

Humanitarian Aid for Warlords?

The Dilemma of Relief Organisations in Violent Conflict Situations

In violent conflicts relief organisations cannot exclude the possibility that part of the aid may unintentionally be of direct benefit to the conflicting parties. Relief goods must be transported, stored and distributed, and the risk of theft and confiscation is especially high in the absence of legal security. Often, armed groups allow relief transports to pass only if they receive part of the cargo. Armed groups also receive foodstuffs by registering their members or front men as being needy.

Relief aid can also lead to a transfer of resources to conflicting parties in a less direct way. The governments of Ethiopia and the Sudan, engaged in wars against rebellions and separatist movements, de facto taxed the expenditures made locally by the relief organisations over the years by overvaluing their national currencies. It is estimated that the foreign exchange which the Sudanese government took in through the big UN-supported airlift project "Operation Lifeline" enabled it at times to cover half of its military expenditures.¹

New conflict potential

Relief aid can increase the tension between conflicting parties and can create new conflict potential. Large relief programmes bring resources into an area in which resources have become scarce due to the economic effects of war. Those who have access to foodstuffs, those who have the opportunity to participate in a rehabilitation programme and those who are able to find a job with a relief organisation are observed very closely by the various parties involved in the conflict, especially in those conflicts which were interpreted by the participants of the conflict as being ethnic clashes.

In the case of rehabilitation programmes, relief organisations make decisions concerning the future structure of settlements. In a conflict which is interpreted as being an ethnic conflict over land, such decisions involve considerable conflict potential. The rehabilitation efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the most recent example of this.

If in programmes for refugees and displaced persons the needs of the local population are not sufficiently taken into consideration then new tensions arise, this time between the displaced/refugees and the population in whose area they are seeking refuge. Insufficient consideration of the population's needs in the large re-

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What effects does relief aid provided in violent conflicts have? Do the side-effects of aid include increasing conflict potential, prolonging conflicts and causing violent clashes in the future? This is increasingly becoming a topic of discussion in Germany. Relief agencies must react to this debate and openly admit the risks involved in intervening in violent conflicts.

lief programmes implemented in Eastern Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) was partly responsible for the violent attacks on the Rwandan refugees who live there (although this was by no means the sole reason for them).

Providing relief aid in conflict areas involves implicit ethical messages.² When relief organisations negotiate with representatives of the conflicting parties about conditions for assistance, they accept, willingly or unwillingly, the right of the party in question to control the corresponding area and to decide whether the population should receive access to relief goods, where they should receive these goods, and who will not receive any.

What options for relief organisations?

Relief programmes can increase tension. In "complex" catastrophes, it is the duty of a professional relief aid organisation to assess the effect the intervention may have on the conflict situation. What options do relief organisations have in order to minimise or avoid negative effects of their assistance in violent conflicts? This question was investigated by "the Local Capacities for Peace Project", Cambridge, USA., directed by Mary B. Anderson.³ In conflict situations, relief organisations are not confronted with simple either-or situations: either to provide assistance the way they are used to or to stop it completely. Anderson asks: how can an organisation transport relief goods to a conflict area while avoiding theft and confiscation and at the same time doing without armed protection? This problematic task is relevant for relief pro-

grammes in most armed conflicts. "Do no harm", is the message of Anderson. When discussing the options proposed by her it quickly becomes apparent that the circumstances which accompany this field of work rarely permit simple solutions.

One option is to negotiate relief programmes with local groups who traditionally have authority in the disaster area, a fact which becomes more important in the absence of an existing state. An agreement with local authorities can safeguard relief programmes, but it does not necessarily rule out a transfer of resources to warring parties. Often, local leaders can only hold their position of informal leadership if they cooperate with one of the warring parties.

Commercial dealers

Another alternative, according to Anderson, is to commission commercial dealers with the transport of foodstuffs to a destination within an area of conflict. The dealers are paid only if the relief goods reach their destination. This option by no means rules out a transfer of resources to the conflicting parties who control the area through which the foodstuffs must be transported or in which they are to be distributed. The dealers will include any payments, charges for passage or informal taxes in the price of their goods. The only difference as compared to a relief organisation assuming responsibility for the transport of the goods itself is that the organisation does not have to be that well informed about any payments to the conflicting parties.

Confiscation sometimes occurs when certain groups of recipients or regions feel at a disadvantage. But, even when a relief organisation endeavours to distribute aid equally among different regions, representatives of the various regions may take the view that their own region should receive more assistance, or even that their region should be the only one to receive assistance, and support their position with confiscation or blockades.

There is no ideal solution to avoid negative side effects, especially not in a situation in which there is no central state authority and no semblance of legal security; in addition, the shortage of resources due to the conflict results in a great demand for all resources which are available locally. In this type of situation no guarantees are possible. Even the most vehement critics of the relief organisations

have no ready concept as to how, in a situation as it existed in Eastern Zaire in the last weeks of the Mobutu regime, one can provide foodstuffs for refugees and displaced persons and at the same time rule out the possibility that soldiers who have not been paid for months, who themselves are starving and whose families are starving, should get "their share" of the goods, either by means of direct agreements with representatives of the relief organisations or by means of confiscation from the relief organisations or the recipients.

Humanitarian aid as part of the war economy?

If, in an armed conflict, a relief organisation does not succeed in avoiding a transfer of resources to the conflicting parties, this does not necessarily mean that the diverted aid is a substantial factor in prolonging the conflict. No war can be financed by diverted relief aid alone. The fighting factions in the Liberian civil war had various sources of income. One was robbery and theft of relief goods and vehicles belonging to relief organisations. But this was only one source besides many others. In many phases of the conflict, the exploitation of the country's natural riches – rubber, gold, diamonds, timber – continued, partly by using forced labour. The armed groups organised production and export by themselves or they obtained a share by way of concession fees. Furthermore, an informal economy existed during the whole civil war. Due to the complete lack of legal security, the members of the factions and their relatives gained a dominating position within the informal economy.⁴ Ceasing to provide food aid and stopping the support given to the local partners would have made it possible to avoid confiscation, but at the price of refusing aid to the population which was trapped in Monrovia and the part of the population in rural Liberia which did not flee abroad. Putting a stop to assistance, however, would have had but a marginal influence on the resource situation of the armed groups in Liberia. This example also calls our attention to the question of international responsibility in this conflict. Whereas it is difficult to influence the smuggling of gold and diamonds from outside the country, the export of timber requires collaboration. This important source of income could only continue to benefit the Liberian factions because border authorities in the Ivory Coast let the shipments of timber pass, because international shipping companies were willing to transport the cargo and because processing industries primarily in France, Ma-

laysia and Singapore continued to buy Liberian wood.

Responsibility of relief agencies and others

Relief organisations which intervene in violent conflicts by supplying foodstuffs, implementing rehabilitation programmes and providing social services must be aware of the fact that their assistance can have negative effects, whether these be the transfer of resources to conflicting parties, or the increase in tension between them or implicit ethical messages. In extreme cases, extensive relief programmes can contribute to prolonging conflicts. The reality of relief programmes makes it necessary to compromise. The compromises which have to be made are dictated by the conditions in the conflict area; these conditions are affected by the conduct of the conflicting parties who are interested in obtaining part of the resources from the relief programme. The best option can be thwarted by an opposing strategy of the conflicting parties who are not restricted by any legal regulations.

For some of the accusations made in the debate on negative side effects of relief aid the relief agencies are not the right addresses. Given that it is true that the relief programmes in Eastern Zaire made possible the reorganisation of the armed Hutu extremists, the responsibility to isolate these groups and to block their access to relief aid is not with the agencies.⁵ Typically, those who raised this criticism did not openly request to stop the relief programme for the Rwandan refugees in Zaire.

Enormous responsibility of relief organisations

The fact that assistance can aggravate conflicts is an indication of the enormous responsibility which relief organisations have. Many people imagine that relief aid is an easy task which merely requires good will and sufficient logistics. On the contrary, relief aid which uses the options available in an effort to avoid detrimental effects is a professional service which requires standards, qualified personnel and methods of quality control just as much as it does financial means and logistics. But, the field of relief aid including violent conflicts is open to almost any organisation who claims have a vocation for it.

In order to avoid negative consequences when intervening in complex conflict situations, it is necessary to have sufficient information on the origin of the conflict, on the interests of the various groups and on particular ethnic and cultural features. Rapidly alternating teams of foreign inter-

ventionists usually do not meet this requirement. Working together with local partners can correct the decisions of relief organisations which are the result of a one-sided perception of the local situation. It were church related partners in Eastern Zaire who insisted that the fate of the displaced persons there be considered, whereas those outside the country saw only the plight of the Rwandan refugees. However, relief aid which is based on the principle of partnership cannot simply delegate the responsibility for avoiding the detrimental effects of aid. It is the responsibility of the relief organisation to judge the extent to which one's own partner is itself involved in the conflict and contributes to an increase in tension.

The relief organisations cannot alone bear the responsibility of anticipating the consequences of intervention. But explaining what they should have seen in advance once the relief programmes are over, as some social scientists are fond of doing, is of little help to them. They need to receive advice ahead of time so that they can use it in situations in which decisions have to be made quickly. In Germany, however, the capacities for research on developing countries are being greatly reduced; these are the same capacities which observe and analyse individual countries and conflict situations on a long-term basis, independently of current trends in the academic sector and of the public opinion. This will necessarily have a detrimental effect on the quality of relief aid.

The debate on the detrimental effects of relief aid is long overdue. In Germany it is just beginning. Its implications for the current system of relief aid, for the mandate of the organisations which act within it, for the system of public funding and for the qualifications of those employed in this field have hardly been discussed up to now. It is worthwhile to enter into this debate.

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1 Mark Duffield, *The Political Economy of Internal War: Asset Transfer, Complex Emergencies and International Aid*, in: Joanna Macrae and Anthony Zwi (Ed.): *War and Hunger. Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies*, London: Zed Books, 1994, p. 60.

2 Mary B Anderson, *Do no Harm. Supporting Local Capacities for Peace through Aid*, Local Capacities for Peace Project. The Collaborative for Development Action, Inc., Cambridge, MA., 1996.

3 Ibid.

4 Philippa Atkinson, *The War Economy in Liberia. A Political Analysis*, forthcoming.

5 Chaloka Beyani, *The Legal Basis for Humanitarian Assistance*, in: *Ethics in Humanitarian Aid. Non-Governmental Organisations Forum*, Dublin, Dec. 9-10, 1996, Published by European Community Humanitarian Office, Brussels