

## **Dilemmas of Humanitarian Assistance: don't shoot the messenger – aid workers' perspectives and practice on working with insecurity**

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The world of humanitarian aid has changed significantly since its heyday in the 1980s:<sup>1</sup> more questions are now asked of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) by both institutional donors and their national public.<sup>2</sup> INGOs have also become more critical of themselves and of one another. Humanitarian aid is no longer accepted without question as a universal right and a good thing. Instead its positive value is dependant upon its outcomes and whether it does no harm. The complex emergencies<sup>3</sup> of the 1990s served to test the idea of neutral, apolitical humanitarianism. As the distinctions between combatants and non-combatants were blurred it became increasingly difficult for INGOs to remain neutral. At the same time as the ground rules of neutrality and impartiality are being questioned and the benefits of aid increasingly scrutinised INGOs are also faced with growing levels of insecurity. Humanitarian aid workers are no longer seen as 'respected and protected neutral healers', instead they are increasingly becoming targets, hostages and victims 'of an anarchy they cannot control'.<sup>4</sup> Recent research by the Humanitarian Policy Group of ODI<sup>5</sup> found that from 1997-2005 politically motivated incidents involving aid workers had increased by 208%. The study found that most aid worker victims were 'deliberately targeted, for political and/or economic purposes, rather than being randomly exposed to violence'.<sup>6</sup> This change in the security environment is impacting on INGOs and the way in which they deliver aid.

### **Global political climate and changing donor funding**

The global political climate is also impacting on donors. The global war on terror has rejuvenated cold war attitudes of aid provision being influenced by geo-political interest.<sup>7</sup> Many of the gains made in changing donor and government mindsets are being undermined by an increasingly close association between security and aid budgets. The rhetoric of 'opposing terrorism' has edged its way into the criteria for allocating aid.<sup>8</sup> Aid policy is increasingly being linked to diplomatic and military interventions as donors' interest in 'failed and fragile states' increases due to the possible implications for the security of northern states.<sup>9</sup> This arguably reduces the degree of focus upon the poor, as aid once again becomes a mechanism for leveraging political support and achieving political aims. Changing motivations for the allocation of aid are clearly illustrated by aid to

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<sup>1</sup> Duffield (2001)

<sup>2</sup> For example, the establishment of a new watchdog to monitor the effectiveness of DFID spending [www.guardian.co.uk/business/2007/may/10/internationalaidanddevelopment.development](http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2007/may/10/internationalaidanddevelopment.development)

<sup>3</sup> For a definition of the term see Duffield (1994)

<sup>4</sup> Cahill, 1999:2

<sup>5</sup> Stoddard et al (2006)

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 2006:1

<sup>7</sup> The well known phrase '3D agenda – defence, diplomacy and development', see Sen and Morris (2008) ch. 1

<sup>8</sup> Christian Aid (2004)

<sup>9</sup> Reality of Aid (2006)

Afghanistan and Iraq. Both the UK and the US have increased their total aid allocations since 2001, resulting in almost \$22 billion in new aid resources. However more than \$7 billion of this was disbursed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Since 2001, \$27 billion's worth of new aid resources has been made available by all donors, but again more than one third of this has gone to Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>10</sup> This change in focus comes at a cost as resources allocated to low and medium income countries are cut back. In the future such significant allocations of aid to Iraq and Afghanistan will not be sustainable unless funding is cut from existing budgets and money intended for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>11</sup>

Donors are releasing more funds for INGOs willing to work in areas of high insecurity as they focus on 'low-income countries under stress', 'difficult partnerships' and 'fragile states'.<sup>12</sup> Donors' acknowledgement of the increased risks to INGO personnel comes in the form of programme budget allocations to cover an increasingly security dominated climate. For example, ECHO<sup>13</sup> acknowledge in their security manual a worsening of the security situations for INGO staff and recommend that donors 'subsidise a variety of models for field-based security training for humanitarian organisations'<sup>14</sup> in order to maintain the quality of programming and ensure that it achieves its goals. USAID also acknowledged in 2001 that 'the neutrality that once sheltered humanitarian workers is no longer sufficient protection', in response to which OFDA<sup>15</sup> agreed to fund the equipment needed by NGOs to meet increased technical security requirements (radios, satellite phones, guards, increased employee benefits as well as increased insurance premiums and secure housing)<sup>16</sup>. However, not enough consideration has been given to the impact on INGO staff and on programming methods of working in such insecure environments.

### **The experiences of aid workers**

This briefing paper is based largely on qualitative data collected through professional life history interviews with 16 humanitarian aid workers working with a range of British INGOs. Whilst the research focused on the experience of individuals it is possible to draw some general lessons. Although this sample size is small the interviews aimed for depth and a richness of data which is often absent in larger quantitative samples.

Although there is a great deal of both academic and NGO sector literature about the changing security environment, very little research has been done to look at the situation from the perspective of aid workers.

The aid workers revealed a number of ways in which, personally and organisationally, they were forced to change their ways of working as a result of the growing insecurity in many field sites. The research highlighted that higher levels of incidents amongst NGO staff was having an impact upon humanitarian aid and the way it was delivered, and that this would continue unless agencies made a focused effort to review their practice. According to the aid workers organisational change in response to the worsening security environment is not happening systematically but locally as a means of coping with evolving field contexts.

Those interviewed had worked both in Asia and in Africa and in some cases had been functioning in the field for many years. The aid workers, unlike claims made in the academic literature, commented that there was a growing reduction of security in conflict and post-conflict environments. The reality on the ground was that security had been

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<sup>10</sup> Reality of Aid (2006) p.225

<sup>11</sup> Woods (2005)

<sup>12</sup> Reality of Aid (2006) p.19

<sup>13</sup> European Community Humanitarian Aid Department

<sup>14</sup> ECHO (2004) p.6

<sup>15</sup> Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance

<sup>16</sup> Rogers (2001)

gradually deteriorating for some time and was now far worse than they had previously experienced.

Whilst the literature tends to focus on one cause of this change, the context, the aid workers' responses were often multi-causal. The workers confirmed theories about the emergence of a 'new' and radicalised Islamic context which had often made the security situation worse. However, they held this in tension with the idea that there are similar security threats and vulnerabilities across all contexts and that they affect different groups of people in different ways.

Most of the aid workers interviewed believed that good systems and procedures within INGOs and the right equipment and training for staff could make a difference. They acknowledged that INGOs were starting to reform and review their security measures especially in the high risk contexts but they felt that the necessary changes were happening too slowly.

The worsening security context seems to be impacting humanitarian ways of working on a number of levels. One cross cutting impact was particularly significant: aid workers felt that they were becoming increasingly distant from their beneficiaries which they felt was problematic on a number of fronts. As aid work becomes more pressured, more hectic and more confined by security guidelines, it seems that not only are aid workers living in high security, high walled and guarded compounds but that their time with beneficiaries is often curtailed by the insecure environment:

'We often received advice from local administration, police and military not to travel or not to go anywhere. So often our movements were restricted not just of us but of the whole community'. (Chris)<sup>17</sup>

Aid workers are increasingly pressed for time by their agencies and donors. Therefore, time spent trying to really understand the needs or issues facing the community they work with has been substantially reduced. Fred, for example, describes the process of talking with communities where they work in Afghanistan. His experience is not uncommon:

'The manner in which we talk is very much, we come, we talk with you, we ask you questions and we go away and we do our job...we're a bit too quick with all our...sort of modern ideas and all our training to decide what's best for people and then get on and do it. And that's a problem, it's a problem of funding, it's a problem of you know, pressure from everybody to get things done.'

Several aid workers provided examples of the ways in which increasing insecurity limited their ability to operate, or made their work more resource intensive. The distancing effects seen as a result of increased security measures and less integration with the local communities were considered to have negative impact not only upon the level of participatory programming but also upon the organisational security. INGOs can no longer rely upon 'acceptance' in insecure environments, one of the three key areas for safeguarding the security of their staff<sup>18</sup>, as aid workers contact with the people and place they are there to serve has become increasingly restricted. As a result security planning relied more heavily on protection and deterrence which often resulted in further distancing of INGO staff from local communities. Tighter security controls are already having negative consequences on the poor, whose humanitarian and developmental needs are being ignored<sup>19</sup>. Unless this progression is stemmed or new ways of working are developed humanitarian aid risks becoming less and less about those it seeks to serve. This shift of focus away from beneficiaries makes aid more vulnerable to serving political or other elite purposes and susceptible to doing more harm than good.

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<sup>17</sup> The names of the aid workers interviewed have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

<sup>18</sup> Lloyd Roberts (1999)

<sup>19</sup> Sen (2007)

Not only did those interviewed reveal that ways of working were changing but they also felt that worsening security in some field sites was having an impact upon how some INGOs were staffing their programmes. Stoddard et al's (2006) research on the increased risk to aid workers highlights the fact that vulnerability to security incidents is different for national staff and expatriates. The interviewees confirmed this and also pointed out that when the security context worsened INGOs would tend to be more reliant upon national or regional staff. Some even suggested that there was increased risk-taking with non-western staff members due to the relative lack of international media interest. This is alarming if true and further complicated by the fact that for southern aid workers motivations may be primarily financial. The recruitment of increasing numbers of aid workers from the south<sup>20</sup> will inevitably impact upon programming and security. The aid workers interviewed felt that mixed; particularly north/south expatriate teams worked differently and networked less, and this affected the INGO's security.

It was not just ethnicity and nationality that were raised as having an impact upon the security of INGO staff. Interviewees argued that an individual's age and gender were important, as were their personality, religious beliefs, attitudes, values and experience. Obviously due to employment law some of these factors are difficult to take into account in the recruitment of aid workers. However, a person's attitude, values and experience should perhaps be given more attention in both the recruitment and training of aid workers for insecure environments. The introduction of psychometric testing at interview would be one way of doing this. It may also be worth considering whether security training needs to be more carefully tailored to individuals; particularly for those who are 'experienced', as the research identified a blasé attitude as another potential problem in insecure environments.

Whilst there has been a complete loss of naiveté amongst aid workers since the 1980s,<sup>21</sup> the interviews suggest growing levels of cynicism. New contexts, high levels of risk and donor pressure are increasingly trying to undermine the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian aid. As a result, aid workers struggle to deal not only with the realities on the ground but often with many conflicting messages. They know that they have become in the current climate, **political actors, often without choice**, but they are also aware of high levels of criticism about the sector<sup>22</sup> from different quarters, both national and international. Yet in most cases they continue to hold the high aspirations of humanitarian concern for everybody. Clearly there are no easy answers to the apparent contradictions in aid work today, but it is important to continue to ask questions about the rapidly changing environment of work and its impact on both aid workers and the communities where they work.

## Conclusion

More support from donors and governments engaged in various conflicts, particularly in the war against terrorism, and much more open debate is needed among INGOs and with aid workers to ensure that conscious decisions are made in the field rather than slippages towards politicisation. Aid workers who are reflexive and questioning are vital for good humanitarian aid, but their views need to be valued and the environment in which they work supportive to reflective practice<sup>23</sup>. If new ways of working are needed for what is definitely a new context INGOs need to be managing change in their organisation to ensure that, despite insecurity, their programming continues to fulfil their objective to serve the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

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<sup>20</sup> Cahill (1999)

<sup>21</sup> Duffield (2001)

<sup>22</sup> Maren (1997) Rieff (2002)

<sup>23</sup> Eyben (2006)

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