) six international sources (the UN family of agencies) and normally one domestic source (usually the international assistance agency of the national government where the NGO resides) which very often will only enter the picture after one of the UN agencies has committed itself.

When examined more closely, the economic dependence of individual humanitarian NGOs is even greater than the overall structure might suggest. In raw economic terms, the UN family of agencies resemble a collection of government mandated, natural monopolies: WFP manages food from donor countries, the UNHCR is charged with taking care of refugees, and so on. While there are a handful of UN agencies and several dozen national assistance organizations, because both NGOs and the UN agencies tend to specialize, most individual NGOs are for sectoral reasons quite limited in their contracting options. For example, an NGO with food logistics expertise generally has one potential partner — the World Food Program. And any NGO with refugee camp management experience must as a general rule contract with the United Nations High

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18 The proportion varies depending on a number of factors including the capacity of the NGO to raise funds, the domestic social environment in which the organization resides, the policies and programs of the national government concerned, and the nature of the humanitarian work. While only anecdotal, the best estimate we have encountered shows that private donors fund account for somewhere between five and at the very most, fifty percent of resources deployed by any individual NGO over the aggregate term of a complex emergency.
Commissioner for Refugees. Such engagements may or may not pull in resources directly from the NGO’s national government.

At the domestic level, the available choices are even more constricted. National governments have an inherent monopoly over domestic funds devoted to international assistance. Here most NGOs, most of the time, face complete “monopsony” — many sellers, one buyer.\(^\text{19}\)

Additional factors create further complications. UN agencies compete with each other at the edges of their mandates (food delivery to refugee camps can be handled by either the WFP or UNHCR, for example) and some UN agencies are both contractors (with NGOs and, increasingly, commercial firms as contractors) and implementers of projects in direct competition with the same contractors.\(^\text{20}\)

The reality of the economic structure outlined above conforms broadly to what economic theory would suggest: the contractor UN agencies have fixed, non-negotiable rates, penalty clauses, payment schedules, and reporting requirements, and effectively play competing NGOs off against each other to make these requirements stick.\(^\text{21}\)

Working against the economic power engendered by the UN agencies’ monopoly powers are some important non-economic factors. In the first instance, the UN system could not possibly deliver the assistance it does without engaging NGOs — a fact which would seem to shift influence back in their direction. However, as a practical matter while it may be the case that the UN cannot do without NGOs in general, it can do without any particular NGO.

A second important factor relates to UN agency governance. UN agencies are not independent actors since they get virtually all their resources from relatively few national government donors whose countries are also host to the UN’s implementing NGO “partners.” Through various governance mechanisms, donor governments exercise influence on contracting practices and policies, though here too, the workings of any single multilateral agency — not to mention the system as a whole — is not well understood.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{19}\) There are some circumstances where the monopolistic forces are less powerful. Anecdotal evidence indicates that in the United States the number of effective funding “windows” available at USAID, and its relatively decentralized structure combined with the sheer volume of funding, tends to mitigate AID’s monopoly power. In addition, some NGOs (CARE International is one example) have developed their own multi-lateral structures which create opportunities for field operations to access multiple national donors.


\(^{21}\) See Ian Smillie, UNHCR. CARE Canada... and the Low Cost of Assisting Refugees (unpublished, Ottawa, 1996) for a an example of what by all accounts is a not atypical NGO-UN multilateral relationship.

\(^{22}\) See Smillie, UNHCR. CARE Canada... as well as A. John Watson and Michael Bryans, Canada. Multilateral Agencies and NGOs.
This far from transparent set of political-economic relationships deserves analysis well beyond the scope of this report. Nevertheless, if one hopes to make recommendations for action that have application in the world in which humanitarians practice their craft, it is necessary to acknowledge the economic factors at work.

**Humanitarian relief undermines local capacities.** This set of arguments has it that humanitarian relief is undesirable because it is externally managed, non-participatory and unsustainable. The provision of free food and other commodities distorts local markets and undermines local food security systems and safety-nets and thus in the longer term fosters “human insecurity”.

As with the earlier argument on containment through charity, the proposition that humanitarian relief is externally managed, non-participatory (though some progress has been made in this area) and is economically unsustainable is largely although not exclusively, a response to the urgency of the conditions faced by the affected populations. Humanitarian relief takes place in the midst of economic collapse, forced population migration, rising death rates, and widespread terror and coercion. It is in the very nature of complex emergencies that the indigenous systems have either failed (Somalia, Sierra Leone) or to the extent they work, have turned their energies to suppressing one or other of their client populations (Rwanda, Bosnia). The attributes of complex emergencies make it unlikely that during their acute phases, relief can be entirely or even mostly locally managed and sustainable.

Ironically, it is a successful quest for more “participatory”, less paternalistic emergency relief which led more or less directly to the non-governmental sector’s greatest crisis of conscience and credibility. The goal in general is to use indigenous leadership within refugee populations to help them, as much as possible, run their own affairs. In Eastern Zaire where aid agencies were setting up camps for the influx of hundreds of thousands from Rwanda, these most advanced techniques of “refugee self-management” were widely employed. In the case of Rwanda, however, the leadership cadres were precisely those who had engineered the genocide and then the mass migration. The misery which resulted, and stretched over more than two years, captures the essence of the current humanitarian predicament.

From a technical perspective — the design and adoption of “best practices” — there is some evidence that NGOs are making progress in mitigating some of the negative consequences. However, none of the efforts at improving operational skills will transform humanitarian assistance into something other that what it is: an act of charity and mercy. Nor will they eliminate the undesirable externalities of humanitarian relief. There are no technical fixes to the profoundly political problems engendered by complex emergencies. Thus the onus is on the critics of

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humanitarian action to develop alternatives to humanitarian relief as it is presently configured which, at the same time, would not sacrifice human life or abandon people who are deliberately targeted for political purposes.

**Humanitarian relief fuels war and conflict.** This last — and by far the most serious — in the thematic categories of critiques has it that because of the political nature of complex emergencies, humanitarian aid, despite best practices and best intentions, can become a political and economic resource to warring parties. In this way, humanitarian assistance is woven into the structures that sustain armed conflict and violence. Recent examples abound:

- In areas of Sudan, assistance to civilians in government created “peace villages,” effectively supporting the government military strategy.

- In Somalia, the UN military and NGO operations in the period 1992 through 1994 pumped vast amounts of money into the Somali economy which helped fuel the political economy of “warlordism.”

- In Eastern Zaire, the armed forces and militias responsible for the Rwandan genocide in 1994 were often able to manage the processes of relief provision for their own political and military purposes such that humanitarian aid became a tool for the rebuilding of the genocide movement.

Unlike the previous three critiques, this last strikes at the core of the humanitarian ethic. Only dimly understood at first, appreciation of this critical dilemma has grown as knowledge of what took place in Rwanda and then Eastern Zaire has accumulated over time. The combatants among the refugees in Eastern Zaire had conducted a genocide of extraordinary brutality and intensity. Nevertheless, for two years, awareness of the presence and role of the genocide militias in the refugee camps never prompted serious action by the international community to undo this most egregious perversion of humanitarian space.

The result for NGOs was perhaps the most acute crisis of conscience, accompanied by profound and at times strident criticism of humanitarian action to date. In newspaper articles, television interviews, journals, and policy debates, critics lambasted NGOs and UN agencies not just for the unintended consequences of their actions but for their motivations, methods, and policies. Humanitarians were accused of knowingly harboring genocidal militias, of complicity in the

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26 Jan Westcott, “A Personal Account”, unpublished correspondence, contribution to material held by Refugee Policy Group, Washington, D.C.
rejuvenation of the genocide movement, of engaging in these activities purely to increase the opportunities to raise funds, and of inflating the numbers of beneficiaries, again for financial gain. And all of this took place, as noted above, in an atmosphere of retrenchment on the part of influential UN member states and donor governments. The international community dug in behind the Mogadishu line and looked away.

While the allegations were unfair and in the most profound sense untrue, the traumatic experience in Eastern Zaire made absolutely clear that international NGOs would have to deal directly with the criticisms they faced, accept responsibility for errors they had made, and begin to face up to the dilemmas that lay behind them.

COPING WITH CRITICS, DILEMMAS AND MISTAKES

The need to address both the substance and perception of humanitarian action has been recognized by NGOs specifically and the humanitarian community in general, in a variety of ways. NGOs have explored new roles and strategies to address the thrust of the criticism. These developments are significant, and represent a serious effort to reassert and strengthen humanitarian law, and to protect the entitlements and the lives of those in need of assistance.

However, not all NGOs and aid agencies are moving in the same direction. Indeed, there is an emergent split between two poles of opinion, which can be broadly categorized as “prevention” and “mitigation.” The first emphasizes development as the long-term solution to conflict and complex emergencies. Within this group, some NGOs believe that they can contribute to a wider effort at preventing conflict from escalating, either through direct diplomacy and conflict resolution, or by facilitating the early warning of the larger international community which would then take appropriate action to forestall the impending crisis.

The “mitigation” group, on the other hand, concentrates on reducing the perverse consequences of humanitarian action by being extremely attentive to the intended and unintended consequences of aid, by educating members of the humanitarian community about these consequences, and by coordinating with other like-minded organizations. The report considers each effort in turn.

The Allure of Conflict Prevention

Forestalling complex emergencies: conflict resolution and peace building

Almost certainly as a consequence of the security vacuum, and the painful dilemmas NGOs have faced recently, a number of traditional development and humanitarian NGOs (most prominently in Sierra Leone and Burundi) have incorporated “peace building” or “conflict prevention” strategies into their programs. This has occurred in tandem with the rise of a new generation of NGOs that specialize in conflict resolution, and that have played a prominent role in the search for solutions to the underlying causes of complex emergencies.
Just as conflicts have both underlying and proximate causes, so there are long and short-term strategies — at least according to prevailing theories — to prevent a conflict or forestall an emergency. Over the long-term, conflict prevention and the forestalling of emergencies require the construction of functioning systems of political, social, and economic management capable of negotiating change without recourse to violent conflict. This takes the form of state building, the fostering of civil institutions and the strengthening of civil society generally. Understood as a short-term activity, conflict prevention and forestalling emergencies entail negotiations with major political and military actors to shift ongoing violent conflicts into political arenas before they escalate to the point where they generate an “emergency.”

NGOs have always been engaged in long-term action, although the work has been constructed in somewhat different language at different points in the history of development efforts. Only recently have NGOs begun to characterize such activities as contributing to an agenda of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Terminology aside, however, at least some of the activities which contribute to the prevention of violent conflict are in fact the kinds of developmental activities in which NGOs have traditionally been engaged.27

As a short-term activity, the new emphasis is manifest in two ways: the growth in the number of of specialized conflict-resolution NGOs, and the adoption of programming goals and activities directly related to conflict prevention by many development and relief NGOs. While these kinds of activities have increased, and currently form a significant part of some NGOs’ activities in complex emergencies, they did not play a role in either Somalia or Rwanda in the period under study.

In Somalia, we could find no instance during the early years of the emergency of an NGO effort aimed at preventing the outbreak of war or containing its spread through diplomatic activity. Only in the later stages of emergency operations did NGOs begin to engage in activities which could be characterized as conflict resolution in its broadest sense, in this case peace building activities in Somaliland, especially after 1993.

In Rwanda, conflict prevention was absent from the agenda of most NGOs, with only a handful engaged in any sort of conflict resolution activity. These were of two types. First, a small number of NGOs, largely Catholic organizations, attempted to facilitate negotiations between the principal combatants in the civil war — a marginal endeavour for most development-relief NGOs. A more

27 While the Project did not explore the issue in depth, focusing as it does on complex emergencies, it is nevertheless worth noting that all three of the principal case studies found instances in which pre-crisis development activity — not necessarily by NGOs — either contributed to the sorts of military and political processes which led into the emergencies, or at least ignored problems which in retrospect emerge as important premissive or underlying causes of conflict. Status quo donor aid policies and IMF structural adjustment in pre-genocide Rwanda, and refugee assistance activities in Somalia following the Ogaden war are cases in point. [See Project Rwanda and Somalia case studies.] And a factor which arises repeatedly is that of urban youth unemployment. By and large, unemployed urban youth have fallen outside of the programming scope of NGOs, though the problem is increasingly understood as a critical catalyst in generating complex emergencies. [See Project Sierra Leone case study.]
widely relevant type of activity was a peace and non-violence education program funded by OXFAM and managed in collaboration with the Catholic Church’s *Justice et Paix* program.\(^{28}\)

Deliberate “peacebuilding” activities grew significantly in Sierra Leone and Burundi. Specialized, secular, conflict resolution NGOs, and most controversially International Alert — one of the oldest of the new breed — played a conspicuous role in Sierra Leone. Although the resource profile of these NGOs is minuscule compared to relief NGOs, their political impact on the shape and course of the emergency can be out of proportion to their size. Engaged in activities such as supporting local peace NGOs, advising (some have argued supporting) parties to the conflict, helping to facilitate political negotiations, and in one notable instance negotiating the release of an expatriate hostage, the conflict resolution NGOs were an important part of the political landscape in Sierra Leone, at times complementing and at times competing with more traditional UN and other diplomatic initiatives.

Since the beginning of Sierra Leone’s crisis, efforts by conflict resolution NGOs have increased exponentially. Many of these attempts, focused heavily but not exclusively on Burundi, have been initiated by NGOs such as International Alert and the International Crisis Group, as well as by some of the long-standing, non-secular groups which have traditionally engaged in peace building and peace making activities, such as the Community of Saint Egidio. One NGO conflict resolution practitioner estimated in 1996 that there have been over 200 separate peace initiatives in Burundi.\(^{29}\) Since that estimate was made, several new initiatives have begun, many undertaken by NGOs.

In Burundi, the more established development and relief NGOs have also taken the conflict resolution agenda as their own as part of traditional emergency programming. Of particular note is Action Aid, which has designed programs for internally displaced populations around principles of reconciliation.\(^{30}\) A significant departure from regular relief activity, it likely represents a growing trend since it offers an “arms length” approach for skittish national governments whose taste for direct political and military action continues to decline. As yet, there has been little systematic evaluation of these conflict resolution programs.

*Forestalling complex emergencies: early warning*

Closely related to conflict resolution and peace building is the increased attention paid in NGO headquarters in London, Geneva, Paris, Washington, and elsewhere, to their potential role in the early warning of conflicts. NGOs, it has long been presumed, have comparative advantages which

\(^{28}\) A small program which has yet to be properly evaluated by OXFAM, it could have important lessons for the increasingly widespread agenda of NGO peace building.

\(^{29}\) Figure cited to co-author at a closed meeting, United States Department of State, Washington, DC, December 1995.

\(^{30}\) Presentation by Action Aid at meeting sponsored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, UK, 1996.
make them ideal for such an activity: they are close to the ground, in contact with local actors, and decentralized — key attributes for the front-line gathering of data for early warning.\footnote{Bruce Jones and Janice Gross Stein, "NGOs and Early Warning: the Case of Rwanda," in Susanne Schmeidl and Howard Adelman, Dilemmas of Early Warning in Complex Emergencies forthcoming, (New York: CIAO: Columbia University Press, 1999). [also published as Project Working Paper.]}\footnote{See Sierra Leone Project Case Study}

The attention paid to the early warning agenda has increased through the 1990s, in tandem with conflict prevention, to which it is a natural complement. As with conflict prevention, many NGOs worry about the consequences of adopting early warning of emergencies as a core task. There is real concern that accepting responsibility for early warning acquires tacitly to the abrogation of responsibility by states and international institutions. And it does not escape the attention of NGOs that they were never asked to contribute to early warning during the Cold War, and are now asked to do so primarily in countries of marginal strategic importance. However, many NGOs also find compelling the argument that good early warning, and efforts to prevent and forestall emergencies generally, hold the prospect of saving more lives and preventing more suffering than any emergency response. Analysis of our case studies shows, however, that NGOs did not play an important early warning role, and in one case, early warning was found not even to be a relevant category of analysis.

In the first of the decade’s large emergencies, Somalia, early warning was certainly not part of the NGO agenda, not least because early warning by that time had become essentially irrelevant. The collapse of the Siyad Barre regime in early 1991 — the event which sparked what became the emergency phase of Somalia’s long misery — was the culmination of one phase of war which stretched back over a decade, and had intensified in 1988.

Analysis of Sierra Leone (chosen as a case in 1996 because it was regarded as an “incipient” crisis rather than a full-blown emergency) indicates that apart from the accumulation by some NGOs of data over time about social disintegration, human rights abuses and corruption, predictions by NGOs and everyone else about what was likely to happen proved unreliable.\footnote{See Sierra Leone Project Case Study}

The issue of early warning is far more salient in Rwanda. The sudden, cataclysmic onset of the genocide in Rwanda took all but a handful of observers by complete surprise. Diplomatic, military, and humanitarian responses were overwhelmed by the scale of the violence, the intensity of the brutality, and the scale of the population movements. While the question of what NGOs (and others) knew, and what they did with what they knew, has been the subject of considerable debate, the story of early warning of the Rwandan genocide by international development and relief NGOs is easy to tell: there was none.

This is not to say that NGO personnel were unaware of a generalized decline in order and security in Kigali, or of escalating atrocities in the countryside during 1992 and 1993. It is to say, however,
that no NGO, international or local, development or human rights, foresaw the escalation of what was in fact a low-level civil war into one of the most intense killing episodes of the century. NGOs are thus in good company in their failure to usefully predict and warn about the genocide.33

More illuminating for the purposes of this study is that there is no evidence from events in Rwanda to support the theoretical contention that NGOs have assets which should enhance their capacity to provide early warning. Despite the fact that NGOs were engaged in broad collaboration with Rwandans throughout society, NGOs appeared to have had no foreknowledge of a qualitative and significant escalation in the level of violence. In Rwanda, a number of local actors and community groups spoke “good words” to NGOs in French, and simultaneously participated in the planning of the genocide in their native Kinyarwanda.34

NGOs delivered relief supplies to tens of thousands of people who would later participate in the genocidal militias without learning of the plans for mass killings. In part, but only in part, the failure to transform local knowledge into a sure political analysis is explained by the shift to emergency operations, with its increased role for expatriates who were far less well connected to important elements within Rwandan society. If this is an explanatory variable, it is an important one. Crises generally build up in stages, and as they escalate, NGOs shift increasingly into emergency operations which overwhelsm in resources and numbers of staff the ongoing development programming. A nearly universal response to an escalating crisis is to fly in expatriate staff who have expertise in all manner of urgently needed technical and operational skills — logistics, water supply, nutrition — are almost by definition insensitive to the cultural and political circumstances. In short, the Rwanda case suggests that as the situation locally becomes more intense, the likelihood of NGOs providing early warnings diminishes precisely when it has the most potential to be useful.

There are other explanations for the disparity between the promise of early warning by NGOs and the delivery. The first derives from NGO organizational culture and experience: by and large NGOs do not think of themselves as providers of early warning — or at least, are only starting to think in these terms. This in turn has several implications: field staff are not required to report on political developments to headquarters, and indeed are sometimes chastised when they do so; NGO staff are not chosen for their capability to provide political analysis but usually for other forms of technical skill in health, sanitation, engineering, logistics and agriculture; and most NGOs make no conscious effort to gather the type of information which would contribute to an early warning of crisis — information gathering where it occurs has been incidental.


34 Project Case Study on Rwanda. See also Stein and Jones Project Working Paper.
Second, and perhaps more damning, NGOs are— or at least were in the cases of Somalia, Sierra Leone and Rwanda — far less close to the ground than presumed. In Rwanda, for example, out of a large number of expatriate NGO staff, there were only a handful who were conversant, let alone fluent, in Kinyarwanda. The evidence the Project gathered in Sierra Leone reveals a similar failure to conform to expectations. “Local capacity building” has long been a mantra for international NGOs, yet in the run up to Sierra Leone’s crisis there was little effort in this direction by the large NGOs and when the emergency hit, even less to interact with Sierra Leonian NGOs and direct resources through them.

Third, NGO field offices encounter the same resistance to the early warnings they degenerate that the field staff of diplomatic missions and intelligence agencies experience: a tendency to dismiss concern that is expressed about potential developments as skewed because people are too close to the ground. Field officers run up against the suspicion that they have “gone native” and cannot, therefore, be trusted, and that they have blew “their” country out of proportion relative to the strategic overview which headquarters must maintain.

And fourth, any NGO early warning will be subject to the same discounting as afflicts the information that originates from all the other sources, diplomatic, commercial, military or security intelligence. There is built-in inertia and resistance to take action on the basis of warning rather than on actual events.

In the wake of the genocide and mass exodus from Rwanda in 1994, some NGOs have begun to address these issues explicitly, consciously developing their capacity to collect pertinent information, and analyze political and security developments that might have an important impact on operations. MSF has an ongoing global country watch; ActionAid has created an office called Emergency Response and Information Collection (ERIC) for the Great Lakes Region, which is, in essence, an early warning office; and many NGOs feed information to and take data and analyses from the Integrated Regional Information Network run by the UN Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs.

**Forestalling and prevention: the five percent solution**

A commitment by humanitarian NGOs to projects involving peace building, peace making, and conflict resolution raises a plethora of ethical, political, managerial, and financial questions. In allocating resources to conflict resolution, are NGOs not in effect acquiescing to the deepening neglect of political and security responsibilities by the major powers and international institutions?

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35 Project Case Study on Rwanda.

36 The reason advanced by NGOs to account for the paucity of interaction between international NGOs and indigenous organizations was the local organizations “lack of capacity” and concerns about their legitimacy and probity. While these are valid concerns – especially amidst violent conflict – it would seem that in order for international NGOs to claim comparative advantage in “grass roots” connections, they are obligated to invest the resources necessary to make such assessments. [See Project Case Study on Sierra Leone.]
Do conflict resolution — even reconciliation — activities compromise the long-term neutrality of NGOs in the eyes of government and civil society partners? Do NGOs have the staff, the organizational structure, and the professional skills to be able to engage productively in this kind of work, and if not, are they appropriately equipped to adapt accordingly?

All of these are important questions, yet for humanitarians and their future beneficiaries, there is an overriding issue: can conflict prevention and resolution work well enough, often enough, to avoid the crises which give rise to the need for humanitarian assistance in the first place. If the considered answer is negative, prevention and resolution may not be the appropriate focus for limited attention and scarce resources.

The large amount of attention paid to early warning and conflict prevention is understandable — prevention is clearly preferable to cure. However, the commendable striving for such ideal solutions cannot address the core dilemmas humanitarians face. It fails not because prevention is not desirable, but rather because there is no reason to believe early warning can work well enough, often enough, to avoid the crises which give rise to the need for humanitarian assistance.

This pessimistic conclusion does not arise from the fairly limited data our project gathered. It is essentially a cautious judgment both about the limits of diplomatic intervention and the predictive powers of social science. Current analyses of the requirements of successful conflict resolution do not suggest that all or even most ethnic or group conflict can be resolved before they escalate to serious violence. Furthermore, the history of intelligence gathering and surprise attacks is not all reassuring about the ability to predict with more than modest accuracy what humans in groups will do and when, nor can the thresholds between low-level and acute, self-generating violence be defined or predicted with confidence.

“Early warning” faces two additional obstacles: there is no conceptual agreement as to what constitutes “warning” as the on-going debate about who told who what before the Rwandan genocide illustrates.27 And second, warning is only useful if it results in action. Is the early warning leverage which an NGO or an international institution would pull actually connected to instruments which could and would be used to prevent violence? In the case of recent complex emergencies it is the hesitation of the major powers to act under almost any circumstance to deter escalation that contributes to the creation of complex emergencies.

These high levels of uncertainty do not suggest that careful attention to early warning and prevention should not continue. While early warning may have a low probability of success — in one scholar’s estimation “about five percent for any given crisis” 38 — it is overwhelmingly in the

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38 Howard Adelman, speaking at a conference at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada, Ottawa, 1996.
interest of the humanitarian community to continue efforts at prevention in order first, to improve the success ratio, and second, (and as emphasized earlier) NGOs need to dramatically enhance their intelligence and analysis skills in any event.

While in its most extreme manifestation, group or “blood” politics is not common to all complex emergencies, the on-going potential for genocide in Central Africa demonstrates that deep political and social indicators should in the future compel the attention of NGOs and their staffs. Just as it now standard for NGOs searching for signs of impending famine to seek out farmers and monitor local market prices, they will have to become sensitive to local social and political signs of mass coercion and intimidation. This includes the prevalence of hate propaganda and other evidence of ethnic, racial or other exclusionary projects.30

In Rwanda, a complex and well-conceived plan of genocide communicated through the indigenous Rwandan vernacular (language, images and myths with local resonance) and employing local technologies, was developed, communicated, and successfully implemented while the international community, NGOs included, watched in ignorance. If front line humanitarians and their headquarters managers are to improve on this sad record, they will have to invest in the requisite analytic skills.

While this knowledge is key to successful warning, it is also essential for meeting the challenges of complex emergencies when warning fails. And the uncertainties inherent in warning strategies strongly suggest that prevention is sufficiently unlikely to succeed often enough so that the international community will be freed from humanitarian need and obligation. Humanitarian organizations will continue for the foreseeable future to face the cruel dilemmas that arise from working with inadequate security in complex emergencies.

Mitigation and Alternative Operational Responses

A second major effort to deal with the challenges posed by working in complex emergencies emphasizes the adoption of new techniques and professional practices, and the setting of standards. In the area of standards and codes of behaviour at the international level there have been a number of initiatives: the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, the elaboration of a set of technical standards in the five key operational categories of water, food, shelter, nutrition and health, by the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR); the development of principles and best practices for the recruitment and management of relief workers by the UK-based group “People in Aid”, and the development by the SCHR of a “claimants” humanitarian charter defining beneficiary rights.

30 Recurring examples of phenomena endemic to societies at risk include: ethnic rallies of incitement and recruitment masquerading as “sports” or “soccer” clubs; the enactment of laws focused on ethnic, caste and racial divisions; the prevalence of road blocks or other forms of coercion that function to filter segments of society from particular regions and urban areas. Howard Adelman has suggested arms flows, attempts at human flight and murders as other indicators.
Given the clear evidence that in some circumstances humanitarian aid can become incorporated into the dynamics of armed conflicts as a political and economic resource, the mechanisms by which aid is managed and disbursed has drawn considerable attention. The principle of “do no harm,” as elaborated by Mary Anderson, is probably the best known and widely adopted of the alternative operational responses.40

However, our research highlights core dilemmas that these essentially technical reforms cannot address. As valuable as they are, they do not acknowledge an essential reality of humanitarian work in the context of a security vacuum—unprotected “neutrality” in circumstances that are fundamentally predatory is a highly political stance.

Two examples illustrate the limitations of the technical approach. It was in Somalia that NGOs first engaged private armed guards (so-called “technical”) on a wide scale, a relationship that contributed indirectly to the resources of the militias and, consequently, fueled the fighting which jeopardized the population. The practice provoked considerable controversy at the time and much self-critical examination within the NGO community subsequently. Anderson highlights such practices as examples of “negative effects” to be avoided and argues that there are a “broad range of alternatives” from which humanitarians can choose to avoid them.41

The available evidence, and a deep understanding of the realities of humanitarian action, indicate that such optimism is not warranted. In Somalia in the spring and summer of 1991, NGO field workers confronted a very narrow set of unpalatable choices: NGOs did not want to hire armed guards, and there was considerable debate, but there seemed to be no other option under the circumstances which prevailed at the time. As one USAID worker noted, “the employment of armed guards was prudent and wise under the circumstances.”42 Humanitarians needed vehicles and security, and both required the hiring of armed guards—a protection racket to be sure, but no less essential for achieving humanitarian ends of the moment. In the words of the press officer attached to one NGO, it was a “take it or leave it situation.”

The second example turns again to Eastern Zaire in 1994 and 1995. Anderson devotes considerable attention to the issue of resource transfer, misappropriation, taxation and theft by thugs and militias. Such overt diversion was indeed a serious problem in parts of Eastern Zaire, but the practices Anderson recommends would not have eliminated these problems, nor would they have helped unravel the fundamental dilemma humanitarians faced. The genocidaires drew their main political support from the physical presence of the humanitarian effort. The humanitarian presence provided an economic base from which they and most important, their key strategic resource —


41 Anderson, pp. 21-27

42 Jan Westcott, op. cit.
Rwandan civilians — could live. And presence also necessitated, as is standard in refugee contexts, an ongoing relationship with the host government, in this case that of Zaire’s dictator, Mobutu, a key political and military ally of the genocidaires.

Thus, the agonizing issue for NGOs was not how to significantly reduce the diversion; rather, it was making a choice between staying — knowing that they were was being exploited by genocidaires — or abandoning the civilian population to its fate. The choice was stark in its simplicity and cruel in its implications; a political and ethical conundrum beyond the reach of any technical solution then available or currently contemplated.

**Mean Times Ahead**

It is vital that humanitarians learn from past experience and that they constantly evaluate their practices, as Anderson does, to assess whether alternatives exist which would minimize the negative consequences of their work. Yet, the unavoidable reality of humanitarian work in complex emergencies is that acute dilemmas are commonplace, that the range of choices is frequently narrow, and, at the extreme, there are often no “good” choices to be made. NGO personnel may not be able to choose to do no harm, if by doing nothing, they abandon civilian populations at risk and violate essential humanitarian principles. In the face of those who are determined to do evil, humanitarian NGOs have in the past, and will in the future, be forced to choose the option that does the least harm.

It is here that the results of our analysis diverge from much of the helpful but essentially technical discussion of practices of humanitarian relief. At the end of the decade of “complex emergencies,” the choices faced by humanitarians — the issues which require their most urgent attention — are conditioned by the conjuncture of two forces: the long-standing (if evolving) international humanitarian ethic as expressed in the rendering of assistance to the poorest of the poor in the midst of conflict, and a security vacuum engendered by a weak-willed international community.

The essential realities facing humanitarians and populations under threat present a somber picture:

- Complex emergencies will continue to occur because most cannot be prevented.
- The core dilemma for humanitarians, from which all the others arise, stems from the security vacuum engendered by the emergency itself and the unwillingness of internationally sanctioned, legitimate forces to address the need for security.
- The international community, acting through the UN system and other multilateral groups such as NATO, the EU and the OAU, have not demonstrated a consistent and predictable willingness to fill the security gap or provide sufficient resources for others to do so.
• Humanitarian organizations in general, and the non-governmental sector in particular, are locked into a set of intractable dilemmas. The negative externalities of humanitarian relief will continue to occur as long as victim populations (and humanitarians attempting to assist them) must confront complex emergencies in situations of woefully inadequate security. Under these conditions, humanitarian organizations in general, and NGOs in particular, can only attempt to do the least harm.

• There is no evidence that any of these trends are likely to abate in the foreseeable future.

POLITICS AND THE HUMANITARIAN ETHIC

It is with this admittedly pessimistic outlook that the report turns to a set of limited prescriptions, designed not eliminate the humanitarian security dilemma — a goal that in our view is not achievable — but rather to blunt its impact and better prepare humanitarians for the grim choices ahead. In developing these prescriptions, the report attempts to avoid exhortations to “do better work.” Unenforced codes of conduct tend to fall into this category, as does much of the operational writing which predominates in current discourse about humanitarian action. For reasons already discussed, we also discount the possibility of unlikely (and in any event, unpredictable) military, political and financial interventions by the UN or major powers and donors.

The essential premise running through all that follows is that NGOs must be better able to situate relief work in its larger political context than they have until now. Some NGOs traditionally have argued, and argue still today, that only strict adherence to principles of neutrality and consent of the parties can insulate relief assistance from political and military agendas. Neutrality, it is asserted, contributes to the amelioration of violence and conflict resolution by effectively inducing UN agencies and governments to provide assistance, by deterring violence through the presence of humanitarians on the ground and their access to the media, and by the humanitarians’ capacity to mediate among the warring parties.

While in some cases this traditional set of dynamics may hold true, increasingly, however, neutrality itself has become a political position because the environments of complex emergencies are increasingly predatory. “Neutrality” in these circumstances, either by humanitarians wishing to be even-handed and above the fray or by local populations groups determined on non-involvement, has little meaning. It follows then that in the world they now inhabit, humanitarians must acknowledge and analyze the explicitly political nature of their work. And the analysis must take place on two levels: first, among the peoples the relief is intended to benefit and the forces who target them, and second, within the key national and multi-lateral systems that make up the existing relief and development apparatus.
Three Modest Proposals

The compelling dilemmas for NGOs in complex emergencies arise from two irreducible factors: the humanitarians' absolute need to be there, and the international community's refusal to provide adequate security either for humanitarians or their beneficiaries. Three core recommendations set out below are intended to address the problems created by the collision of these forces:

- **NGOs need to significantly enhance their political analysis and policy development skills** if they are to have voice in humanitarian matters commensurate with the mandate and responsibilities that have been thrust upon them, and with the unique vision the humanitarian ethic represents.

- **NGOs should consider the privatization of security for humanitarian purposes.** The notion of an independent, volunteer security force not affiliated with any single nation, and available explicitly to further humanitarians ends was not the subject of our research, and remains sparsely examined elsewhere. Since the core dilemma humanitarians face is the ability of predators to prey on civilians at will, and since nations and the UN are increasingly hesitant to furnish the necessary means to provide that security, it is worth exploring whether in the face of the privatization of assistance, the privatization of security is also appropriate.

- **In the effort to do the least harm, NGOs should begin to take seriously the option of withdrawal or disengagement.** A new political humanitarian ethic needs to be developed which assists NGOs to understand when and under what circumstances (as limited as those might be) the humanitarian ethic compels withdrawal, not presence. NGOs need to be able to identify the situations in which it is only their willingness to suspend delivery and disengage which offers a chance to regain sufficient leverage to retain control over delivery and management of relief supplies, and to re-convert presence into genuine protection. As important, beyond individual situations, strategic disengagement successfully managed (or even threatened) could over a period of time send crucial signals to future would-be perpetrators of violence hoping to use relief resources for their own purposes.

**ONE: Cats, Minnows and Owls — Enhancing NGOs Political Analysis and Policy Development Skills**

To this point, NGOs have necessarily been described as though they comprised a single community. In reality international NGOs come in many different shapes and sizes, with varying

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43 With apologies to the author of *Hawks, Doves and Owls: An Agenda for Avoiding Nuclear War* Graham Allison, Albert Carnesale and Joseph Nye (New York: Norton, 1985). In this widely read mid-1980s exploration of the nuclear threat, the authors set out an agenda which firmly rejected the ideological stances of the then hawk and dove extremes in favour of a wise, pragmatic and presumably safer, owl-like approach to the nuclear problem.
governance structures, mandates, missions and national characters. While a comprehensive assessment of such a disparate and diverse group verges on the impossible, two images of humanitarian NGOs seem to predominate.

The first image, almost a caricature propounded by critics, depicts NGOs as a like-minded, self-referring, apparently politically naive but in fact deeply manipulative set of “do-gooders” mindlessly stampeding from one crisis to the next in the pursuit of riches. In its most unflattering form, this portrayal has NGOs as a school of hungry minnows swarming around disasters to receive contracts and gain attention, then just as easily off in another direction when crises become either unprofitable, too dangerous, or more attractive opportunities develop elsewhere.

In sharp contrast, the self-image of NGOs draws on the well-known pugnacious independence of humanitarians, a trait which makes collaboration among different NGOs on issues beyond the technical and operational extraordinarily difficult. NGO personnel are generally proud of their independence and individuality and suspicious of attempts at coordination, the trappings of authority, and what they perceive as bureaucracy of any kind — cats that refuse to be herded.

**Political analysis skills**

The Report’s first core recommendation is that NGOs need to take firm hold of the political responsibilities their work and the evolution of the international power structure have thrust upon them. They must begin to distance themselves from both the public caricatures and the self-referring isolationist tendencies. A more thoughtful, “owl-like” approach is essential, for example, to the analysis and development of the two options of strategic disengagement and private security. If NGOs are going to be able reasonably to weigh, for example, withdrawal as an option, they need to improve their analytic capacities in three areas.

- First, the ability to monitor the consequences of their actions on a scale of “perverse outcomes” so that they can properly assess the consequences of their strategic choices — which at the extreme becomes one of “stay or leave.”

- Second, the knowledge and skills required for effective negotiation with implementing partners, non-governmental organizations in the regions in which they are working, and with potentially predatory forces so as to define appropriate conditions for engagement and, if required, disengagement.

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Third, the development of a sophisticated understanding of the political economy of the humanitarian assistance “marketplace” in which they are embedded if they hope to influence the very crucial set of contractual relationships with the UN and others.

Policy development and communication

It is now evident that NGOs’ actions have strategic, far-reaching, life and death consequences. Commensurate with this power, NGOs will have to begin to invest time and resources into long-term policy research and development, and the capacity to communicate the results to the major players in the international system. National donors, governments, and the UN system all devote considerable effort to policy analysis and development. For the non-governmental sector to be able to contribute, it must begin to do likewise.

Good or even adequate policy research, development, and communication requires an investment of resources, which in turn implies some coordination among NGOs if only to share the burden. Much of the strength of the non-governmental community (in general, not only in the humanitarian sector) derives, however, from its diversity. Yet this same diversity creates undoubted difficulties in presenting a responsible, legitimate face to other elements of the international system: diplomats, agency senior management, the military, large commercial suppliers and so on. Some have complained that when facing a plethora of NGOs, they simply don’t know who they are dealing with, and there have been continued suggestions that humanitarian NGOs set up some form of regulatory, self-policing apparatus separate from the broad voluntary NGO coalitions.45

The challenge facing the major humanitarian NGOs is to be able when necessary to perform in concert while not losing the strength inherent in their differences. A self-regulatory apparatus could facilitate NGOs’ ability to communicate with the rest of the humanitarian system simply by raising confidence levels across organizational cultures, and at the same time promote sound political analysis and policy development work.

TWO: Going Private — Securing the Humanitarian Space

It is only apparent in retrospect just how much humanitarians relied upon and took for granted the ability to work in relative safety. They assumed, almost reflexively, that the apparatus providing that security was available more or less on demand and at no direct cost to the humanitarian enterprise. Local governments functioning more or less capably delivered at least a minimum of protection to refugees and their rescuers, or security assistance came from outside, often provided by UN members states in the form of peacekeepers.

45 At a conference in Ottawa in 1996, Robert Oakley, the senior US diplomat active in Somalia in the period 1992-93 expressed unease at dealing with NGOs he didn’t know anything about, and though he presumed some were excellent and other less so, he did not know which was which. He hoped that in the future, humanitarian NGOs would set up some form of self-policing organization which would set standards and grant “seals of approval.”
All that has changed. Analysis of our own cases, and others, suggests that the more complex the conflict, the more chaotic the security market; the more traumatized the social order, the more important an adequate security envelope for effective delivery of humanitarian assistance. Complex emergencies feed on themselves, enfeebling and even wiping away legitimate security resources, spreading chaos and violence, and generating the need for even greater security resources from outside.

It has taken the decade of the complex emergency to show what happens when such a “public good” is no longer available. As provided by governments (or conglomerations of governments) security in the midst of almost any complex emergency is now almost non-existent. And as the citizens of Kosovo learned in 1998, the evident cost in innocent lives directly attributable to humanitarian security failures in Somalia (1992), Rwanda (1994), Sierra Leone and Liberia (1996) and then Eastern Zaire once again (1996-97) has not led the international community to provide security as a “public good.”

Many factors have contributed to this situation — declining national budgets for development assistance and the demise of Cold War surrogate military forces in the Third World — to “donor fatigue” and in the case of Africa’s crises, simple Euro-centrism. There are also deeper structural forces at work.

The demise of security as a “public good”

In a pair of controversial articles in Foreign Affairs 1995 and 1996, Edward Luttwak highlighted three factors which alter the climate in which the American military (by extension all the military forces of post-industrial, major power states) operates. The first is that most conflicts in which such forces could potentially participate are “discretionary”, in that no single one of them threatens the survival of the state; that major power military forces are structured and trained for a world of total war and the expectation of high casualties; and third, that post-industrial societies (the direct or indirect providers for the most part of humanitarians’ security envelope) have for demographic and other reasons developed a marked intolerance for military casualties in conflicts which do not directly threaten the core of the nation concerned. There is currently, as Luttwak expresses it, a widespread refusal “to sanction the casualties of any avoidable combat.”

These underlying trends in the post-industrial world bode ill for humanitarians who have previously relied on security as a public good. First, from the perspective of the major contributors

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47 Edward Luttwak, “Toward Post-Heroic Warfare”, Foreign Affairs May/June 1995 (vol 74, no. 3) and “A Post-Heroic Military Policy”, Foreign Affairs July/August 1996 (vol. 75, no. 4).

48 Luttwak, 1995, p. 115
to a viable humanitarian security envelope, most of the crises in which NGOs are likely to be involved in the future are “discretionary.” Major powers, therefore, are unlikely to be willing to commit forces to an emergency that humanitarians consider urgent. Second, given the demographic and social forces which reinforce the aversion to casualties, this caution can only become more pronounced over time. The “Mogadishu line” has become at the close of the decade a military and political firebreak which national governments (at least those of the major Western donor countries) are increasingly less inclined to cross.

The current Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Sergio Vieira de Mello, has decreed the general lack of willingness of member states to provide security forces for humanitarian operations (noting that they are not at all “averse to letting humanitarian staff go where they dare not send their... invariably better equipped, better trained and better protected [troops]”) and proposed the creation of “regional humanitarian security teams” trained and equipped to support humanitarian personnel at short notice. In this concept, these teams would be drawn from “selected troops from a variety of nations in the region concerned.”

Mr. de Mello’s idea is reflective of what is known generically as “regional” or “sub-regional” conflict management, wherein the aim is to place responsibility for peacekeeping and security generally within the purview of the countries closest to the problem. A direct result of the Rwanda debacle was a US-led (backed by the UK and France) project (African Crisis Response Initiative — ACRI) to help train and equip what amounts to a standby rapid reaction peacekeeping force, though it has yet to be put to the test. By far the most extensive trial of regional peacekeeping on the Continent has been carried out by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its eight-year long deployment of a multi-national force (“monitoring group”) called ECOMOG, first in Liberia and more recently in Sierra Leone. While the verdicts on what ECOMOG has accomplished have been decidedly mixed, the same can be said and was said about NATO and UN efforts in the Former Yugoslavia.

It is clear that while at times African peacekeeping and peace-enforcing efforts have been effective, what emerges from the overall pattern is not encouraging. Forces have been infrequently deployed, uneven in performance, and moreover, the choices as to where and when to intervene essentially arbitrary. Thus, peoples who are at risk or those under attack — as well as their would be

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humanitarian rescuers — cannot assume that assistance in the form of basic security is likely to be forthcoming.

And what should NGOs draw from such a gloomy prognosis? If it is the case that national governments acting through multilateral bodies at any level (UN, regional and sub-regional, and even ad hoc) are increasingly less willing to put publicly-employed (and in many countries, conscripted) lives at risk, it is perhaps time to consider the private alternative — a "foreign legion" comprised of paid, volunteer, professionally-trained personnel employed without regard to national origin beholden to its employer rather than any single government. While the image of private security forces is an unsavory one — reinforced just recently by a UN Human Rights Commission report calling for their regulation and restriction\sup{52} — the absence of international public security forces, and the lack of effective and legitimate alternatives, empowered the militias and gangs of Somalia, Eastern Zaire, Sierra Leone and Liberia to terrible effect.

The questions surrounding such an initiative are many. On its face, a recommendation to consider private security would seem to violate the Project's self-imposed restriction about implausibly expensive proposals. Military forces are notoriously expensive; who would pay? Even the largest NGOs could not hope to raise even a small private security force on its own. However, casual observation of the humanitarian services market, our case studies and the Liberia experience, show that huge sums are routinely lost to theft, looting and outright extortion. Hardly a week goes by in which an NGO or a UN agency does not report a major theft of food, equipment and other resources somewhere in Central Africa. All this is quite apart from Somalia in 1992, where NGOs' only available security remedy — the notorious "technicals" — represented a large drain on resources in addition to fueling the cycle of violence.

A most telling illustration of comparative cost can be seen in the events in Eastern Zaire in 1994. A proposal discussed at the UN (and ultimately rejected) to employ a private security firm to sort militia members from non-combatants in the refugee camps was costed at $50 million — at the end of the first nine months of the Rwanda crisis $1 billion had been funneled into Eastern Zaire.\sup{53} This and other preliminary evidence indicates that private security could effectively help pay for itself in monetary terms (not to mention lives) if means could be found to capture the savings and direct them appropriately.

More difficult to identify and to overcome, are ethical concerns about a private force.\sup{54} All the negative images of mercenaries and private armies come immediately to mind; the idea is rejected almost instinctively by the humanitarian community. Yet the concept was seriously considered in

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\sup{52} Anthony Goodman, Reuters, United Nations, October 16, 1998.

\sup{53} Rwanda Case Study and author interviews.

\sup{54} For a provocative and non-dogmatic examination of the role of private military forces in international security see David Shearer, Private Armies and Military Intervention, Adelphi Paper 316, (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, February 1998).
Rwanda in late 1994, and some official UN circles appear to be exploring the concept as well. Perhaps the greatest service a full examination of the proposal might yield is rhetorical: to focus attention on the extent to which the basic human right to security and safety is being denied to millions in crisis.

**THREE: Disengagement — A Last Option for Causing the Least Harm**

The option of humanitarian withdrawal is central to the creation of an ethic equipped to meet the challenges set out above. Awareness of the political impact of NGO assistance necessarily begins with acknowledgment of the enduring dilemma of humanitarians: all humanitarian work does some harm in addition to the good it is doing. And the humanitarian’s dilemma is further deepened by the knowledge that doing nothing at all — total disengagement — will also result in harm. This is not to suggest that NGOs should withdraw provision of assistance simply because there is evidence it is being put to nefarious purposes. All relief flows have been tapped for alternative purposes at some point; theft and misuse is always present to some degree, and even when it is not, the mere fact of the assistance, as noted earlier, can accomplish for perpetrators the same end. The issue political humanitarians need to confront is: how much is too much, and how do they measure and assess critical thresholds.

**Can humanitarians withdraw?**

By far the most common form of withdrawal by NGOs is reactive in nature: tactical withdrawal in the face of actual or apprehended violence directed at staff — ICRC in Burundi and Chechnya, Caritas in Burundi — or the physical destruction of necessary infrastructure (CARE and others in early and mid-1992 in Mogadishu, Somalia, and almost all NGOs from Liberia in 1996).

Disengagement as a strategic choice (an action contemplated over time, weighed against consequences, then implemented in stages or as part of a “graduated response” intended to signal the seriousness of the intent) is much more rare, and in our case studies occurred only once. In Eastern Zaire in November of 1994 fifteen NGOs withdrew from Katale camp in the Goma region of eastern Zaire in the face of military and militia efforts to assert political control over all the camps. The action was taken, the NGOs publicly asserted at the time, both in response to an untenable ethical and security position, and to increase pressure on the international security community to respond appropriately.

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55 In the fall of 1994, the UN received a proposal from a British company to provide training and support to Zaire’s army in order to wrest control of the camps from the militia. The idea received support from one permanent member of the Security Council, but other members rejected the idea on the basis of cost and principle: using a private company to fulfill an international public responsibility was wrong. None of the states rejecting the proposal on principle subsequently offered troops and resources when requested by the Secretary-General. [See Project Rwanda case study]

56 Events that followed on the NGOs’ principled stand conform exactly to the what one would expect under the prevailing oligopsonistic conditions. All withdrawing NGOs were replaced immediately by the multi-lateral contracting partners and the relief work went on essentially undisturbed. In the case of CARE’s operation, the replacement NGO staff waited impatiently outside the camp management office while the CARE director cleared his desk.
That the action did not have the intended outcome is incidental here. What is more interesting is that is happened at all, and that given the circumstances they faced at the time, NGO senior management came reluctantly to the conclusion that withdrawal was the last least harmful option to address the dilemma created by the continued security vacuum.

In and of itself, then, withdrawal by humanitarians is not a large ethical or conceptual hurdle — it happens all the time. What is relatively untried is strategic disengagement in the wake of an assessment that it represents the last, least harmful step.

**When in doubt, go in**

The formulation of the issue as one of “withdrawal” rather than “should we go in?” is deliberate and conforms to operational experience and to the standards inherent in the humanitarian ethic. As a practical matter the question of whether or not to engage is usually rendered moot by the fact that most of the time NGOs and other humanitarian organizations are already involved at one level or another when the crisis erupts. The case of Liberia in 1996 was an exception that serves to prove the rule. There, all NGOs had been evacuated to surrounding countries and the NGO coalition came into being with the aim of “coordinating the resumption of NGO implemented humanitarian assistance.” — a rare event. In none of the other cases we reviewed does the question, “should we go in?”, have political or operational meaning.

The second reason for formulating the question as one of withdrawal or disengagement is ethical. The humanitarian imperative calls for early, urgent action in the face of unfolding or impending disaster. The launch of humanitarian action should only be called into question on the basis of compelling and overwhelming indications that to do so would do more harm than good. However, such information is rarely likely to be available at the outset of a crisis. It is only once the interaction between all the participants is underway that evidence begins to accumulate that there are serious negative consequences to assistance. Thus, the long-standing humanitarian instinct — when in doubt do something — should remain paramount in all but the most extreme circumstances.

**How much harm is too much, how do you know?**

Analysis of the cases we reviewed suggests that there are patterns and indicators — a set of diagnostic tools which when further developed and refined — NGOs could use to monitor the particular contexts in which they find themselves. While we identify some of these potentially useful generic indicators, we do not presume to specify in the abstract which indicator, at which threshold, should trigger the consideration of withdrawal in specific crises. Decisions must be weighed on a case-by-case basis by those directly involved with field operations in concert with headquarters and senior management. It is apparent, however, that a set of standard measuring

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57 CARE Canada internal memorandum, record of Liberia-NGO Steering Committee teleconference, June 19, 1996.
tools, common across humanitarian organizations, would help NGOs to analyze the political context of their actions.

Monitoring, indicators and triggers

Political/Military Taxation of Relief — Our case studies suggest that political taxation of relief supplies is a key factor in measuring the level of harm. However, the task of measuring is complex since political diversion is quite different in its ultimate effect from the more banal “wastage,” although organized theft and hijacking may be a mechanism aiding the political diversion. As the case of Eastern Zaire illustrates, in parts of the region classic theft and extortion were low or non-existent, while the impact of enforced taxation via the conduit of a passive shield of non-combatant refugees was immense. Not all theft is political, and politically motivated taxation for military ends can occur without theft. Therefore, the better informed NGO personnel are about local political and military organizations, about ethnic and religious fault lines, and about local social, economic, and political structures, the more easily they will be able to distinguish simple theft from systematic diversion. Systematic political diversion that is not reducible through available “best practices” should trigger consideration of partial or complete disengagement.

Cooperation With Local Authorities in Registration — A second warning light for humanitarians is the unwillingness of local authorities to cooperate with the UN and NGOs to register recipients of relief assistance, especially in refugee and displaced persons camps, and to make lists of registrants available. Again, the assessment is a subtle one. Local authorities will always seek to maximize local benefits of relief assistance, an entirely rational economic and political reaction to the arrival of large resources into a situation of relative scarcity. However, recurrent and aggressive failure to cooperate in registration suggests that local authority structures are seeking to supplant or subvert existing distribution mechanisms in order to divert relief assistance. And if local authorities are willing to go so far as to use force to monopolize control over registration process, there is a very high likelihood that aid will subsequently become a resource for coercion and violence.

Unobstructed Access — Access to affected populations is at the very core of the humanitarian ethic, the offering of protection, support, and witness. While “protection through presence” — the capacity of unarmed humanitarians to prevent abuse of people in their care — is under challenge, access by UN agencies and NGOs is the key to knowing what is going on and essential to reducing harm. Overwhelmingly, the evidence shows that continued obstruction or restriction of access by militias and local military forces constitutes prima facie evidence of the use of relief as a tool for gaining control over local populations. Serious attempts to restrict access even if ultimately unsuccessful are also a red flag, since the process of negotiation to gain access can provide predatory governments and militias with the opportunity to impose inequitable political conditions which privilege some vulnerable populations at the expense of others.
Joint action for coordinated disengagement

A recognition that the conditions for humanitarian presence do not exist, and a decision to leave or to signal the intention to disengage runs immediately into a serious obstacle: joint action. The existing economic relationship between NGOs and their major contractors makes it extraordinarily difficult to leave, and so for NGO action to have a significant impact on altering the conditions for humanitarian presence, they must act strategically, in concert and with a long view. This goes beyond simply joint press statements, or other shows of solidarity. Serious attempts at strategic coordination by NGOs will have to grapple with the basic contractual terms that are the currency of relationships between NGOs and their major institutional funders, chiefly the small family of UN agencies.

Large NGOs, with the capacity to deliver significant amounts of assistance quickly, are almost all dependent on a handful of UN agencies or single agency within their home government for implementing contracts. Thus the terms and structure of these contracts have a significant influence on the ability of NGOs to realistically contemplate disengagement. Payment schedules, penalty clauses and all the other terms and conditions contained within a typical contract — not to mention the ultimate penalty of never again being contracted by the agency concerned — are severe impediments to the kind of conditionality proposed here. The prospect of committing organizational suicide is hardly conducive to clear political analysis by NGO management of the dynamics of an emergency.

Instead of being an obstacle, however, appropriately restructured UN agency contracts could create incentives for conditional relief by including terms that recognize the legitimacy of strategic withdrawal within defined parameters and in accordance with agreed principles. Additional contractual incentives to responsible political humanitarianism could take the form of obligations on the part of NGOs to assist in the monitoring and reporting on abuse of vulnerable populations, requirements for regular reporting on a set of agreed upon indicators, such as those described earlier, provisions that permit “waiting periods” for warnings of disengagement to have impact so that NGOs are not unduly penalized financially, and even sanctions for NGOs that fail to carry out monitoring responsibilities or who “break” a disengagement cordon that has met certain criteria for legitimacy.

At least two conditions are necessary if a strategic withdrawal by NGOs is to have any impact on what is presumably a desperate and urgent situation. The first is a considerable measure of unanimity among the relevant organizations to act in concert. Such a consensus will be difficult to reach and expectations should not be high in the early stages of what will be a long-term effort. Many NGOs continue to believe that withdrawal violates the fundamental humanitarian ethic and that it amounts to abandoning the most vulnerable, that it will provoke looting and violence, and that withdrawal compromises humanitarian neutrality and impartiality. Within the limits of the possible, consulting the beneficiaries of assistance — going over the heads of the predatory leadership — as to whether agencies should remain silent or protest against abuses even if they lose
their access, could empower local populations, enhance accountability, and make it easier for NGOs to reach a collective decision.

In addition, disengagement should be accompanied by explicitly articulated conditions for return. Clearly, the end to diversion of relief, unobstructed access to vulnerable populations, and cooperation in registration of refugees or displaced person are among these conditions. However, if disengagement is to have long-term strategic credibility, if there is to be influence on the behaviour of predatory governments and militias, the demands need to reflect the targets’ ability to deliver.

Ongoing disagreements among humanitarians may well limit the possibilities of coordination to arrangements between those who leave and those who stay, so that there can be both public statement and quiet assistance. While not ideal, this kind of outcome illustrates why effective strategic disengagement can only be regarded as a medium to long-term plan involving a number of episodes spread over many years. In effect, an important new dimension to the existing humanitarian ethic will be created, requiring repeated interactions between NGOs, their contractors, the intended beneficiaries and the would-be predatory forces before the requisite trust and credibility is established and procedures are worked out.

CONCLUSION

The community of humanitarian NGOs has intuitively understood, at least since the early years of the decade, that they were in a new, bewildering and distinctly more hostile environment than that for which their experience had equipped them. The character and scale of relief efforts — operating in predatory contexts, deliberately manufactured by conflicting parties — had completely changed the rules of humanitarian action for NGOs. And for the broader public, dramatic events in Africa focused unprecedented attention on the non-government sector and spawned harsh criticism from some quarters about motives, methods and choices.

Critics inside and outside NGOs have legitimately addressed the perverse and unintended consequences of emergency relief in predatory contexts, as well as the steps humanitarians must take to identify these consequences and improve their practices in order to minimize their impact. A second unhelpful body of criticism arises out of impossible demands that result from the privatization of assistance and the unwillingness of national powers to engage in political-military action to maintain security for victimized populations. Despite the essential unfairness of this second strand, however, NGOs must address its impact on their legitimacy and credibility, their capacity to mobilize resources, and their ongoing ability to engage quality professional staff.

58 Medecin Sans Frontieres withdrew from Goma, objecting publicly to political conditions in the camps, but other humanitarian NGOs stayed to provide assistance. Prendergast, “Minimizing Negative Externalities of Aid: The Ten Commandments,” p. 33.
For the foreseeable future, humanitarian NGOs will confront a set of stark and intractable dilemmas in their work which best practices and improved techniques will not fully resolve because these dilemmas are political, not technical in origin. NGOs will become ever more important actors in situations conditioned by the collision of two forces: the long-standing (if evolving) international humanitarian imperative as expressed in the rendering of assistance to the poorest of the poor in the midst of conflict, and a security vacuum engendered by a weak-willed international community unwilling to confront directly political projects and movements which derive strength from the capacity to victimize and exploit whole population groups.

The title of our report, *Mean Times*, has a double meaning. Humanitarians have always worked at the somber edge of human existence — when they deliver mercy, charity and solace in the midst of disaster. But now humanitarians confront another dark force: an apparently inexorable retreat of national and international government from the responsibilities of protection and intervention. Since states continue to deny their responsibilities either bilaterally or through the UN, since the need for humanitarian action will almost certainly grow, and since the humanitarian ethic as expressed through NGOs remains strong, NGOs — like it or not, ready or not — are now serious players in the international system.

In beginning to shoulder responsibilities in proportion to their power, NGOs, if they wish to achieve their purposes and remain faithful to their ethic, will have to develop a sophisticated understanding of the political and economic environments in which they work, and invest appropriately in building new strategic capacities. Absent such investments, NGOs will be unprepared to face the stark dilemmas which humanitarian action presents; lives will unnecessarily be lost, blighted and put at risk; and the world will be deprived of a humanitarian vision to which the non-governmental community is uniquely equipped to give voice and substance.
CONDENSÉ

DES TEMPS DIFFICILES

*Les ONG et les situations d’urgence complexes — Rapport final*


La préparation du présent rapport a commencé en 1995, quand tout professionnel des questions humanitaires cherchant à comprendre les problèmes créés par les situations d’urgence complexes, ou à leur trouver des solutions, n’aurait pas trouvé grand-chose de satisfaisant. Les analyses se préoccupaient des aspects techniques et opérationnels — c’est là une vision incomplète des choses — ou s’adonnaient à des débats théoriques peu utiles dans la pratique. Nous avons adopté une démarche multidisciplinaire dans l’espoir que l’examen détaillé de crises complexes, fait du point de vue des ONG concernées, débouche sur une analyse ayant fait défaut jusqu’ici. Celle-ci aiderait ensuite à éclairer une importante discussion sur ce que les spécialistes des questions humanitaires, en général, et les ONG, en particulier, peuvent faire, doivent faire et éviter de faire en pareilles circonstances.

L’analyse des études de cas montre que, même si les organismes non gouvernementaux ont récemment fait l’objet de nombreuses critiques injustes et parfois irrationnelles, il existe malgré tout des lacunes graves dont ils sont responsables et auxquelles ils doivent remédier, individuellement et collectivement. Dans les situations d’urgence complexes, les ONG travaillent dans des conditions où la privatisation de l’aide et le refus des puissances nationales de prendre des mesures politiques ou militaires ont engendré un vide au chapitre de la sécurité et éliminé le « havre de protection » où les victimes du conflit et les services humanitaires peuvent exister. Pourtant, l’éthique humanitaire internationale très souhaitable qui existe depuis longtemps telle qu’elle s’exprime dans les secours prodigués aux plus démunis des pauvres au cœur des conflits concrétise encore un puissant engagement. Le rapport porte essentiellement sur les conséquences perverses et non voulues des secours d’urgence fournis dans des régions en proie aux pillards et sur les mesures que les organismes humanitaires doivent commencer à prendre pour évaluer les conséquences négatives et envisager des réponses stratégiques et politiques appropriées.

Les réalités fondamentales qui se présentent au mouvement humanitaire et aux populations menacées font entrevoir un avenir encore plus sombre :
Les situations d’urgence complexes continueront de se produire, car la majorité d’entre elles sont inévitables.

Le dilemme déterminant auquel le mouvement humanitaire fait face et dont tous les autres découleront est dû au vide engendré au chapitre de la sécurité par la crise même et par le refus des forces légitimes ayant la sanction internationale de voir à assurer la sécurité.

La collectivité internationale, agissant par l’intermédiaire du système onusien et d’autres instances multilatérales telles que l’OTAN, l’UE et l’OUA, ne s’est pas montrée fermement disposée à remédier aux lacunes en matière de sécurité ou à fournir à d’autres les ressources suffisantes pour le faire.

Les organismes humanitaires, en général, et le secteur nongouvernemental, en particulier, sont enfermés dans des dilemmes insolubles. Les secours humanitaires continueront d’avoir des conséquences perverses tant que les populations victimes (et les groupes humanitaires essayant de les aider) devront faire face à des crises complexes dans des contextes où les moyens de sécurité sont affreusement insuffisants. Dans ces conditions, les organismes humanitaires, en général, et les ONG, en particulier, ne peuvent que viser à faire le moins de tort possible.

Le rapport énonce trois recommandations principales pour résoudre les problèmes créés par le nouveau climat dans lequel le mouvement humanitaire se trouve maintenant. En les formulant, nous étions parfaitement conscients des exigences avec lesquelles les ONG doivent composer dans le monde actuel :

Tout d’abord, afin de progresser dans les grands dossiers humanitaires, en général, et par rapport à l’une ou l’autre des recommandations énoncées plus haut, les ONG doivent perfectionner leurs compétences en analyse politique et quant à l’élaboration de principes directeurs. Il leur faudra consentir d’importants investissements sur ces plans pour obtenir, dans les dossiers humanitaires, une voix au chapitre proportionnelle aux responsabilités et au mandat leur ayant été confié et adaptée à la vision unique des choses que présente l’éthique humanitaire.

En deuxième lieu, les ONG doivent songer à privatiser le volet « sécurité » des missions humanitaires. Notre recherche n’avait pas pour objet d’examiner la notion d’une force de sécurité composée de volontaires, indépendante de tout pays en particulier et constituée explicitement pour faire avancer les fins humanitaires; pour l’essentiel, cette notion n’a toujours pas été étudiée ailleurs. Comme le principal dilemme qui se pose au mouvement humanitaire réside dans la capacité des pillards de s’attaquer impunément aux civils et au personnel des ONG et comme les pays et l’ONU hésitent de plus en plus à fournir les ressources nécessaires pour assurer cette sécurité, il y a lieu de se demander si, au vu de la privatisation de l’aide, il ne conviendrait pas de privatiser aussi les services de sécurité.
Troisièmement, afin de causer le moins de tort possible, les ONG doivent commencer à s'interroger sérieusement sur le concept de retrait ou désengagement. Il faut élaborer une nouvelle éthique politique humanitaire qui aiderait les ONG à savoir quand le retrait s'impose plutôt que la présence sur les lieux de la crise. Les ONG doivent pouvoir repérer les situations où seule leur volonté d'interrompre les secours et de se retirer leur offre une chance de renforcer suffisamment leur influence, pour demeurer ainsi maîtres de l'acheminement et de la gestion des ravitaillements de secours, et de pouvoir à nouveau, du fait de leur présence rétablie, assurer une protection véritable. Et, aspect tout aussi important, au-delà des cas individuels, le désengagement stratégique bien géré (ou la menace d'une telle mesure) pourrait avec le temps décourager les pillards éventuels envisageant de s'approprier les secours à leurs propres fins.

Comme les États n'assumeront leurs responsabilités ni bilatéralement ni par l'intermédiaire de l'ONU, comme le besoin d'une action humanitaire grandira presque certainement et que l'éthique humanitaire telle qu'elle s'exprime par le biais des ONG demeure forte, le secteur humanitaire non gouvernemental — qu'on le veuille ou non — est désormais un intervenant de taille dans le système international. En assumant des responsabilités proportionnelles à leur nouvelle influence en devenir, les ONG devront améliorer leur compréhension des contextes politiques et économiques où ils travaillent et consentir les investissements nécessaires pour se doter de nouvelles capacités stratégiques. Autrement, ils seront mal équipés pour affronter les terribles dilemmes inhérents à l'action humanitaire; des vies seront inutilement perdues, brisées et compromises; et le monde sera privé d'une vision humanitaire que les organismes non gouvernementaux sont les mieux à même d'exprimer et de concrétiser.


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MEAN TIMES

HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN COMPLEX POLITICAL EMERGENCIES—STARK CHOICES, CRUEL DILEMMAS

Report of the NGOs in Complex Emergencies Project—a Collaborative Research Effort Funded By

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