

Humanitarian Exchange

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About HPN

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



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At the World Food Conference in 1974, governments proclaimed that 'every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties'. They promised that, within a decade, 'no child would go hungry'.

Ten years later, in Ethiopia, between 800,000 and a million people died in one of the worst famines in the country's modern history. The scale and severity of the famine eventually triggered an unprecedented international response. Such events as Band Aid and Live Aid marked the moment when, for many, the world woke up to the huge challenge of famine and food insecurity in the world's poorest countries.

In Ethiopia today, much of the population is extremely and increasingly vulnerable. Most years bring famine warnings and appeals for food aid from the government and international aid agencies. This year, according to the Ethiopian government, seven million people are unable to feed themselves for the whole year, and need 900,000 tonnes of food aid.

According to Amartya Sen, 'Famines are extremely easy to prevent. It is amazing that they actually take place, because they require a severe indifference on the part of the government'. The term 'famine crimes' was used by Alex de Waal in relation to the causes of and response to famine. However, the complex interaction of political, social, economic



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and environmental factors makes the task of famine prevention far from easy.

Significant advances have been made, in early warning and food security policy for example, but new challenges such as HIV/AIDS have emerged, and conflict and weak and poor governments remain key factors in allowing famines to continue. Three decades after the proclamations and promises of the 1974 World Food Conference, a major development theme of the recent G-8 summit in the US was famine in the Horn of Africa. Famine and the threat of it remain a shameful challenge to the world.

The challenge to humanitarian organisations is to define an effective role in the face of famine in Ethiopia and elsewhere. The special feature of this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* takes Ethiopia as a focus to consider the complex, often controversial question of famine response. It explores the role of humanitarianism amongst all the various approaches and forms of action, and asks what humanitarian actors can do to try to save lives and alleviate suffering.

Articles on a wide range of other humanitarian policy and practice issues are also presented in this issue. As always, we welcome submissions for publication, and your feedback on HPN's publications.

Hunger and poverty in Ethiopia: local perceptions of famine and famine response

Alula Pankhurst, Addis Ababa University, and Philippa Bevan, University of Bath

Twenty years after the devastating famine in 1984, Ethiopia still faces food security crises. In 2003, up to 15 million people were considered food insecure. Despite much research, we still do not know enough about how local people in different settings understand and cope with food shortage. This article reports on research which aimed to explore how people in Ethiopia have experienced famine, related epidemics and food aid. The research, conducted between July and September 2003, was carried out in 20 locations across the four main regions of the country – Amhara, Oromia, Southern and Tigray – together representing the bulk (86%) of the population.

Famine experiences *Hunger, poverty and death*

‘It is difficult to say that an individual has died due to famine, although there were deaths [in 1994]’

Only four of the 20 locations escaped the mortality effects of famine. The 1984 famine was perceived to be the worst, affecting 14 locations, compared with four in 1973 and six in 1994. However, without food aid, many more locations would have been affected in 1994, and southern locations were affected for the first time. This suggests that famine, often assumed to be largely in the north and east, is spreading, particularly in the south.

The 20 locations can be classified under three headings:

- 1) never affected by food production failures (four);
- 2) affected, but not regularly (seven); and
- 3) facing chronic food insecurity and food aid dependent (nine).

Differences of opinion and a hesitation to attribute deaths to ‘famine’ suggest that preoccupation with deaths, both in the media and among researchers, may no longer be useful in understanding famine. Instead, the focus should be on coping strategies, links between food insecurity and poverty, and differences between and within communities.

‘People suffered from poverty, yet I know of no one who died’

Food security

Between 1991 and 2004, people generally reported a bad year or two, especially between 1999 and 2003, and some

reported continuous problems. Given significant variations, there is a need for caution in generalising over the entire country. Nonetheless, 2002 was clearly generally a bad year, while trends for 2003 seemed fairly good at the time of the research.

Historical perspective

Comparing food security across three political regimes – the Imperial reign of Haile Selassie (up to 1973), the communist Derg regime under Mengistu (1974–91) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF – 1991 onwards) – food production was generally perceived to have continually declined. However, a respondent in Haresaw noted that *food security* under the EPRDF was better than during the Derg era, even if *food production* was worse. Food security is not limited to production alone since taxation and market policies are also critical:

‘In the Imperial period, there was excess product but it was taken by the Balabat (landlord); during the Derg, there was sufficient produce, but it was taken by the Agricultural Market Corporation; under the EPRDF, there is increased production, and we hear about famine in faraway areas’

Causes of food insecurity

The general view of increasing food insecurity was explained mainly by the weather (12 locations). Other natural factors included a decrease in land size and quality, animal and plant diseases and a reduction of trees and wild products. Human factors included population increase, governance issues related to development policies and indebtedness, conflict, and a loss of work values. In contrast, better food security was explained by food aid, an increase in productivity and in land cultivated, improved seeds, irrigation and knowledge and NGO assistance.

Coping with hunger

Selling assets

‘The livestock became thin and bony. Just at the beginning of the famine, they were sold with less price. However, in the middle of the famine, who would buy them?’

The main strategy for asset sales was selling livestock. However, in famine conditions prices of cattle fall dramatically, while grain prices escalate rapidly. This means that



A child plays in Adele Keke, Harerghe

the sale of livestock does not provide food for long. People also sold household assets, gold and 'even land'. Trees, firewood and charcoal were also sold, mainly by women:

'Almost everybody started to cut trees for charcoal and firewood. Especially the women became involved in carrying the firewood to the nearest cities for sale. They became the backbone of their families'

Work

'During bella [lack of food for a short time], people work for others. During shantu [lack of food for a long time, such as a year], people migrate to other areas, particularly urban areas'

Migration was reported as the main work-related strategy, including rural and urban migration, seasonal and daily wage labour, work on state or private farms, and hiring out children as herders or domestic servants. Wage labour for richer households within communities was reported as limited to shorter crises; as conditions worsen, people go further, notably to towns. Seasonal labour migration for harvesting and coffee picking is a normal strategy and only intensifies under famine conditions. Irrigation is new and limited to a few locations; there is insufficient water to go round.

Borrowing

'Ask help from relatives in and outside the area/country? Not often, since only a few people have relatives with enough resources. No more borrowing but free gifts expecting reciprocity'

Borrowing food was reportedly common, especially from relatives but also from neighbours and the rich. But relatives

may not be able to lend, and the rich may be less willing. Children are sometimes sent away to relatives. People borrowed money from the community, town traders and government agencies; but interest was high and credit limited during famines.

Begging and stealing

'Although people used to steal in the night before, during the famine people used to steal in the day-time'

Begging was mentioned both locally and in nearby or distant towns, especially by the old and the disabled. Theft of livestock and crops was also reported, though in Gelcha, in the Southern Region, both begging and stealing were considered to be shameful. Theft

was said to take place at night and on the way to market:

'Unemployed armed individuals have robbed houses during the night time and when people are on the way home from the markets'

Food and diet

'They rarely or do not eat injera [a local staple pancake], but bread, beles [fruit of wild cactus], and meals were reduced from twice to once a day'

Reduced consumption and meal frequency and changes in diet were common. In cereal cropping areas, this meant a change to vegetables and pulses, notably cabbage and potatoes, as well as low-status foods. In areas where *enset* (false-banana) is the staple food, people ate the root not usually consumed, and in pastoralist areas, a move from milk to cereals and blood was mentioned. Wild foods were also consumed, though rarely in some locations, and only by the poorest.

The experiences of women, older people and babies

'If there is shortage of food at home, the one who suffers is the woman. They give priority to their children. A man will go and get some food for himself'

Generally, men thought that women were more affected: they fed their family first and needed good food while pregnant, giving birth and breast-feeding. Others suggested that they are weak but work harder than men, and support the family while men look for work locally or migrate. In two locations, women reportedly walked long distances to get food or off-farm income.

'During the drought, women are engaged in off-farm work like collecting and selling firewood and charcoal. The whole family depends on the women for food'

Most respondents thought that older people were particularly affected, mainly because they could not move around looking for food or work, and could not participate in food for work programmes. Others said that they lacked teeth to chew food; they needed food more frequently, and young men ate served food faster.

'There were cases where people committed suicide as they could not bear to see their starving children'

All respondents recognised that babies were worst affected due to their regular need for milk, problems of milk supply from hungry mothers, their inability to eat famine foods and food aid, and their lack of resistance to diseases. Other factors were lack of care when mothers search for food, and an inability to afford medical fees.

'Babies are highly affected because of disease and having nothing to eat. Their mothers also cannot breastfeed their children since the breast has no milk'

Food allocation within households

Informants generally agreed that reductions in food were not equally distributed. Most mentioned adults, but in half the locations women and children were also mentioned and the elderly were said to be affected in five of the villages. In only three locations was it suggested that food reduction is equally distributed.

'Our tradition is to share the available food during both good and bad times'

Famine, poverty and the rich

'In times of drought there is famine, which finishes all resources leading to poverty. This in turn creates vulnerability to famine'

The connection between famine and poverty was generally recognised. Most picked up on the progression from drought to famine to poverty; a few identified a causal link from poverty to famine:

'In our community, agriculture is the sole important means of livelihood. Agriculture is fundamentally rainfed. For a long time, there has been a shortage of rain; rain has been unreliable and irregular. These events were the basic factors that have a lot to do with poverty'

In 13 locations, respondents said that people got richer during famine. Some said that the rich lost more stock, but it was also noted that the rich better resisted famine's effects:

'Rich farmers who have oxen cultivate more; they manage to produce drought-resistant crops including sweet potato, cassava, yam. Thus, they

benefit more and could survive in the period of drought and famine'

Moreover, in the post-famine period, the rich may capitalise on having survived better:

'Those who were rich can survive the famine and buy livestock and property at cheaper prices from the hungry'

The potential for food aid as a source of enrichment was mentioned. Individuals bought property at low prices and lent food and money at high interest rates; traders, local officials, and militia manipulated food aid through corruption, nepotism and theft.

'During famines, there has always been food aid. There are some people who manipulate the aid through corruption and nepotism. Some get a lot of aid for their own personal benefit. This is true for village officials and administrators. They and others become richer during famines in a short cut way'

Famine and conflict

'Yes, there will be conflict between people who have and who have not. Those who do not have they steal from the "haves", and when they protect it for themselves, there would be disappointment and people kill each other'

In more than half of the 20 locations, conflict was reported as a result of theft of livestock and food, competition for water and firewood, reduced tolerance owing to hunger and disputes over food. Seven locations reported no conflict. Famine was also reported as potentially leading to conflict within households:

'Yes, if a person does not get food, after working hours in the family he becomes angry and quarrels with his wife, children and cattle. He lacks patience'

Interventions

Food aid

'Even in seasons where food is relatively secure, the community receives food aid'

Regular dependence on food aid was reported from nine communities, in one case going back many years, in others beginning around 2000. Patterns vary between and even within locations. In Oda Haro, Oromia Region, food aid in 1983–84 was too late; in 1994, it was insufficient to go round and was looted; in 2003, it was targeted towards the most needy. In nine locations suffering from chronic food insecurity, food aid saved people from death, reduced indebtedness, and prevented livestock sales, wage labour and out-migration.

'If there was no food aid, we would all have been dead or we would have become labourers'

The negative effects of food aid included long-term dependency, laziness and reduced reliance on oneself and God.

‘For those lazy fellows who depend on the food aid it has a negative aspect. Hard-working farmers want a permanent aid to pull them from this type of life for ever’

Four occasionally food-aid dependent locations reported that some people sold aid to buy cigarettes, and that low grain prices may affect merchants. In most chronically food-insecure locations, distribution was perceived as unfair because of corruption, nepotism, inefficiency, delays or incorrect reporting. Other reasons mentioned included discrimination against the ‘rich’, older or poorer people; people ‘cheating’ through double registration; and high NGO salaries.

Food for work

‘The community is engaged in food for work programmes whenever there is food aid distribution’

Food aid was generally reported as linked to ‘food for work’ programmes. Benefits were that people could work locally rather than migrating, that some work was useful (soil conservation, ponds, forestry) and encouraged a work spirit, and that people participated in their own development. Major constraints were conflicts with other labour needs and people’s own priorities at peak times, low payments and the late arrival of food. Not everyone is involved, and the work was often compulsory.

‘Negative aspects arise when people seek for an incentive (food) before they involve in development programmes that benefit the community. It is bad for people to wait for an incentive before they work for their own wellbeing. They could have done it out of self-initiation’

Employment generation

‘Airport construction and irrigation schemes were some of the employment generation schemes [EGSs]. Now there are no EGSs in the community’

Employment generation schemes reported in four regularly food-aid dependent locations include road and other construction, terracing, irrigation, tree nurseries and a coffee-processing machine. Advantages were cash incomes, environmental rehabilitation and a reduction in migration. Negative aspects were that the airport and irri-

gation schemes took over people’s land, and the coffee-processing machine poisoned the water.

Policy conclusions

This research raises five key findings with policy implications:

- We should be talking about hunger and poverty rather than ‘famine’, moving away from a preoccupation in the media and academia with famine deaths to take a broader view of how food security relates to poverty.
- People and communities affected by hunger and poverty have a considerable understanding of the processes involved, and individuals and households are actively engaged in struggles to survive and prosper. Given options, people are able to make appropriate choices, and should be involved more in decision-making on types and modalities of assistance.
- Food aid is an important cushion, but there are problems in the way it is delivered. Issues of timely delivery, the effects on local production and exchange, variation and nutrition of food aid-based diets, especially for pregnant and lactating women and babies, unfair distribution and misuse should be given more attention, and innovative ways of ensuring food security, in which local people have more say, should be explored.
- Food for work and employment generation schemes should not conflict with local labour needs and priorities at peak times, the work should be considered useful by local people, must be voluntary and should not alienate or damage resources, or undermine individual and community initiatives.
- Given significant variations in ecology, livelihoods, social status and individual potential, interventions should be fine-tuned to suit local conditions, and defined and managed by local people, rather than simply following international, national or even regional blueprints.

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'Famines' or 'mass starvations': victims, beneficiaries and perpetrators

Jenny Edkins, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK

There have been many attempts to establish what is meant by famine and to determine what its causes might be. Many writers see the search for an adequate definition as an essential preliminary to analysis and action. Donors cannot be motivated to act unless they are convinced that what is taking place is actually a famine. Analysts cannot begin to study the causes of famine until they know what it is they are looking at. Yet the meaning of 'famine' has remained elusive.

Sen and entitlements theory

Historically, famines were understood largely in Malthusian terms: as natural disasters that occur when a failure of food production, through drought for example, leads to conditions of scarcity. The land can no longer support the population that relies upon it. By the early 1980s, this view was being challenged by Amartya Sen. Sen argued that a decline in what he called 'food availability' was not necessary for a famine to occur. It did not matter what the total food supply per head in any area was; what was crucial was whether particular individuals or households had access to sufficient food. Sen's work emphasised not quantities of food but questions of entitlements, or the assets a person owned that could be traded for or converted into food. This stressed the need to examine each famine in its own particularity. Second, it looked not at 'populations' in the Malthusian mode, but specific 'persons' or households. Finally, it focused attention on ownership and other forms of entitlement relations within a society.

Technologised responses and their limitations

Sen's work was potentially radical, and could have produced a new approach to famine studies. However it did not, for two reasons. First, although Sen moved away from the notion of famine as a failure of food production, he retained the idea of breakdown or collapse, this time of a person's entitlements. Sen did not consider the possibility that famines could be a *product* of the social or economic system; famines are still unexpected 'emergencies'.

When something is identified as a failure, it appears as a technical or managerial problem. An otherwise benign system has collapsed and needs putting right. The appropriate response is to identify what went wrong and then to intervene to correct it. So, for example, once Sen's notion of entitlements was accepted, plans could be developed to replace lost entitlements. These responses, like the responses based on Malthus, are depoliticised and technologised. They are implemented by experts, without consultation with those involved.

The second reason why the radical potential of Sen's approach was blunted lies in his limited view of what politics is. Sen sees politics as separable from economics, and the state as ultimately benign and non-violent. His entitlements approach excludes instances of deliberate starvation and what he calls 'non-entitlement transfers', which are those that fall outside the legal system of the society concerned. Both routinely occur during famines. In addition, Sen does not question the way in which the legitimate violence of the state is used to uphold the ownership rights of certain sections of the community, while others starve. During a famine some people are denied access to food by force, whether it is the police protecting food shops while people on the streets starve, or, as happened in Ethiopia in 1984, the diversion of food from its intended beneficiaries to others.

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Repoliticising mass starvations

Sen retained a definition of famine which, like others current in the mid-1980s, focused on demographic and biological factors, and which saw famine as a breakdown. His definition of famine was: 'A particularly virulent manifestation of starvation causing widespread death'.

Amrita Rangasami questions this definition. First, she argues that mortality is not a necessary condition of famine but only its biological culmination. Famine should be seen as a protracted political, social and economic process of oppression comprising three stages: dearth, 'famishment' and mortality. The culmination of the process comes well before the final stage of disease and death. If the process is halted before people die, it is nonetheless still a famine. Second, famine cannot be defined solely with reference to the victims. The process is one in which 'benefits accrue to one section of the community while losses flow to the other'. To study only the responses or coping strategies of victims, while paying no attention to the actions (or inaction) of the rest of the community, is to miss what is going on.

Since Rangasami's work, writers such as Alex de Waal have developed the notion of famine as a process, and examined the coping strategies that those suffering from famine employ at different stages. Only one writer – David Keen – has directly examined the strategies of the

beneficiaries of famine: its perpetrators and its bystanders. In his study of famine in Sudan, Keen asks: 'What use is famine, what functions does it assure, in what strategies is it integrated?'

Such questions reinstate mass starvations as a political process, involving relationships of power between people and between groups (not just between people and commodities, as in entitlements theory). Social relations are inevitably power relations. However, power is not centralised and possessed, but dispersed. Power relations are produced on a day-to-day basis through the small-scale actions and interactions of individual people.

To study mass starvations in this way is to examine how they come about, what small actions or inactions make them happen, and who exactly the beneficiaries and the victims are. It requires close investigation rather than grand general theory. It means addressing minutiae or details. The historian of the Nazi genocides, Raul Hilberg, adopts precisely this approach: 'In all my work I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with small answers ... I look at the process ... as a series of minute steps'.

Attributing responsibility

If it is accepted that mass starvation is the result of a series of small acts, at least some of them deliberate and some carried out with the intention of producing precisely this outcome, then it is possible to begin to explore the question of responsibility. Alex de Waal has used the phrase 'famine crimes', and has suggested that a possible solution would be 'anti-famine contracts' between rulers and people. If such a political contract is in place, 'famine is a political scandal. Famine is deterred'.¹

Such political contracts may seem more likely in democratic political regimes than in authoritarian ones. However, it is important to avoid concluding that democracy prevents famine, since this risks reinstating a grand theory of famine. It is also important to avoid framing anti-famine contracts as simply measures against governments that fail to respond quickly enough to an emerging crisis: to say this would be to return to the language of failure, breakdown and disaster.

Once mass starvations are considered crimes, parallels can be made with other crimes like genocide or war crimes. This changes the vocabulary. When genocide is discussed, it is not so much a question of causes and

¹ Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997).



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An Ethiopian woman carries firewood in Sekota, Ethiopia, May 2003

solutions, but one of responsibility, criminal liability, perpetrators, bystanders, victims and survivors. Using the language of genocide, appropriate questions become: who committed the famine?; how, and why?; who were the victims?; who was involved?² If mass starvation is a crime, the appropriate language should be used. Crimes do not *happen*, they are *committed*. Crime is not 'ended': criminals are deterred, detained and prosecuted.

No one has yet been prosecuted for committing mass starvation, but there are prospects that this may happen with the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Rome Statute that forms the basis of the ICC explicitly includes mass starvation under three headings. It is a war crime if it is used as a weapon of war; a crime against humanity, if it is the deliberate extermination of a civilian population by the deprivation of food; and a genocide, if it is carried out with the intention of destroying in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.

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Article 8 of the Statute defines as a war crime 'Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival,

² These questions are taken from S. Totten, W.S. Parsons and I.W. Charny, *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views* (New York: Garland, 1997), substituting 'famine' for 'genocide'.

including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions'. At present, this applies only when starvation takes place in international conflict. Article 7 defines 'extermination' as a crime against humanity 'when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population' where "“extermination” includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, *inter alia* the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population'. Genocide is defined in Article 6, and includes 'deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part'. The term 'conditions of life' is further defined as including 'deliberate deprivation of resources indispensable for survival, such as food or medical services, or systematic expulsion from homes'.

Conclusion

Any definition of famine which sees it as a failure of some sort is missing the point. Whether famine is seen as a failure of food supply, a breakdown in the food distribution system, or a multi-faceted livelihoods crisis, the outcome is the same. These definitions or concepts blind us to the fact that famines, and the deaths, migrations or impoverishments that they produce, are enormously beneficial to the perpetrators: they are a success not a failure, a normal output of the current economic and political system, not an aberration.

This article suggests that it might be useful to replace the notion of famine with the phrase 'mass starvations'. This might help to get away from the idea of scarcity as a cause and famines as a breakdown or failure. To talk of mass starvations is to evoke the parallel of mass killings and genocides. Famines, though clearly distinct from genocides, share more with these acts than they do with natural disasters. In many cases they are the result of deliberate actions by people who can see what the consequences will be. In Ethiopia, for example, there is little doubt that the damaging effects that some of the tactics of the war have had on food production and distribution could have been predicted, and may have been intended. If famines are not produced deliberately, then they are often allowed to progress beyond the stage of 'famishment' to 'morbidity'.

Famines are not caused by abstractions, such as food supply or entitlement failure – they are brought about

through the acts or omissions of people or groups of people. These people are responsible for famine and mass starvation – and they should be held accountable. There is already an embryonic provision in international law which allows for the prosecution of those responsible for mass starvations. Rather than assuming goodwill and unanimity in the project of ending famine, it might be as well to consider campaigning to improve these provisions and to remove impunity from those who, nationally or internationally, commit famine crimes or the crime of mass starvation. This would take place alongside action to establish robust anti-starvation political contracts locally.

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Food insecurity and aid policies in Ethiopia

Jerome Frignet, Action Contre la Faim

The famine forecast for 2002–2003 put Ethiopia once again – albeit briefly – on the international front pages. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's comparisons with the situation in 1984–85 were duly relayed by the media, yet the circumstances of these two crises are so different that a repetition now seems almost inconceivable.

In the event, the 2002–2003 food crisis did not have the feared lethal intensity, though it was still exceptional in terms of numbers involved: at the end of 2002, the UN spoke of perhaps 15 million people 'threatened' by famine. All the attention and resources of the international community were directed towards emergency response, mainly food distribution.

Should we simply rejoice that, 20 years on, early warning and response systems have progressed so far that a large-scale famine is no longer a major risk in a country that so neatly symbolises hunger in Western eyes? Or should we also ask questions about the persistence of such immense food insecurity in a relatively peaceful country? It seems that the attention paid to early warning and emergency response mechanisms, vital as they are, may have diverted minds away from more fundamental issues about the persistence of food insecurity and how to deal with it. The bulk of aid focuses on short-term responses; the deeper causes of food insecurity are largely ignored due to lack of political will on the part of the government, and the essentially reactive policy of donors.

'Model' warning and emergency response mechanisms?

Since the 'hidden famine' of 1973–74, the Ethiopian government has tried to develop an early warning and emergency response system that would lead the way in sub-Saharan Africa. The system's growing openness and transparency since the fall of the Mengistu regime has ensured much better support from international donors. In 2003, pledges exceeded 90% of the 1.7m tonnes requested. About 50% of distributions were arranged by the government. The government also has emergency stocks of around 200,000 tons, allowing it to make up for the traditional tardiness of international contributions. The mechanism is running relatively well; given the generous international response, it can avoid widespread or mass famine.

These evaluation and response mechanisms enable fairly large amounts of aid to be mobilised. However, placing unshakeable faith in them is not without risk, and it would be dangerous to rely on them alone:

- The mechanisms for early warning, assessment of food shortages and distribution were designed for farming regions, and are much less relevant to pastoral areas (where early warning systems do not, in any case, always exist).
- Emergency food aid is both visible and costly, and eats into other forms of international assistance. As a result, Ethiopia has one of the world's largest food aid programmes, but the lowest rate of official aid per capita in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Short-term emergency operations are not appropriate for chronic or recurring situations.
- Until 2003, calls for food aid made no distinction between temporary needs (in response to a one-off crisis) and chronic needs (structural food deficits). This means identical responses to fundamentally different problems.
- The food rations that are distributed are not necessarily suited to real nutritional needs. This gives the illusion of an effective solution, while masking persistent problems.
- Finally, the process of assessing crops, regional deficits and consequent food aid needs remains cumbersome, complex and plagued by disparate methodologies and regional interpretations. This damages its effectiveness and coherence.

The assessment of the 2003–2004 *Meher* harvest, accounting for 95% of the total national cereal output, illustrates this incoherence. While official statistics and the joint (FAO/WFP/DPPC/donor) assessment predicted a bumper crop, subsequent analyses of the country's grain markets by the Central Statistical Authority concur on a harvest on a par with the average for the last ten years. Estimates vary from 8.5m to 11.8m tonnes of cereals, equivalent to a margin of error of nearly 50%. Estimated food aid requirements reflect this uncertainty: the FAO, while speaking of a 'record crop', still estimates that 7.2m people might be short of food – a deficit of around a million tonnes. There is, in other words, a fear that an underestimation of needs – perhaps in the hope of restoring confidence in agricultural policy – could lead to catastrophe.¹ In 2003, the area most seriously affected by the nutritional crisis, Sidama zone in the SNNPR, was not one of the regions usually threatened with famine; it had not been considered especially vulnerable in the past, which meant that needs were spectacularly underestimated, and the targeting of beneficiaries was problematic.

the FAO still estimates that 7.2m people might be short of food

Shifting the policy focus

Countrywide food self-sufficiency has long been a primary political and economic objective for Ethiopia: cropping and herding account for around 50% of gross domestic product and 70% of exports; since the mid-1990s, the Ethiopian government has been trying to make agricultural development drive economic development. While Ethiopia has come closer to its overall aim of self-sufficiency, this has not led to an automatic reduction in food insecurity:

- Annual variations in production are still considerable, reflecting in part the dependence of farming on climatic conditions.
- These variations cause significant price fluctuations, in the absence of effective market regulation and a transport and storage infrastructure that could allow surpluses to be directed towards deficit areas.
- The government has encouraged systematic use of inputs. These are supplied on credit, which can cause repayment problems due to the vagaries of production and the absence of a guaranteed minimum selling price.² Paradoxically, a good year can undermine producers, causing them to sell at a loss to repay their debts, which will mean reduced production capacity the following year.
- The lack of security of tenure (the state still owns the land) acts as a brake on rational land management by farmers.

¹ Interviews with participants in the joint needs assessment missions in that area.

² Yves Guinand, 'Livelihood Disruption in Cash Crop and Surplus Producing Areas', Emergencies Unit for Ethiopia, August 2002.



©Jerome Fignaret, ACF

Livestock in Afar region, where ACF is supporting an animal health network

than 40m head of large livestock and the same number again of small ruminants. The food security strategy also makes the link between so-called ‘transitory’ food shortages and ‘chronic’ deficits. It stresses the need to develop a preventive approach in the medium to long term, while reinforcing short-term response capacity.

This development is important, and needs to go further: often, massive so-called ‘emergency’ responses are implemented with no thought for the more fundamental approaches that they end up smothering. Genuine coordination between these approaches, all of which are needed in Ethiopia, is essential.

A new approach is needed to the issue of food security, designed to guarantee self-sufficiency at household level, thereby reducing the risk of temporary shortfalls. With this in mind, the Ethiopian government reworked the food security strategy framework in 2002. It has set out four objectives:

Improving food availability by increasing crop and animal production

- Developing irrigation (3% of cultivated land is currently under irrigation) and water points in pastoral areas.
- Soil conservation and fodder plantations in pastoral areas.
- Diversifying crop and animal production, encouraging specialisation in accordance with ecological characteristics (promoting vegetable production in dryland areas).
- Intensifying cropping through the use of inputs (improved seeds, fertilizer, animal or mechanical traction, pest control).
- Strengthening extension services.

Improving access to food by increasing farm and off-farm income

- Developing ‘safety net’ programmes to limit the erosion of productive capacity in the event of crisis.
- Promoting income diversification.
- Improving credit and market mechanisms.
- Improving access to micro-credit mechanisms.

Improving health services

Improving access to land through voluntary relocation out of areas of chronic food insecurity

These new guidelines acknowledge the critical importance of animal production, and the need to develop a coherent policy in this sector. Ethiopia’s livestock population is the largest in Africa, with, according to FAO estimates, more

To take one example: in Afar region, Action Contre la Faim (ACF) is supporting a Community-based Animal Health (CBAH) network. This multi-year project is based on cost recovery, and is designed to operate independently. At the same time, recurrent crises in the region periodically require an emergency response. As things stand, it may be necessary to proceed with a mass campaign of free vaccination and livestock treatment, even though this goes against the cost-recovery and self-financing principles of the CBAH system. However, it is possible to limit the contradictions by establishing strict criteria, common to all agencies in the region, before an emergency situation is declared; restricting the length of the emergency programme to the barest minimum (typically, one month); involving ‘long-term’ stakeholders (the herders from the CBAH system) in designing and implementing the programme; and raising beneficiaries’ awareness of the usefulness of the veterinary service, and the fact that its being provided free of charge is exceptional (not easy, of course). Where these principles are not put into practice, the CBAH system suffers long-term effects: in Afar zone 1 in 2003, for example, massive free drug distributions saturated the market and ruined the CBAH system.

The failure of market mechanisms is also an important factor in food insecurity. At the end of 2000, in anticipation of a bumper crop, the price of grain in the producing regions collapsed to record lows (at times, well below production costs) for over a year.³ This impoverished producers, who were unable to meet their credit commitments, and made them extremely vulnerable in the next cropping season – which turned out to be a disaster. At the end of 2003, anticipating another bumper harvest and therefore the possible repetition of this process, the government established a floor price slightly above the

³ The source for this information is the Ethiopian Grain Trade Enterprise (EGTE) Cereal Price Monitoring System.

producers' average cost price. This appears to be a logical counterpart to a policy of intensified production, since the idea is to 'guarantee' small producers a minimum return on their investment. However, the system was not tested this year, because prices naturally held up above the intervention price. According to some international experts, this policy is unrealistic in any case, since the government does not have the means to intervene on an adequate scale in the event of a collapse in prices unless it has support from donors. Donors are, however, unlikely to want to get involved in what looks like a subsidy to Ethiopian farming, even though such practices are common in the West.⁴

the failure of market mechanisms is an important factor in food insecurity

In the absence of an adequate transport and marketing infrastructure, a solvent market in deficit areas and government capacity to implement a price stabilisation system, the only alternative would be for Western agencies to buy locally, in surplus areas, in order to distribute in deficit areas. The main donors would have to agree among themselves to do so: the European Union has adopted a local purchasing policy since 1996, whereas the US, constrained by its own legislation, uses its own grain surpluses as aid. Moreover, this would in effect put foreign agencies in the position of acting as regulator of Ethiopian grain markets, perpetuating the dependency of the country's economy.

The food security strategy also acknowledges the need to provide small farmers with greater security of tenure (without going so far as privatising the land, which remains taboo). This is a major bone of contention between the government and the main international donors, for whom the absence of private land ownership will always be a hindrance.

The final and most controversial aspect of this policy is the voluntary transfer, over three years, of 440,000 households affected by chronic food insecurity. The dramatic failure of similar experiments in the 1980s, as well as comparable projects in other countries, invites scepticism. Political conditions have undoubtedly altered since the 1980s: the government now emphasises the voluntary nature of the plan, the occurrence of spontaneous relocations that need to be supervised and supported and, finally, the intra- (rather than inter-) regional nature of the planned population movements. Above all, the government says that these transfers are unavoidable, inasmuch as the people concerned are now dependent on food aid for their survival, with no real prospect of regaining their self-reliance. Projects have

already been launched, with no real support from international donors. While it is far too early to judge this resettlement policy as a whole, as it is designed to last three years and will have an impact over many more, serious problems have already started to appear at certain relocation sites, especially in Oromo region, including health problems, malnutrition and a failure to prepare sites before families arrive. This will probably turn out to be one of the most important humanitarian issues in Ethiopia over the coming months.

Conclusion

The experience of 2003 underlines the persistent need for food aid, and its ability to ward off a major or widespread crisis when it is properly implemented. Yet it also illustrates the weakness of an aid system based on anticipating emergency needs (always a risky and uncertain exercise), and the lack of understanding of the counter-productive medium-term effects of aid. Can the international community confine itself to responding to annual appeals whose main virtue is that they send the mass of Ethiopian farmers back to oblivion until the next warnings of 'record famine'? It is thought that a 'hard core' of around five million people will require food aid in any one year, whatever the climatic conditions. Another two or three million may need food aid, even in good years, because an earlier crisis has affected their means of production. Given population growth of 2.7% a year, recurrent climatic problems and better geographical coverage by early warning systems, the number of beneficiaries can be expected to rise beyond ten or even 15m in bad years. This is a pattern that urgently needs breaking, not least because, one day, donor fatigue or a less favourable geopolitical context may fatally hinder the emergency provision of food to 15m Ethiopians in dire need.

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⁴ Interviews in March 2004 in Addis Ababa.

Local famines, global food insecurity

Roger Persichino, Action Against Hunger-USA

In early 2004, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO)'s *Food Outlook* report estimated that 38 countries were in need of exceptional food assistance, the same number as in 2003, about 15% more than in 2001 and 2002, and the highest since 1984. This list is noteworthy less for what it includes (the majority of affected countries are in Africa) than for what it leaves out, in particular China and India where, by the FAO's own assessment, in the *State of Food Insecurity 2003*, about 70% of the world's undernourished people live. In other words, the FAO's list says more about state capacity and/or recourse to international assistance than it does about actual food needs. It thus tells only one part of the story. To tell the full story, we need to take a closer look at the local dynamics of famine and the political and economic processes that influence it. This report argues that a focus on countries, rather than regions or specific areas, is a significant weakness. Famines are local, never national, phenomena.

General geographic patterns

The FAO's publications yield consistent and useful data: since 1996, *Food Outlook* has listed countries requiring 'exceptional food assistance'; since 2000, it has also given the main reasons leading to such food insecurity. Exceptional food assistance is defined by evaluating those food requirements that will not be met by national production and government intervention, for instance a strategic grain reserve and/or government purchase. The list of countries affected is therefore not indicative of

famines as such, but rather of vulnerabilities that, especially when recurring over time, point to famine processes at work.

Overall, 53 countries have required exceptional assistance over the last six years: 29 in Africa (more than half the continent's states), 14 in Asia, eight in Latin America (75% from Central America and the Caribbean) and two in Europe (Serbia and Russia – the northern Caucasus). As Figure 1 shows, the trend is steady overall for all continents except Africa, where requirements for food assistance have risen noticeably.

fifty-three countries have required exceptional assistance over the last six years

Twenty-five of these countries have required exceptional food assistance every year since 1998 (see Table 1). This indicates sustained high levels of food insecurity.

The causes of famines

There is a wide range of views on what actually causes famines. Since 2000, FAO has given a country-by-country indication of posited reasons why food assistance is required. These fall broadly into four categories: natural

Figure 1: Exceptional food assistance requirements, 1998–2004

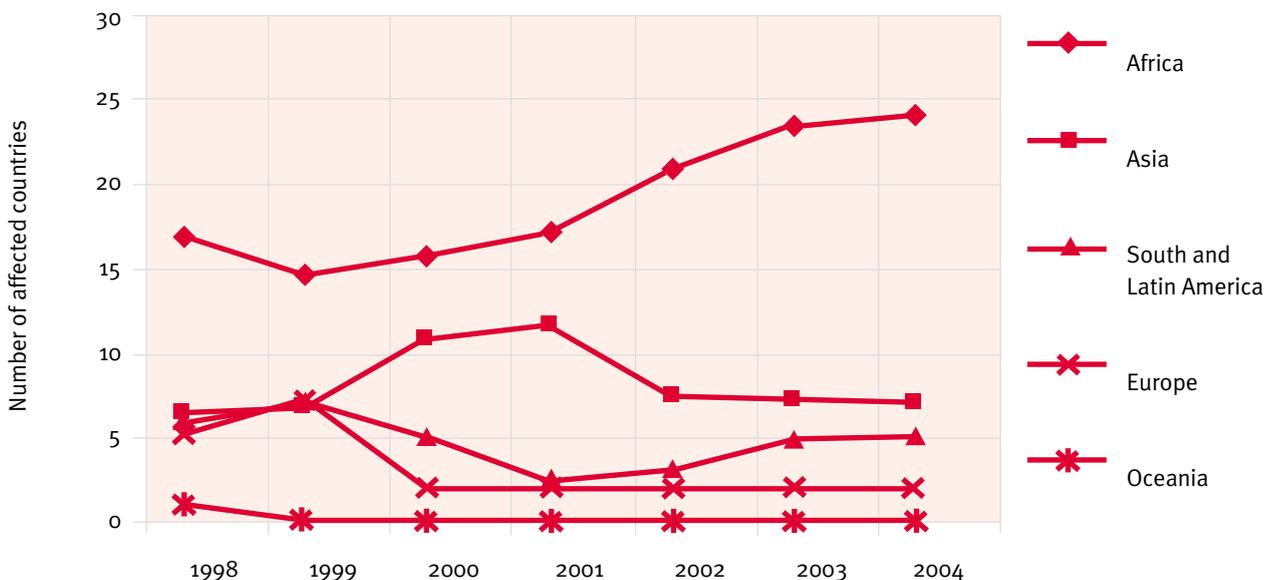


Table 1: Countries affected by high food insecurity since 1998

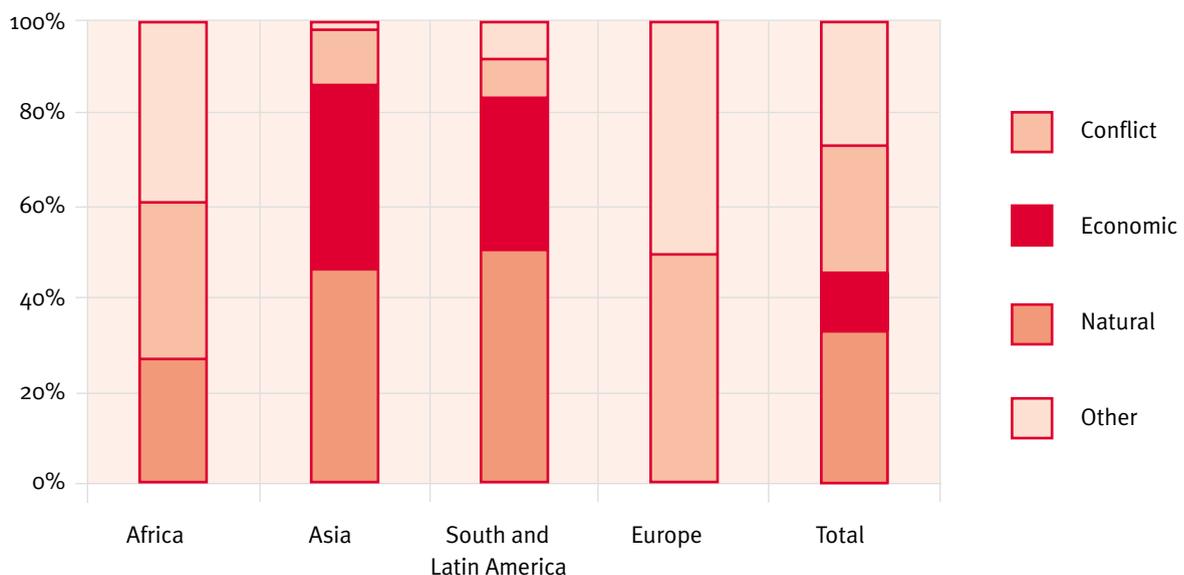
Africa (14)		Asia (7)	Latin America	Europe
Angola	Kenya	Armenia	El Salvador	Russia
Burundi	Liberia	Afghanistan	Haiti	Serbia
DRC	Sierra Leone	Georgia		
Congo Rep.	Somalia	Iraq		
Eritrea	Sudan	North Korea		
Ethiopia	Tanzania	Mongolia		
Guinea	Uganda	Tajikistan		

disasters; economic issues (an international coffee crisis in Latin America, economic policy in Zimbabwe and Tajikistan); civil strife; and other causes (refugees in Tanzania and Guinea, IDPs/ returnees in Serbia and Montenegro, returnees in Angola).¹ In several instances, more than one cause is given, for instance drought and internal displacement in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The data allows for a crude presentation of famine causes since 2000, as estimated by FAO. This is described in Figure 2.

¹ FAO considers that caseloads of vulnerable populations (refugees, IDPs etc.) constitute a direct requirement for exceptional food assistance. It could be argued that real causes are underlying and that the existence of vulnerable populations actually results from underlying causes, but this article retains the FAO categorisation.

Figure 2 shows two clear features of famine patterns. First, Asian and South American food insecurity is mostly related to economic issues (dependency on monoculture in Latin America; the nature of economic policies in Haiti, Tajikistan and Mongolia) and regular natural disasters or unreliable weather. Second, African and European food insecurity appears to be essentially related to conflict and a high caseload of vulnerable populations. There are caveats to this analysis, of course; it does not, for example, capture the primary importance of economic issues in recurring food requirements in Madagascar. But it does indicate that two factors usually combine to determine structural vulnerabilities and chronically high food insecurity. The combination is, however, strikingly different between Africa and Europe on the one hand, and Asia and Latin America on the other.

Figure 2: Patterns of high food insecurity, 2000–2004



In India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s unexpected electoral defeat in May 2004 was in part explained by the discontent of a rural population affected by drought and high levels of indebtedness.² This suggests that rural voters feared that the BJP's policies were threatening the social compact that has prevented large-scale lethal famines in India for the past half-century. This would be in line with the analysis here, which suggests that natural phenomena and economic policy issues are of primary concern in Asia.

Famines, entitlements and emerging political complexes

FAO's assessment is indicative of needs, not of actual assistance delivered. In that sense, it does not show those countries where government intervention could single-handedly address food insecurity, but has not done so.

A further limitation is that the FAO does its analysis on a country basis. This does not take into account the highly variable dispersion of food insecurity *within* countries, a point well-illustrated by early-warning systems such as FEWS and the FAO's own GIEWS. Similarly, Save the Children's food economy assessments differentiate between regions or food economy zones.

The point that famines are local phenomena is not new, but it is increasingly lost in aid agencies' communications campaigns. Also lost is the fact that assistance requirements factor in government capacity to redistribute aid within their own countries. This capacity is calculated on the basis of national production, but does not incorporate political and/or logistical constraints (e.g. local conflicts; the state of the road network or the truck fleet), nor does it evaluate a government's willingness to redistribute this aid (the issue of access).

the point that famines are local phenomena is increasingly lost in aid agencies' communications campaigns

The localisation of high food insecurity is significantly related to two distinct issues: wide disparities in entitlements are of primary concern in Latin America and some parts of Asia (Mongolia, North Korea, some regions of China and India); while emerging political complexes have more explanatory power in Africa and, to some extent, in Europe (the Balkans and the Caucasus) and Asia (Afghanistan and Central Asia). Both topics are vast, and can be touched on only briefly here.

Simply put, entitlements, from Amartya Sen's analysis, deal primarily with demand issues in situations where some food is available, but the capacity to purchase it is low, because

² See Amy Waldman, 'What India's Upset Vote Reveals: The High Tech Is Skin Deep', *New York Times*, 15 May 2004.

of restricted resources for instance, or because logistical problems impede adequate redistribution of food among markets. Rural populations are highly vulnerable to income variations related to crop prices that are set externally. This is especially true in economies that rely heavily on export crops such as cotton, coffee or cocoa, as in Central America or Africa. Cyclical variations in commodity prices lead to recurring falls in both employment and income, in turn leading to decreased capacity to purchase food.

This can be compensated for through welfare programmes and/or redistribution. But in the absence of successful poverty eradication, such measures do not affect the issues that underpin this structural vulnerability to high food insecurity. Furthermore, poverty eradication, even when moderately successful, is unevenly distributed geographically, as shown in India, Brazil and China.

Mark Duffield has defined 'emerging political complexes' as areas characterised by warlordism and illiberal economies (e.g. trade in illicit substances, the criminalisation of the economy). These complexes are transnational in essence, and reflect a process of political reconfiguration. The Mano River Union (Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea), Somalia, the Caucasus and Afghanistan illustrate the concept, with their reliance on drugs, weapons or primary commodities (and in some cases all of the above) through a political structure essentially disaggregated among warlords wielding local influence.

Duffield's point is not uncontroversial, and it could be argued that it describes the 1990s more accurately than the present, with its substantial decrease in conflict areas through international intervention and/or peace agreements (in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Afghanistan, the DRC and the Balkans, for example). Nonetheless, criminalised economies and/or local violence substantially persist in the countries given as examples here.

The pervasiveness and resilience of emerging political complexes have a clear impact on food security and, ultimately, on famines. First, reliance on criminal trade reinforces income disparities between those who engage in such trade and those who do not (with the exception of narcotics production in Afghanistan and Colombia). Second, as demonstrated by David Keen in his analysis of the famine in south-western Sudan in the 1980s, such political structures amplify arrangements whereby famine benefits a fraction of the population. Lastly, environments that remain conflictual are an obvious impediment to effective redistribution mechanisms.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that economic and political issues are not separate: entitlement packages and political arrangements are mutually dependent. Most of Central America was in a state of armed conflict throughout the 1980s, and several Indian states remain affected by low-level insurgencies, such as the Naxalite movement or the Assam Liberation Front: either through 'post-conflict' or 'low-intensity conflict' phases, violence is never far away from the political and economic processes that underpin famine.

Conclusion

A focus on the locality of famines illustrates three critical points. First, the spread of poverty eradication – which should lead to increased entitlements – at country levels will determine salient areas of high food insecurity: the more poverty, the more vulnerability to famines will remain. Conversely, successful poverty eradication campaigns should translate in less vulnerability to entitlement crises. Second, the emergence of peace agreements, especially in Africa (in Liberia, Burundi, the DRC, and potentially in Sudan) at national level should not mask the resilience of conflicts at the local level, tied as they are to emerging political complexes. Third, while most of the analysis in this article implicitly deals with rural populations, increased urbanisation is set to pose new challenges. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, urban populations are projected to account for 45% of the total in 2020, up from about 20% in 1980. At current levels of employment and services in urban areas, this will inevitably result in the spread of urban slums, with very low access to water and sanitation services and no recourse to subsistence agriculture. While none of this is inevitable, it suggests that the geographical distribution of famines is bound to become increasingly discrete. To address this will require a full acknowledgement of the importance of local issues.

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Forthcoming special feature in Humanitarian Exchange

Humanitarian response in the Palestinian territories

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict continues to exact an appalling cost on the civilian population. The closure policy, the wall being constructed between the West Bank and Israel, and military attacks on Palestinian targets are intended to secure the protection of the Israeli population. However, they are also the cause of an economic, social and humanitarian crisis for the Palestinian population.

This politically charged situation confronts humanitarian organisations with critical dilemmas. Should they provide relief when Israel, as the occupying power, is obliged to supply essential services? If they do, how can they provide a response that is impartial and neutral, and perceived to be so by all parties?

The special feature of the November 2004 issue of Humanitarian Exchange will focus on humanitarian action in the occupied Palestinian territories. It will look at the challenges for humanitarian actors, examine the different ways organisations are responding, and explore the possibilities for, and the limits to, humanitarian response.

If you would like to suggest or contribute an article for this feature, please contact hpn@odi.org.uk. HPN's editorial policy and submissions procedure is available at <http://www.odihpn.org/documents/HPN-submission.pdf>.

The deadline for submissions is 15 September 2004.

Famine (again) in Ethiopia?

Sue Lautze and Angela Raven-Roberts, Tufts University

In 2002, Stephen Devereux, an economist at the UK-based Institute of Development Studies (IDS), stood on the dusty plain outside Gode in Ethiopia's Somali Region, and argued that the Ethiopian government and the international community had failed to prevent another famine. Devereux cited a US Centers for Disease Control study led by Peter Salama that demonstrated a concentration of excess mortality that coincided with the onset of relief food assistance to Gode in 2000. The IDS critique stung many in the humanitarian community in Addis Ababa, including USAID/Ethiopia staff responsible for food and humanitarian assistance.

As the warning signs of another crisis in Ethiopia intensified in 2002 and 2003, the USAID mission in Addis was keen to avoid another round of academic post-mortems. In the midst of the crisis, USAID engaged a group of academics, including specialists from Clark University, the Food Economy Group and the Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University. A number of these academics had experience in Ethiopia predating the famine of 1984–85. USAID's first (and repeated) question was: 'Is this a famine?'

When pressed on the issue by an IRIN reporter in Addis in July 2003, the Tufts team stated: 'You have a widespread livelihood crisis leading to emergency levels of malnutrition, morbidity, mortality, with alarming implications for destitution. That for us is a famine'. However, to call the 2002–2004 crisis in Ethiopia a famine had different implications for different actors. Famine, like genocide, seems to imply a particular level of moral responsibility above ordinary disasters, albeit without genocide's legal obligations. As noted by Alex de Waal and a number of other writers, declaring that a famine exists is a political exercise. This article examines some of the issues that arose for analysts in their engagements with USAID and others on the question of famine in Ethiopia.

'No Famine on My Watch'

In the interim between the two most recent crises, there were two important political developments in the US. First, following the 11 September attacks in the US, Ethiopia's importance to US national security interests increased. USAID's aggressive food aid response to the government's 2003 appeal for food aid accordingly raised questions about political motives. Some in the donor community thought that USAID was overreacting; as one British government official put it, Ethiopia was experiencing 'just another normal bad year'. Second, President George W. Bush challenged his administration to ensure that famines were avoided during his tenure, a policy known as 'No Famine on My Watch'; declaring the existence of a famine could be seen as a political shortcoming and, therefore, a political vulnerability.

On the other hand, elevating the crisis to the level of famine was a tool for galvanising US public opinion, for advocating for a new food security strategy by the Ethiopian government, and for encouraging a higher level of engagement by humanitarian and development institutions, including the rest of USAID. The compromise eventually reached within USAID was to refer to 'localised famines'. This implied that the situation was serious, but not unmanageable. The qualifying concept of 'local' makes possible unsubstantiated claims of success: famines that did not expand to a national scale.

Declaring a famine was also a complicated question for the Ethiopian government. Famines have contributed to the downfall of Ethiopian regimes. The government's Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC) is charged with preventing famines of the 1984–85 type: that is, *those types of famine that make regimes fall*. In both the 1999–2000 and the 2002–2004 crises, the DPPC fulfilled its mandate well; neither crisis was allowed to develop into the type of famine that threatened the political order.

following 9/11, Ethiopia's importance to US national security interests increased

Some humanitarian practitioners gauge their successes, in part, according to 'famines averted'; declaring the existence of a famine is seen as a mark against the humanitarian effort. Both the World Food Programme and Addis-based European Union staff, for example, reacted strongly against the Salama article. Development actors resisted the use of the word famine out of a concern that emphasising humanitarian responses would come at the cost of development efforts.

The media are interested in the answer to the 'is there a famine' question essentially because of the definition of 'news': vulnerability, poverty, suffering, disease and a certain level of death are viewed as the status quo for Ethiopia. To be news, these tragedies must be elevated to extraordinary levels, levels which the press and the public have come to associate with the term 'famine'. There has been what Mark Bradbury has called 'an accommodation of suffering' over time: the numbers of people affected by recent crises dwarf those affected in 1984–85. However, the 2002–2004 crisis largely failed to produce the 'famine image' the media and public associate with Ethiopia.

Is it a famine?

Although most famines are characterised by widespread distress migration, this is neither necessary nor sufficient

for the definition of famine. The absence of distress migration in a crisis may be because migration to camps is prohibited, or because there are no camps, as in North Korea throughout the 1990s. Alternatively, deeply vulnerable populations may be able to remain in their home communities, for example in the absence of forced displacement or due to the timely provision of relief food. By mid-2003, this seemed to be one possible explanation for the absence of large-scale distress migration in Ethiopia. In 2003, USAID provided 999,650 tons of food aid.

The Tufts team argued that the nature of the food aid response (coupled with increasing restrictions on internal migration) induced vulnerable populations to remain in their home communities. The humanitarian community has long believed that preventing distress migration is a highly desirable outcome, but one rarely achieved. The team concluded that the Ethiopian government and the humanitarian community were ill-prepared to manage the resulting dispersion of vulnerability. The team argued the following line of logic:

- Vulnerability to malnutrition, morbidity and mortality increased sharply because of the nature of the multiple collapses of livelihood systems.
- Against these threats, food aid alone was insufficient and, in some cases, inappropriate.
- The hungry, the sick and the dying then had to rely on existing institutions for assistance; these were either grossly inadequate or already overtaxed.
- The humanitarian community proved once again that it is not adept at fixing systems and institutions in the midst of crisis.
- Consequently, instead of concentrations of famine victims, as in 1984–85, there was a diffusion of famine victims.

the 2002–2004 crisis failed to produce the ‘famine image’ the media and public associate with Ethiopia

In the absence of large-scale migration, it is much easier for the Ethiopian government, donors, UN agencies and NGOs to declare once again that famine was averted, or minimised as a local affair. The lack of classic famine images from IDP camps facilitates further disengagement by the media and Western publics, even as large numbers of vulnerable people face destitution, malnutrition, morbidity and mortality.



©Reuters/Anthony Njuguna/courtesy www.alettrc.org

A family carry their food home from a feeding centre in Lablibela, 700km from Addis Ababa, May 2003

The capacity of institutions to manage crises remains compromised by policy reforms, including the Ethiopian government’s too rapid and inadequately supported decentralisation process. While decentralisation may in future enable more localised management of crises, the timing of the decentralisation process was unfortunate; the distribution of famine suffering in Ethiopia neatly corresponds to the areas of greatest administrative weakness, such as Afar and Somali Region. The international humanitarian community has been unable to step into the breach. While this can be interpreted as a lack of commitment, it is also due to the fact that the humanitarian community is overwhelmed with disasters throughout the world.

Neither declared nor averted

Many now hasten to declare the crisis over. In Ethiopia, famines are neither declared nor averted, but are rather declared to be averted. Instead of engaging in potentially divisive discussions on the existence or otherwise of famine in Ethiopia, a far better strategy would be to describe the recent confluence of interlocking vulnerabilities as a terrible, slow-onset crisis of livelihoods. There remain great needs for immediate, transition and longer-term responses, both to save lives and to protect and promote livelihood systems among disparate livelihood groups. Consensus is still needed on the long-term processes that induced the tragedies characterising Ethiopia in order to inform more coherent short-, medium- and long-term humanitarian, development and political strategies to address the structural vulnerabilities inherent in a range of Ethiopian communities and production systems. These processes entail far more than droughts; they include local, regional and international political, social and economic dynamics as well as other man-made and natural causes.

In moving forward, it is important to challenge at least three key assumptions that dominate the current discourse about crises in Ethiopia:

1. That emergencies ‘suddenly emerge’, and therefore should be treated as rapid-onset crises, rather than slow-onset crises.
2. That crises are ‘food crises’ as opposed to ‘livelihoods crises’.
3. That the people most at risk of malnutrition, morbidity and mortality are the same people identified as being ‘chronically vulnerable’.

in Ethiopia, famines are neither declared nor averted, but are declared to be averted

This last point may be counterintuitive. Much more work is needed to determine exactly who is both ‘chronically vulnerable’ and demonstrated the greatest vulnerabilities in recent crises. It is likely that these investigations will show one population that is well entrenched in a system of annual food aid receipts (the ‘chronically vulnerable’ or the ‘chronically eligible’), and a very different population that is most at risk during the current emergency (for example, those on the margins of administrative reach). There is at present an unhelpful assumption in the development community that these two populations are the same; this is leading to intervention strategies that assume a neat and linear (and doubtful) relationship between identified chronic and acute vulnerability in Ethiopia. These assumptions underpin the government’s Food Security Strategy, which includes the resettlement of chronically vulnerable populations to often distant and unprepared sites.

The second step is to engage with the institutions and systems that vulnerable communities rely on for survival. The definition of vulnerability needs to be expanded beyond a focus on targeted individuals and groups to consider institutions, policies and processes. These systems include informal kinship networks, state-managed social service systems and market networks. In addition to material inputs, a common denominator in each of these systems is the role of cash, income opportunities and debt. Health, water and food security services are commercially available in many of the affected communities; vulnerable populations need to be assisted in accessing these services. The state is functioning in Ethiopia, even in the midst of decentralisation. Direct support to state budgets to manage social services should be considered, while a plan for revitalising former state farms is urgently needed. Similarly, new partnerships with states should be pursued for the creation of emergency, cash-based public works programmes. The extremely poor condition of Ethiopia’s public health system needs to be a focus for major donor input and aggressive UN leadership, underpinned by broad consensus on the implementation of minimum goals and achievements.

The third step is to critically engage with the government of Ethiopia about the relationship between its policies and acute vulnerability. A rational policy of environmental

management is critical. Resettlement may be one partial solution to Ethiopia’s food security challenges, but to pursue resettlement in the midst of crisis – and at its present rate – is to impose additional burdens on communities, service providers and the international community. Other policies appear to have been unquestionably endorsed by the international community, despite the vulnerabilities associated with them: the risk of malaria associated with water harvesting, the promotion of maize at the expense of farmer choice about crop diversity, the lack of marketing strategies for bumper harvests. The list goes on.

Donors need to work with the Ethiopian government, the UN and NGOs to tackle the underlying causes that lead to the kinds of acute crises that prompt academics to wonder if it is time to use the F-word. Consensus is needed among major actors on a comprehensive and complementary action plan that provides mitigation, preparedness and recovery activities for vulnerable communities, while also providing accelerated input to those sectors and areas with the capacity to absorb real investment and development.

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Ethiopia 2003: towards a broader public nutrition approach

Helen Young, Tufts University

Twenty years on from one of the most severe famines ever witnessed in Ethiopia, the prospect of hunger, starvation and death threatened ever-increasing numbers of people in 2003. Experience of famine response in Ethiopia since the mid-1980s has led to a 'food first' bias, which fails to take account of the broader risks and vulnerabilities associated with famine. Current policy and programming gaps require significant institutional change and major capacity development if progress is to be achieved.

The 'food first' culture

The 'food first' culture of humanitarian assistance is reflected in the almost continuous flow of emergency food aid to Ethiopia since 1965. This has been linked with more-or-less continuous nutritional assessment and surveillance, which has explicitly advocated for a food aid response to increasing levels of acute malnutrition. The 1989 Ethiopian nutrition guidelines state that a food aid response is necessary when the prevalence of acute malnutrition (wasting and nutritional oedema) rises above 10%. While this level of acute malnutrition is clearly unacceptable, this policy fails to recognise the impracticality and long-term implications of such a recommendation. First, the 2000 demographic health survey reported that the prevalence of acute malnutrition in rural areas was 11.1%, suggesting national coverage of rural areas with food assistance. Second, there is little or no room for analysis of the actual underlying causes of malnutrition, linked with the social and care environment, access to health care and the health environment, as well as food security. This means that there is a risk of failing to identify those situations where people are dying, but not necessarily from lack of food. Figure 1, which shows the results of nutrition surveys from late 2002, indicates that this is indeed happening in parts of Ethiopia.

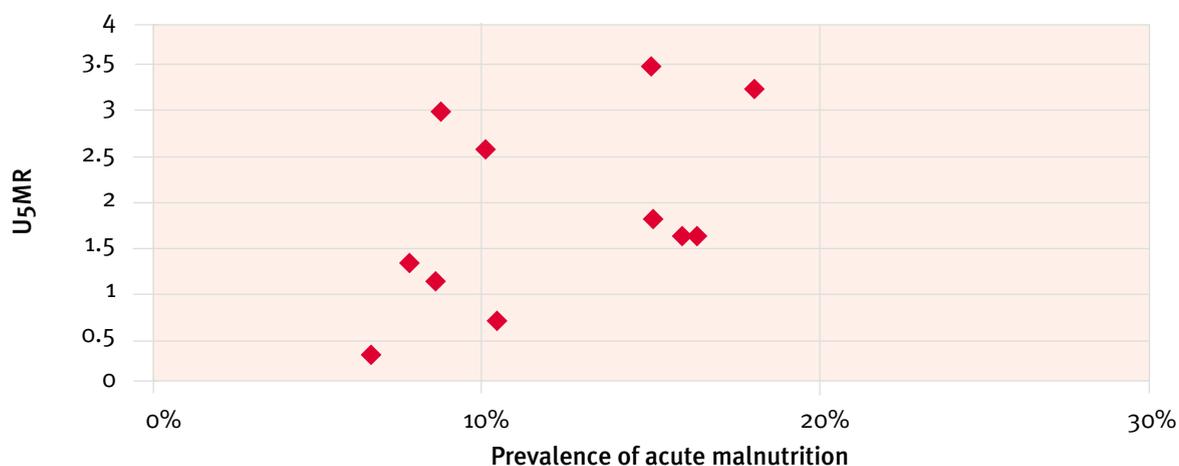
the 'food first' culture is reflected in almost continuous emergency food aid to Ethiopia since 1965

The disaster response in 2002–2003

The main needs assessment in Ethiopia was the multi-agency post-harvest assessment, which took place in November 2002. This determined the number of people requiring food assistance at district level, and the duration of assistance for 2003. In keeping with previous years, the focus was on food security and associated food aid needs. Around 20 teams participated, with approximately 80 assessors from over 15 agencies, including the government's Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission (DPPC), the World Food Programme (WFP) and other UN agencies, donors, NGOs and regional authorities. The assessment was complemented by the annual FAO/WFP Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission, which focused on crop production and food supply and demand.

Shortly after the assessments, in December 2002, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi launched a joint appeal with the UN for emergency assistance; Ethiopia, he said, could face a disaster worse than 1984. The appeal estimated that upwards of 11 million people were in need of relief food, and an additional three million needed close monitoring. A multi-agency reassessment of emergency food took place in April 2003, and figures were revised upwards, to 12.6m. Although this surpassed all previous emergency appeals in Ethiopia it was met in its entirety.

Figure 1: Prevalence of acute malnutrition and mortality rates in selected sites in Ethiopia during the second quarter of 2002



Notes: Prevalence of acute malnutrition: less than 80% weight-for-height of the reference median (NCHS/WHO) and cases of nutritional oedema; U5MR: Under five mortality rate per 10,000 per day.

Early warning and needs assessment

The process of prioritising areas for relief is a combination of technical assessment and analysis and negotiation. *Woredas* are categorised as ‘moderately’, ‘severely’ or ‘very severely’ affected. In addition, WFP singles out those districts where the proportion of the population in need is greater than 50% of the total, and where baseline chronic food insecurity is four or five, on a scale of 1–5. In the light of ongoing early-warning data, such as market prices, migration and nutritional status, the list is updated as required, which means that assigned categories of priority may change from month to month.

In February 2003, the Emergency Nutrition Coordination Unit (ENCU), part of the DPPC, adopted a new decision-making tool for the geographic targeting of supplementary feeding. This was based on the presence of indicators including the prevalence of acute malnutrition. While this may work to a degree, it has two major pitfalls. First, it risks failing to identify the real cause of malnutrition, so children continue to suffer despite an apparently adequate response; second, it fails to recognise other responses to moderate malnutrition, which are likely to be more effective and appropriate than targeted supplementary feeding.

Nutrition survey data has long been used in Ethiopia in relation to famine prevention, and for targeting assistance in a systematic way. Currently, the DPPC mainly uses nutrition status data for verifying nutrition-related problems (which are known already to exist), and for pressing the international community for an emergency response.

Overall, the analysis of nutrition in emergencies in Ethiopia has improved substantially in terms of quantitative estimates of acute malnutrition, but this has not always been matched by an improvement in the more qualitative analysis of underlying causes.

Ration scales

Emergency food assistance in Ethiopia currently consists of three programming strategies:

Box 1: Food distribution: three programming strategies

General food distribution for ‘all drought-affected’

A single commodity ration: 15kg of cereals per person per month (ppm) or 500g per person per day (pppd). In the first half of 2003, this was reduced to 12.5kg ppm.

Blanket supplementary feeding of additional rations for ‘at-risk groups’

At-risk groups were estimated to comprise 35% of drought-affected people, and included children under five years of age, pregnant and lactating women and the chronically sick. Ration: 4.5kg ppm (150g pppd) blended food and 750g (25g pppd) of oil.

Targeted supplementary feeding of additional dry rations for all moderately wasted children (<80% weight-for-height)

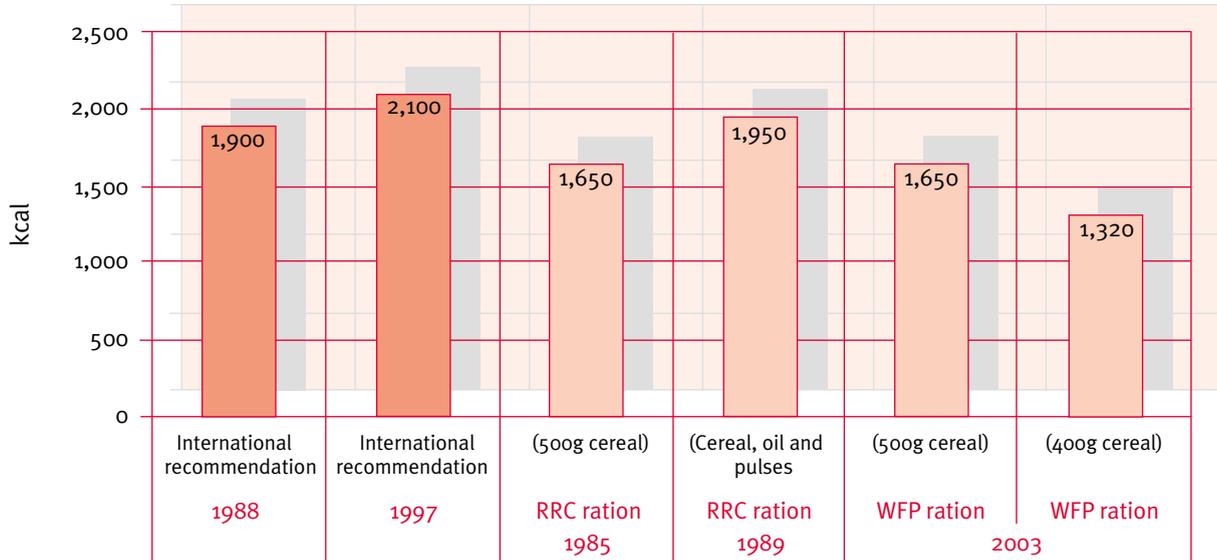
Ration: 9kg blended food (300g pppd).

- General distribution of a general ration for all affected people.
- Blanket feeding of a complementary ration for specific at-risk groups.
- Targeted supplementary feeding for moderately malnourished children.

The ration scales and composition used by the DPPC and WFP in 2003 are shown in Box 1. These have evolved from the 1989 Relief and Rehabilitation Commission guidelines (15kg of cereals, 0.45kg of oil and 1.5kg corn soy blend (CSB) per person per month).

In practice, the general ration for all drought-affected people was reduced from an agreed 500g of whole-grain cereals per person per day to approximately 400g. This reduction was a result of food aid shortages rather than any strategic review of nutritional composition. Figure 2 shows the decline in levels of rations since 1989.

Figure 2: Comparison of general rations and the recommended minimum planning figure for energy



The 1989 DPPC ration reflects the internationally agreed planning figure for energy, which at that time was 1,900kcal per person per day. Since then, the planning figure for energy has increased to 2,100kcal, but this has not been reflected in ration scales in Ethiopia. A major problem is the lack of a public or transparent process of reviewing and establishing ration scales. As a result, in mid-2003, there was widespread confusion and misinformation about what the scales should be. For example, the US-funded Joint Emergency Operations Plan partners, which included six NGOs¹, assumed a general ration of 15kg of cereals, 0.5kg of oil and 1.5kg of CSB. This is more-or-less the 1989 ration, and fails to recognise changes brought in by the DPPC and WFP.

Notwithstanding the planned ration, the actual rations that people receive are different again. In Tigray, for example, committees decide who is entitled to receive rations. This usually results in only two people from each household receiving food, thereby diluting rations even further. Rations are further reduced by the need to sell a proportion to pay for transport from the *woreda* centre back to the village, or to buy essential goods. The sale price is typically less than the usual market value, because market prices fall as a result of sales of relief grain on the day of distribution. In Somali Region, the system of registration and targeting is less structured – everyone who turns up for a distribution receives a share, which means that ration sizes change depending on the total number of people present.

In mid-2003, a joint NGO advocacy initiative called for an increase in the general food ration and the provision of blended food for all drought victims to prevent the ‘slow starvation’ associated with the regular ration. The need for widespread emergency food assistance is not in question, but it must be only one part of a carefully planned and comprehensive national disaster response strategy. In 2003, good nutrition was equated with 12.5kg of cereal grain for more than 10m people. It does not take a nutritionist to work out that this ‘one size fits all’ approach to emergency relief is likely to fail to reduce preventable morbidity and mortality, and that a wider range of food security and public health strategies is required. Of equal concern is how the short-term solution of emergency food aid affects longer-term recovery: how, for example, is it linked to or even exacerbating destitution?

A focus on nutritional risk provides a much broader understanding of nutritional problems, which in turn requires a broad-based response that is not limited to food aid. For this to be achieved, the entire range of nutritional concerns in emergencies must be adequately addressed at all levels, including national policies. Because no single organisational body, including the ENCU, has either the capacity or the authority to coordinate, facilitate and strengthen all emergency-related nutrition activities, these tasks must be subdivided between relevant ministries and departments. All should nonetheless fall within the wider overall nutrition

strategy for Ethiopia. These ideas were widely endorsed by a participatory review of the Ethiopia emergency at a workshop hosted by Unicef in November 2003.

a focus on nutritional risk provides a much broader understanding of nutritional problems

Conclusions

Thirty years of humanitarian practice in Ethiopia have generated the widely held view that famine is the outcome of a failure in the food supply, resulting in malnutrition and mortality which could be addressed by better and more efficient food distribution. This ‘food first’ approach has become an institution deeply embedded within the Ethiopian humanitarian enterprise, with its own rules, principles and advocates. Last year was no exception, with a continued heavy emphasis on food aid assessment and appeals. Although these problems are widely recognised, a significant shift in the ‘food first’ bias seems unlikely given the importance of the institution of food aid globally, and the power it affords a wide range of stakeholders within Ethiopia. It is therefore imperative that its use is better monitored and evaluated, while more appropriate approaches to addressing food insecurity and supporting livelihoods are actively pursued. Concerted efforts are needed on all sides, not only to improve the quality and flexibility of food aid programming, but also to move forward with a more comprehensive approach to addressing humanitarian needs, as encapsulated by public nutrition within the broader context of protecting livelihoods.

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When will Ethiopia stop asking for food aid?

Al Kehler, WFP

In 2003, 13 million Ethiopians required exceptional food assistance just to survive. Despite 30 years of food aid, the country's food security has steadily worsened, and relief food aid has become an institutionalised response. Thus the common refrain: if food security is getting worse, is food aid the right way to address food insecurity in Ethiopia? The question is, however, flawed. We need instead to ask how food aid is being used.

Relief food aid, while effective in saving lives and relieving short-term hunger, cannot achieve sustainable food security. Food aid, when well targeted and linked with other development inputs, can and is having sustainable impact. By 2002, WFP's development food aid programme in Ethiopia had reduced food shortages by 40% for 1.4m people in 800 communities. These communities were remarkably less vulnerable during the 2003 drought, maintaining their productive assets and emerging more resilient than communities with only relief assistance. However, contributions to WFP's development projects in Ethiopia are shrinking, largely due to the belief that food aid does not work in development. This article, drawing on WFP's experience in Ethiopia, asserts that food aid has a major enabling role in sustainable food security strategies.

Food aid in Ethiopia: an overview

In the early 1980s, the UN Ethiopian Highlands Reclamation Study concluded that soil erosion and degradation in the breadbasket of Ethiopia had reached crisis proportions. WFP responded with a soil and water conservation programme that used food as a wage for labour. Technical experts implemented the programme, imposing design and work requirements on communities.

**despite 30 years of food aid,
Ethiopia's food security has
steadily worsened**

Initially, the project was successful. However, between 1984 and 1991 crop failures, civil war and political unrest increasingly hampered progress. Survival alone became the objective. Food aid initially intended for development was needed to address more pressing emergencies. Relief food came late, and had to be dispatched immediately to address life-threatening situations. The volumes of food in development programmes were dwarfed by enormous amounts of relief food. Technical and managerial time and expertise, never plentiful, was redeployed for emergencies.

In 1991 the government was overthrown, and changes were introduced to development and relief food aid programmes. In development, local community planning

was incorporated, and investment in technical and community skills was increased. In relief, the new government recognised that the much larger relief food aid flows needed to be harnessed. It adopted the 'Employment Generation Scheme' in 1993, which replaced free food distributions with food for work to rebuild productive assets. However, the relief programme had fatal flaws: relief food was unreliable, often too little and coming too late; essential complementary inputs like tools, equipment and supplies were largely unavailable. Line ministries did not accept their responsibilities, and the government did not enforce them as there were too many competing priorities.

Ethiopia is Africa's largest recipient of emergency aid per capita

These difficulties persist. Ethiopia has received an average of 700,000 tons of food aid per year for the past 15 years. The vast majority of this has been emergency food aid. Ethiopia is the largest recipient of emergency aid per capita in Africa, but receives the least investment in development aid for each citizen. While no one questions the need to save lives, the failure to invest in food security programmes for the poor is doing little to break the cycle of food crisis.

Food aid for development has continued to mature in Ethiopia, but remains too small to be noticed. What *is* visible is the large relief programme. This has saved lives, but it has not halted the decline in assets, improved malnutrition levels or mitigated vulnerability to shocks. Food shortages are in fact becoming more frequent, and are affecting more people.

It is tempting to conclude that *all* food aid erodes livelihoods, and support for successful food aid programmes is shrinking as a result. However, during 2002 WFP showed that, where integrated food aid projects have been in place, the beneficiaries were markedly less vulnerable to the same climatic and agricultural shocks as those who had received no development food aid.

MERET: a success story in development food aid

The MERET programme (MERET stands for Managing Environmental Resources to Enable Transitions to more sustainable livelihoods) has had a measurable impact on food security among some of Ethiopia's poorest communities. Between 1994 and 2002, MERET assisted 1.4m food-insecure people in over 800 communities. The objective was to increase incomes for the poor through asset

creation and rehabilitation, using food for work. It included interventions to:

1. Conserve, develop and rehabilitate degraded agricultural lands.
2. Establish wooded lots and community forest plantations.
3. Improve access to potable water and to enhance water quality.
4. Improve access to markets through construction of feeder roads.
5. Strengthen the capacity of communities and the government to plan, implement and manage project activities and assets.
6. Improve the availability of food through food distribution.

In 2002, the WFP with the Ministry of Agriculture undertook an assessment of the impact of the MERET project. Ten districts were randomly selected, each with about ten sites. Two sites from each district were chosen. The assessment compared areas that had projects with those with none. Comparisons included scientific biophysical field measurements (qualitative and quantitative), as well as the 'impressions of change' expressed by community members and field technicians. Tools were used from livelihood and stakeholder analysis, as well as from Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA). Questionnaires were designed to encourage spontaneous and unguided responses.

Socio-economic and biophysical data were collected through 600 household questionnaires (half female), 60 focus groups involving 600 individuals (female, vulnerable groups and planning teams), 200 non-beneficiary household questionnaires, 20 technical staff questionnaires at district level, background fact sheets for all sites and biophysical field measurements. Data collection teams comprised external consultants, WFP field monitors and counterpart technical staff. They were trained for a week in data collection methodologies, and then collected their data simultaneously over a six-week period.

Main impact assessment results

Respondents to the survey that had participated in the MERET project reported the following results.

Food security and livelihoods

- The average annual food shortage was down from five to three months, a 40% reduction.
- 60% reported an increase in the number of meals eaten per day.
- 85% indicated an improved ability to cope with drought.
- 84% reported a 150–400kg increase in crop production per year per household.
- 72% enjoyed increased income from the sale of agricultural products.
- 73% had more money to spend on education, health and clothing.
- 88% considered that their livelihood situation had improved from 'struggling' (losing assets) to 'doing okay' (not selling assets) or 'doing well' (making some extra money and buying new assets).

Soil and water conservation on farmland

- 78% reported a reduction in soil erosion.
- 83% indicated an increase in soil fertility.
- Field measurements indicated an 80% reduction in soil loss on cultivated land, and a 37% increase in soil depth.

Area closure and forest development

- 71% reported improved availability of forage.
- 47% indicated improved livestock health and productivity.
- 45% reported 0.5–2.5 hours saved in collecting forage each time.
- 61% said fuel wood was more easily available as a result of forest development activities.
- Field measurements indicated a 76% increase in vegetation (trees/shrubs).

Water and road development

- 42% indicated increased water availability through ponds and springs.
- 37% reported improved quality in water for human consumption.
- 60% reported better access to markets and other services through feeder roads.
- 25% have more income from selling more products at markets.

forest and water development disproportionately benefit women

Women are primarily responsible for collecting wood for fuel and water, so forest and water development disproportionately benefit them. Of all female respondents who had participated in MERET:

- 41% reported reducing the time they spent collecting water by between one and five hours per day.
- 45% saved 1–6 hours each time they collected wood.
- Households headed by women experienced the largest decrease in the number of months in which they suffered from food shortages after the project (2.3 months).

A number of conclusions follow from this.

1. The MERET programme has increased the availability of food and improved access to food for the majority of participants. Investment in assets, including soil, water harvesting, trees and vegetative covering, is earning income for the poor.
2. MERET lifts people out of destitution. Almost all of its most vulnerable participants have gone from 'struggling' to 'doing okay'. Thus, it has acted as a safety net, protecting 1.4m food-insecure people. Similar interventions should be considered for the four million chronically food-insecure people who are perennially

- assisted through relief. A more thoughtful intervention could prevent them from sliding further backwards, and build their resilience to future shocks.
3. MERET has not reduced food shortages to zero, and will not do so unless more comprehensive food security packages are made available to these communities. These packages, including cash-based interventions, need to create alternative sources of income for the poor to reduce the current complete reliance on agriculture. This would enable the effective phasing out of food aid over an appropriate transition period is possible.
 4. MERET has strengthened community-planning skills. This is a foundation that should be useful, particularly for supporting the government's policy of devolving more power to the grassroots.

Lessons learned were incorporated in the redesign of this activity for the years 2003–2006. Particularly vigorous efforts are being to work in strategic partnership with other complementary development interventions; work is under way with the World Bank, for example, to link its Food Security programme with the MERET programme. Even better results are expected in the next evaluation.

Addressing chronic hunger with relief food aid alone cannot achieve sustainable food security. Disciplined, considered development interventions are required. In the MERET project, development food aid has demonstrated that it can build a solid foundation for food security.

Ethiopia's opportunity: graduating from food aid

Following the record relief requirements of 2003, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi called a meeting between the government, UN agencies including WFP, donors and NGOs. The deteriorating food security situation was named as Ethiopia's most pressing priority. The government requested support to move from the current model of short-term relief to multi-year development to lift and keep people out of hunger. The government proceeded with legislation, drastically curtailing the mandates of the relief bureaucracy and overhauling the structure of agriculture and rural development. For the rest of 2004, the government is working with donors, UN agencies and NGOs to design a multi-year programme to protect people from shocks, build up productive assets and link into successively more robust food security programmes.

Food aid is essential to this strategy. Vast areas of highland Ethiopia have very limited transport, communications and markets. Institutional capacity to handle large amounts of cash at the community level does not yet exist

– for example, the majority of rural Ethiopians and rural government offices do not have ready access to banking facilities. Communities along major roads, with access to regular markets and with financial institutions, should move towards more cash-based programmes. However, other communities will need continued food aid for a number of years.

food aid has saved millions of lives

Conclusions

Ethiopia has had food aid for 30 years, and its food security is worse than ever. Food aid is not the culprit – it has saved millions of lives. But its potential to bring about lasting improvements in food security has not been utilised.

With the government providing leadership, Ethiopia has another opportunity. Food aid applied with development discipline can make a remarkable contribution. A good food aid programme can simultaneously reduce vulnerability and improve food security.

Food aid cannot *achieve* food security for Ethiopians by itself. By using both food and cash strategically, and by providing a continuum of programme options through linkages with other food security programmes like the World Bank's, the impact on community livelihoods will be even more substantial. This will also depend on parallel efforts to tackle poverty with policies that promote agriculture (including security of tenure), improve education and health, address HIV, control population growth and upgrade rural infrastructure. Effective safety nets for the vulnerable and a focus on nutrition are essential.

Food aid will be a necessity for a number of years to come. However, provided that cash becomes increasingly available, planned transitions away from food aid are also required. The two most important areas are boosting local production, so more of the imported food aid can be replaced with purchases of locally produced crops, and capacity-building to enable reliable cash programming.

The clock is ticking for Ethiopia: old patterns must be broken so that real hope can emerge. Food aid is vital to success, but with success food aid will cease. The goal – ambitious, but possible – is that by 2015 Ethiopia will no longer need to ask for food aid.

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Correction

The caption used with the photograph on page 30 of the previous issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* (no. 26, March 2004) was printed in error. The caption reads 'A Palestinian settlement on the West Bank'. It should read 'A Palestinian village on the West Bank'.

Humanitarian relief and the media: making the relationship more effective

Steven S. Ross, Columbia University

Humanitarian aid organisations need the press. Good coverage can help with fundraising, smooth the way to cooperation with host governments and raise staff morale. Journalists need humanitarian organisations to provide on-the-ground expertise and resources, and the raw material of their stories. It is therefore surprising how little each side understands the other:

- NGO press officers complain that few journalists know about chronic, long-term problems such as HIV/AIDS in Africa or the comeback of malaria. Journalists say that they do know about these issues, but need better reasons to run stories on chronic issues *today*, rather than at some point in the future.
- NGO press officers complain that journalists are less knowledgeable than they used to be, and less polite in the field. Journalists doubt that humanitarian organisations operate efficiently, and are sceptical about their motives.
- Journalists complain that NGO press events lack the kind of follow-up or relevance that could result in more than a single story about an event.
- NGOs offer increasingly elaborate websites. Journalists find that the sites do not contain all the information they need – and that for competitive reasons NGOs usually do not link to other NGOs doing the same kind of work or providing aid in the same area.

This article reports on two surveys exploring the nature of the relationship between humanitarian NGOs and the press, carried out in the latter half of 2003. The work was sponsored by the Fritz Institute and the Reuters Foundation. The first survey covered press officers and field personnel at 54 humanitarian aid organisations worldwide, by email and telephone. Their responses helped shape the second survey, covering reporters, editors and opinion writers. More than 290 responses were tallied. The full report, by far the largest and most systematic ever attempted in this field, is available at www.fritzinstitute.org.

Has coverage of aid work increased?

By a three-to-one margin, journalists said that coverage of humanitarian aid operations had increased. This was contrary to the belief among many NGO press officers that coverage was static or declining, especially for chronic problems such as HIV/AIDS in Africa. Research in NEXIS, a database of articles, showed that the volume of stories on long-term chronic crises has indeed been increasing in the mainstream press. The coverage is spread across many more groups providing aid, including humanitarian

NGOs, perhaps contributing to the perception of less coverage by individual NGO press officers.

The bad news: a more critical press

By a four-to-one margin, journalists said that criticism and scepticism in the press about relief organisations had increased. Among columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers, the gap was 11-to-1: 57% said they were more critical about relief organisations, as against 5% who said they were not. Journalists criticised NGOs as having ‘large bureaucracies’, and for staging ‘fancy events and expensive lunches aimed at attracting journalists’. Faith-based organisations were noticeably exempt from these criticisms. It seems that journalists have only a hazy idea about what overhead is necessary in any organisation, and only a vague notion about where to gather comparative data (one source for North American NGOs is www.guidestar.com).

media criticism of relief organisations has increased

What makes news?

Reporters who cover crises do not do so full time. In fact, the average among the respondents was less than one story in five. Only two of the 265 journalists who responded to this question said that they exclusively covered crises. Only 10% (27) said that crisis stories made up more than half of their output. Thus, the newsworthiness of humanitarian stories is judged by the norms of other stories they do, such as timeliness and death-toll.

Almost half of the respondents (49%) said that a high death-toll was the best reason to run a relief story. Having a readership of the same background as the people affected by the crisis was also cited as making a story compelling, as was the involvement of aid workers from the readership or viewership area. As for what keeps crisis stories off the news agenda, the two main reasons given were a lack of journalistic resources and ‘crisis fatigue’; each was mentioned by more than a quarter of respondents. The third most cited reason was the predominance of Iraq and Afghanistan, followed closely by a ‘lack of new angles’ to long-running crises.

There was a marked orientation towards breaking news: almost half (48%) of all the stories done by all the

respondents were categorised by them as breaking news; 31% were categorised as features and 20% as opinion, columns or editorials. Even respondents who classified themselves as columnists, editorial writers and opinion writers did a substantial amount of what they considered to be breaking news (43% of their output, on average). The lesson from this is that humanitarian aid organisations should not pour huge resources into ‘educating’ journalists about crises. The issue is not lack of knowledge, but that journalists and their editors do not consider many crises to be ‘news’.

What journalists want

Journalists most want what most NGOs seem loath to provide: links on their websites to other groups doing similar things or working in the same areas. The next most popular request was for NGOs to hold more press conferences. Journalists, particularly outside North America, also asked for training, travel help and free editorial material, such as images and video. This was confirmed by NGO respondents, who reported an increase in requests by journalists for ‘stock footage’ video and still images to use in coverage. Many NGOs have started to put still images on their websites in response. While these images are typically collected informally, some NGOs give their field staff digital cameras and ask them to submit photographs.

Lessons for NGOs Resource issues

Only nine of the 54 NGO respondents said that they had a specific budget for press relations within field and regional offices. The approach is remarkably ad hoc, despite the potential fundraising benefits of a good relationship with the press. While donors want to see their money used operationally, some are willing to specifically fund press relations efforts.

NGOs acknowledge many missteps in press relations, and many NGO respondents mentioned a need for more training. Although large international organisations often hire experienced journalists as press officers at headquarters, regional press officers are rarely well-versed in international press relations. There is, however, little time or money to train press officers in the field. No respondent outside CARE and the IFRC mentioned having a budget for such training beyond perhaps a few hundred dollars for attending short seminars.

NGOs have barely begun to exploit the Internet

Nevertheless, regional press officers described the range of basic services they provide to journalists without special prompting. These include writing and distributing press releases and background reports on regional aid needs, offering photographs for use with journalists’ stories and holding the press conferences that journalists

say they want more of. They displayed good understanding of the need for timeliness in attending to journalists’ requests.

The web

The worldwide web has opened up opportunities for humanitarian aid organisations to gain international visibility. But the potential of Internet technologies has barely begun to be exploited. Few NGOs have a formal online press room and archive of press releases. Those that do, and had the usage data to tell, reported that these areas were popular with users.

Key issues include:

- Few humanitarian organisations’ websites have internal search engines.
- None of the NGO officers we talked to said that their organisation had a formal procedure in place to check on a continuing basis whether their website was easily found on the various international versions of Google, Yahoo and other search engines. Several assumed that their webmasters or other ‘technical’ personnel handled such chores.
- Many sites cannot be fully searched from the outside by search engines such as Google, either because the pages are sparse on text or because they are ‘framed’. Framed pages load faster when bandwidth is low, but cannot easily be found and indexed by search engines.
- Newer web technologies such as streaming video and blogs (weblogs: online newsletters by individual or corporate reporters) are virtually ignored.
- Older Internet technologies that predate the web are sparsely used. These include chat rooms, LISTSERVs and Usenet newsgroups.
- Email is often used to send press releases, but distribution lists are built in a haphazard manner. Fax and post are also used, despite the costs and potential for errors in distribution. Email is clearly underutilised, perhaps because address lists are poor.

Conclusions

The issues that need fixing fall into two categories: misconceptions and inefficiencies. On the misconception side, humanitarian aid organisations should pay closer attention to what journalists say they need to enable them to cover crises. The journalists have a fair idea about what the crises are, but often lack the financial resources necessary to report them.

On the inefficiencies side, NGOs need to rethink their traditional ideas about training. If a typical field office staff member stays with an organisation for two years, expensive annual training visits would benefit that organisation for only 18 months before replacements are hired. Organisations should thus think about sharing training visits and basic training materials, and about supplementing visits with alternative training methods such as online or CD-based distance learning. Finally, humanitarian aid organisations have taken great advantage of the worldwide web, but can do far more, at trivial extra cost.

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Yes: lack of journalistic resources (staff layoffs, budget cuts)	28%
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Improving NGO coordination: lessons from the Bam earthquake

Jenty Wood, Oxfam (writing in a personal capacity)

In a recent lessons-learned meeting on the Bam earthquake in Iran, a polite and respectful colleague from the Iranian Ministry of Health related his frustration at international NGO coordination in the early days of the emergency. He said that, at the same time as he was desperately trying to set up field hospitals and bury the dead, representatives from over 100 international NGOs had individually requested meetings with him. He appreciated their help, he said, but some organisations wanted to ask him about the siting of rural clinics when he was still trying to arrange emergency medical evacuations. Was there no way, he asked, that these agencies could organise themselves better in the early days of a disaster?

This article tries to answer his question. It reflects first on the nature of international NGO coordination and co-operation in the Bam response, then asks if there are ways that inter-agency coordination could be improved – without losing sight of agencies' individual identity and independence. Finally, it suggests areas for further discussion and research.

Background

The earthquake hit in the early hours of the morning on 26 December 2003. Its scale was massive: some 26,000 people out of a population of about 90,000 were killed, and about 80% of the housing stock and government infrastruc-

ture was destroyed. Key government officials, health staff and national response personnel were among the dead.

The Iranian government took the unprecedented step of requesting international assistance and – in a brave move for a country largely closed to outsiders for 30 years – instituted a no-visa, open skies policy for relief supplies and personnel to assist the affected population. In the first two weeks after the earthquake, over 120 tonnes of relief supplies and 1,900 international personnel arrived in Bam, complementing the 4,500 tonnes of supplies and 8,600 personnel already deployed by the Iranian government and the Red Crescent. Many professionals in the relief sector considered the initial response exemplary, and it is true that performance on key indicators was impressive. There were no significant disease outbreaks; according to the Iranian Red Crescent, the first food and water distributions began within 12 hours, and over 20,000 tents were distributed within the first three days.

the Iranian government took the unprecedented step of requesting outside aid

Initial coordination mechanisms

Over 200 international organisations arrived in Bam in the first two weeks after the earthquake. To assist in the coordination effort, the Iranian government and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) set up a camp for international organisations on a former sports field. OCHA also established sectoral coordination meetings and strengthened links with the Iranian Red Crescent, the lead agency for the response. Organisations helped each other, and personal relations were good. Oxfam borrowed tents from Save the Children, and Médecins Sans Frontières provided supplies to other organisations. There was a strong sense that everyone simply wanted to get things done to help the people of Bam.

There were also more formal coordination mechanisms. A group of five agencies banded together to initiate a joint latrine procurement tender using agreed standards and specifications. The tender failed in the end, but it was proof that organisations were willing to cooperate and to agree standards and approaches in a coordinated matter. A system initiated by the Iranian Red Crescent, dividing the city into 12 zones each to be assisted by a different provincial branch, was rapidly picked up by international NGOs, who agreed to accept assigned zones and to focus their assessment and intervention work in these areas.

Coordination problems

Perhaps it was inevitable, given the scale of the disaster, that there were difficulties in coordination among the agencies working in Bam. Some agencies came ill-equipped – some even arrived without sleeping bags or enough food and water. Small agencies were assigned huge zones to work in, and record systems looked at the amount of work being done, not at whether needs were being covered. Most international NGOs conducted individual assessments, the results of which were generally not shared between agencies. Several agencies said that they did not share their reports because they were not finished, or because they felt uncomfortable sharing information that had been gathered quickly. Others said simply that they were not asked to share their assessments, or that they did not have time to do so. Project designs varied significantly between agencies, and some were not accepted locally: women would not use latrines with



An Iranian woman and her child stand in front of a destroyed building, Bam, December 2003

©Frederik Kok, NRC Geneva

plastic sheet superstructures because their shadow could be seen through them. Sometimes it took weeks for this learning to be communicated between agencies. Suppliers played agencies off against each other to get higher prices, and there was general confusion about what was being done and distributed where.

Sorting through the chaos

Was this situation inevitable? How could we have communicated better in the early days of the response to reduce the duplication of effort? Could international NGOs have been better coordinated as a group before the emergency?

The traditional answer to these questions usually has two parts. First, coordination is the job of OCHA. If international NGOs set up their own coordination system, this would just add to the mess and potentially increase duplication. Second, indi-

vidual NGOs have their own missions, mandates and systems, and it is exactly this independence that can make them so effective. Push inter-agency coordination too far and gaps in coverage will appear, and essential flexibility will be lost. These are valid points, but is there really no way to do better?

Old hands say that things are far better than they were 20 years ago, mainly due to three factors: the broad acceptance by most (though not all) international NGOs of international standards such as Sphere; the development of OCHA and the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (DAC) teams; and the emergence of inter-agency coordination bodies such as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in Geneva, the Washington-based VOCA and the broader-based Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). Applying this argument to the early days of the Bam earthquake, however, suggests that there is still room for improvement.

The application of international standards

Almost all agencies operating in Bam publicly professed to be applying key international standards such as Sphere in their work. Other technical standards were also used, and there is no doubt that standardising the fittings of relief water items, for example, easily proved its worth. Yet Sphere was seldom actively used as a coordination and planning tool. None of the weekly UN progress reports systematically compared actual data to Sphere.

And while Sphere was used in reviewing assessment data, it was of only limited benefit in speeding up the design process for latrines and other materials.

Sphere was seldom actively used for coordination and planning

OCHA and UNDAC

Despite years of emergency interventions, there remains confusion regarding the role of OCHA. OCHA is clear that its coordinating role within a humanitarian response does not extend to leading it. Yet many NGO representatives in Bam suggested that they would have appreciated OCHA playing a more active part. One senior staffer told me that one reason why agencies were so willing to embrace the zonal system was that there was an urgent need for organisations to be clearly directed – ‘they really wanted to be told where to go so that they could get down to work’. Government officials also wanted OCHA to assume this role, although this clearly was not part of its mandate.

UNDAC meanwhile remains an essentially UN-centric tool. The UNDAC system is ‘designed to assist the United Nations in meeting international needs for early and qualified information during the first phase of a sudden-onset disaster and in the coordination of incoming international relief at national level and/or at the site of the emergency. It also aims at strengthening national and regional disaster response capacity’. In Bam, an assessment team was deployed within 72 hours. This included representatives from a range of UN bodies, plus at times donor representatives. Despite the fact that UNDAC is meant to act as ‘part of a joint effort to enhance system-wide coordination’, there is currently no provision for international NGOs to be represented on the UNDAC team. One UNDAC team member told me that they would have welcomed such participation, but were unsure who would be best suited for it, and how to get good-quality staff at such short notice. More discussion on this is needed.

Current coordination mechanisms

This brings us to the third improvement in the relief sector in the last two decades: the reinvigoration of NGO networks such as ICVA and Interaction. Despite the fact that most organisations arriving in Bam were a member of one of these coordinating bodies, evidence of this membership was not obvious. In the first month of the response, not one UN meeting or inter-agency assessment report appears to have mentioned these organisations. Although clearly it is not the aim of these bodies to actively coordinate response on the ground, are there ways that they could facilitate more communication between members prior to a crisis, and even in the early days of an emergency? By building a culture that reminds organisations of their inter-agency commitments, and making sure that common documents such as the humanitarian charter or other standards are well disseminated,

could improve communication and potentially the quality of interventions in the field. It could also encourage partner organisations to get in touch with each other and potentially undertake joint assessments or pool information and infrastructure.

Conclusions and recommendations

The experience of Bam provides important lessons for improving coordination among international NGOs in rapid-onset emergencies. Some key questions should guide this debate.

Can Sphere be used to reinvigorate the concept of a set of agreed designs for relief items? There is no doubt that, in Bam, if agencies had been able to show vendors three or four pre-agreed ‘Sphere-compliant’ latrine designs, items could have been more quickly and more effectively deployed. The concept of standardisation has fallen from favour recently, with most agencies stressing the need for locally appropriate solutions, rather than bringing in too many items from abroad. However, given the wide acceptance the Sphere standards now enjoy, perhaps a next step could be to adapt these into a set of designs that could be reviewed and considered for local production in an emergency. Like Sphere, these would not have the status of rules, but would rather be suggested guidelines. These would need to be adapted to individual circumstances, but they could at least jump-start a process or provide a base for concrete discussion.

Could NGO bodies like ICVA, VOCA or Interaction be more active in putting together joint assessment teams in rapid-onset disasters? Is there scope for agreements between international NGOs on this prior to the emergency, so that when disaster strikes the inter-agency mobilisation system is clear? This could improve the chances for the rapid deployment of a good-quality team with a range of skills and attributes. It could also reduce duplication in assessments and add credence to the results generated.

Alternatively, or additionally, could international NGOs be represented on UNDAC teams? While the modalities of this would need to be worked out, given that many organisations already have emergency rosters it should be possible to work out a system where NGOs could propose participants at short notice. Using the IASC or other existing coordination mechanisms could be a good place to start.

Could existing coordination bodies play an expanded role in promoting information exchange between individual agencies and between agencies and external bodies, such as the UN, donors and local governments? For example, could Interaction put members considering responding to an emergency in touch with agencies already there, to help them make an informed decision on whether to intervene? While clearly it would not make sense for these bodies to become operational in the field, they could perhaps designate focal point agencies in emergencies who could ensure that members were in touch with each other. These interventions would have to be well-designed to complement the existing UN humanitarian

information systems, but they could provide a much-needed, less public coordination forum. They could also ensure that the NGO perspective is clearly articulated to donors, the government and other actors, and not eclipsed by UN or Red Cross appeals and media messages.

The example of international NGO actions in Bam suggests both a need for improvement, and a willingness to achieve this. Clearly, each of these ideas requires much further thought and discussion. However, if international NGOs were able to make progress, we would be in a better position to answer our colleague from the Iranian Ministry of Health when he asked how we could organise ourselves better in the face of disaster.

Jenty Wood is the Humanitarian Programme Manager for Iran, Oxfam GB. The views expressed in this article are her own, and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam GB or its affiliates. Her email address is: JenWood@oxfam.org.uk.

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Children's feedback committees in Zimbabwe: an experiment in accountability

Chris McIvor, Save the Children (UK)

Over the last two years, due to drought, economic decline and low agricultural productivity arising from the government's land reform programme, a significant humanitarian operation has been under way to feed Zimbabwe's people. During the peak of the hungry season from November to April, some four to five million people (about 40% of the population) have been recipients of food aid. This has largely been delivered through international organisations, since government structures have generally been regarded by donors as too partisan and politically compromised to be able to deliver such assistance in a neutral and impartial manner.

To target beneficiaries within areas of need, agencies have largely used community meetings, supported by traditional structures of leadership such as chiefs, headmen and local councillors. Local leaders convene community gatherings, where agency personnel explain the criteria for selecting beneficiaries. After these criteria have been discussed and debated, the community is then tasked with producing its initial registration list. This is subsequently checked by humanitarian agencies through household verification and further meetings. Community committees are set up to notify beneficiaries



An aid delivery at Mucheni School, Zimbabwe

of when food will be delivered, to assist with distributions and to participate in post-distribution monitoring.

On paper at least, community involvement in humanitarian assistance in Zimbabwe looks significant. Yet there are numerous signs that it may not be as extensive as it would appear. Many members of vulnerable communities in receipt of food aid do not feel empowered, do not believe that they are privy to all the information they should receive, and do not feel that agencies or their staff

are in any way accountable to them for the aid that is delivered.

Community complaints

To explore community concerns, Save the Children (UK) carried out a survey in August 2003 in its three operational areas in Zimbabwe. Community members claimed that explanations of selection criteria were inadequate; agency staff, people claimed, were impatient when questions were asked, for example. They also pointed out that community gatherings were not necessarily the most appropriate mechanism for selecting beneficiaries, since there was a reluctance to publicly dispute the inclusion of influential people who might not merit food aid, for fear of recrimination and possible persecution. Many of those interviewed also complained of late deliveries, uncertain schedules and poor planning of distribution points. Several areas had no shade to protect against the sun or the rain during the wet season, nor did they have adequate latrines or running water.

Save the Children (UK)'s survey also included focus group discussions with 140 boys and girls between the ages of eight and 16. Their criticism was particularly worrying. Despite the fact that many children live in households where parents have either died or are absent, they claimed that they were never included in the registration process. Community gatherings did not seek their participation, nor did subsequent household verifications particularly focus on them as a group that needed to be consulted. When child-headed households were included in beneficiary lists, on many occasions no information was given to them about their entitlements, roles and responsibilities. Finally, children indicated that they were unwilling to make complaints, either within the community or to agency staff, for fear that food aid might be terminated. This was an observation echoed by adults and children alike. No independent, friendly and accessible mechanism of feedback had been set up, and people were left with the impression that the agency did not particularly value what they had to say.

many children claimed they were excluded from the registration process

The IASC task force

Further impetus for mechanisms that better responded to community concerns, especially among children, came from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) task force on Protection from Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises. This was set up in March 2002 in the



Children gather food aid, Mucheni School, Zimbabwe

©Georgie Scott

wake of allegations of widespread sexual exploitation and abuse of refugees in West Africa. One of the task force's recommendations was that humanitarian agencies must be more accountable to beneficiary populations, including children. This included disseminating information to all beneficiaries on their rights, entitlements and responsibilities, as well as the setting up of a mechanism to hear and respond to complaints.

Save's children's committees

In August 2003, the Save the Children (UK) programme formulated a plan to translate these recommendations into something practical and concrete. Several factors informed the strategy that was followed.

- One of the major dilemmas relating to the appropriate monitoring of emergency aid interventions is that the people and organisations tasked with registering complaints and problems may well be the same people against whom the complaints are directed. The willingness to share this feedback and pass it on for resolution may ultimately depend on the goodwill of the people and institutions implicated.
- Children are frequently invisible within the community structures set up to monitor the performance of aid programmes, and are unable to raise their individual and collective concerns. This relates not only to possible physical coercion and sexual exploitation, but also to their inclusion as beneficiaries in programmes. In Zimbabwe, where there are increasingly large numbers of child-headed households and where such families are considerably marginalised within community structures, this problem is acute.

To meet these considerations, the plan envisaged several stages. Food aid beneficiaries, particularly children, would set up their own committees to collect feedback, complaints and suggestions for improvements to the

programme. Child representatives to these committees would be elected by groups of children themselves. These representatives in turn would receive training in information-gathering skills, the principles and practice behind food aid targeting and delivery, documentation and reporting skills and learning on how to be accountable, so that the views and opinions of other children were fairly and adequately represented. Each of these steps was preceded by detailed discussion with parents and community leaders, so as to solicit their permission for children to participate.

To address concerns about potential bias in the collection of information, it was decided to establish an independent channel of communication rather than rely on agency staff to gather and respond to the feedback received. This resulted in the idea of an independent ‘ombudsperson’ who would provide the core point of contact between the committees and the programme. This individual was expected to report to a board that had wider representation than senior Save the Children (UK) personnel. A representative of one of the organisation’s principal donors, a government delegate, a representative from another humanitarian agency and the director of the Save the Children (UK) programme were to form a hearing committee that would respond to the complaints and feedback coming from the children’s groups. This board had a mandate to redirect food aid operations in response to observations received, and to provide feedback to the children around their concerns.

cases of child abuse are a particular concern

Progress and lessons learnt

Seven children’s feedback committees had been formed by April 2004, representing seven communities in Mutoroshanga District in northern Zimbabwe. These communities largely comprise informal chrome miners and former commercial farm workers. It is in one of the most disadvantaged parts of the country. Save the Children (UK) has been working there for the last four years. Around 50 children have been trained, through formal workshops and practical on-site visits. An ombudsperson has been recruited and the board has met four times to hear feedback from the children, both about the food aid programme and about other issues.

The board generally believes that this intervention has provided information of a nature and quality that may not have been possible through the normal post-distribution monitoring visits conducted by international NGOs. In particular, children have raised issues around the allocation of food aid within households, and the marginalisation of orphans by caregivers prioritising their own children at mealtimes. When agency officers have previously conducted household verification visits, these observations have never been shared with them. The children’s committees have also suggested that the

organisation needs to monitor more closely what happens to food after it is collected from distribution points. In some cases, guardians may sell a portion of the rations received to meet needs which have little to do with the welfare of the rest of the family.

Of particular concern are the cases of child abuse that have been brought to the board’s attention. These generally relate to the vulnerability of children under the care of step-parents or other guardians, one or both parents having died. Sexual exploitation, physical punishment, refusal to support orphans’ attendance at school and excessive child labour have been documented. In line with Save the Children (UK)’s child protection policy, these cases have been brought to the attention of the relevant authorities for further investigation and redress.

The children involved have also registered their interest and enthusiasm in being part of this project. It has given them skills they otherwise may not have acquired, and has increased their self-confidence and assertiveness within the family and the community.

Problems have also been noted. Some committee members claim that they have been stigmatised by other children and adults as ‘agency spies’, and that some people in the community are fearful that the aid programme will be terminated as a result of what they disclose. Through general community meetings and awareness raising, Save the Children (UK) has been at pains to point out that the purpose of this endeavour is not to find some pretext to withdraw assistance. One of the principal reasons for greater accountability within the programme is to ensure that it lives up to its ideal of meeting the needs of the most vulnerable.

Yet it would be naive to expect that promoting the accountability of emergency food aid programmes to the most marginalised and invisible members of a society does not have repercussions. This has surfaced in families, where some parents have expressed their reluctance to allow their children to participate in a process that they believe might well undermine their authority: ‘What will they demand next?’ was one comment made by guardians at community meetings set up during the initial phase of the project.

The fear of subsequent ‘demands’ also has a political dimension, and perhaps explains why, in another area of Save the Children (UK) operations, the local authorities rejected a proposal to set up feedback committees. In the project’s pilot district, some traditional leaders and local political representatives have expressed concern about setting up feedback and complaints mechanisms that might challenge their own ways of doing things in the community. As one councillor remarked, it is a short step from promoting the accountability of food aid deliveries to demands for greater accountability among elected office-holders.

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Civil society and Islamic aid in Iraq: unseen developments and threats

Theo Murphy, independent

This article explores two related, but neglected, aspects of the aid environment in Iraq: the politicisation of aid by local religious/political parties; and the role and position of international Islamic aid. Clearly, in the politically charged climate of present-day Iraq, the activities, funding and political affiliation of international aid is a key question. Yet while there has been extensive debate about US NGOs and their affiliations with the belligerents, Islamic aid organisations are afforded *de facto* membership of the humanitarian community in Iraq without any enquiry into their funding, affiliation and agenda. This presents a potential – but unforeseen – threat to the principles of humanitarian action.

Manipulation by political/religious parties

History in the region suggests that the emerging political/religious parties in Iraq will need to turn to something other than rhetoric in order to build a constituency for taking power. Historically in the Middle East, inchoate organisations and parties like *Hamas* and *Hizbollah* generated support by providing essential services that the government could not provide. Iraqi groups like al Dawa and the Sadr party can be expected to do the same. With the pressure of upcoming elections (or impending civil or sectarian war), competition to provide aid in order to consolidate political support seems likely. That this has not happened yet does not mean that it will not do so in the future. Emerging groups are addressing gaps in the essential services that the ‘government’ (the Coalition Provisional Authority) is providing. It is only that these gaps are not ‘humanitarian’, but security-related.

The proliferation of armed ‘brigades’ and ‘corps’ linked to sects and political parties highlights that security is the greatest need and greatest deficit in essential services. The ‘Mahdi Army’ and other groups that patrol the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala mark the beginning of what

may become a problematic trend.¹ The regional historical pattern dictates that an embryonic organisation develops an ideology and then complements this with aid, slowly building a following before becoming militarised. In Iraq, the opposite has taken place: the impulse to address the most pressing need, security, has created political/religious parties that already possess military power without having proved themselves in any other way, nor necessarily commanding popular support. Addressing inadequacies in electricity and fuel availability or high unemployment – all of which are present needs – is not easy. Patrolling the streets with armed militias is another matter, and perhaps a shortcut to legitimacy.

security is the greatest need, and the greatest deficit

Sectarianism and intra-sect tension and competition are likely to increase as elections draw near, with implications for the perceived neutrality of international NGOs. Comparisons with Lebanon in the 1980s, where extreme divisions shaped the political and humanitarian landscape, cannot be ignored. While international NGOs are aware of the Sunni–Shi’a–Kurdish split, little attention is paid to how this is evolving, or how these groups may use international NGOs for their own ends.

¹ This article was written before the events of early April 2004, surrounding Moqtada al Sadr. This comment reflects more the threat of these armed groups aligning against one another and forcing international NGOs into perceived alliance with the groups in whose region they work.

Although the co-option of international aid by various groups is not unique to Iraq, it is significant nonetheless because it may erode the impartiality of humanitarian agencies in the eyes of other competing groups or parties. Thus, even though international NGOs may provide their aid on an impartial basis, it may be that, due to an NGO's geographic location, it may be perceived by default as being aligned with this particular party or group. Thus, an international NGO working in Sadr city may face co-option by the Sadr, who will take the credit for bringing in the NGO's services. This is nothing new. But the fact that the NGO may then be seen as being non-neutral and non-impartial, because of the location of its projects within a sectarian enclave, is potentially a much greater risk, since this poses obvious security problems when NGOs depend for protection on recognition of their status. In effect, the agency becomes perceived as pro-Sadr, with obvious consequences if the Sadr come into conflict with other Shi'a, Sunni or Kurdish groups.

It is as yet unclear to what degree the neutrality of international NGOs will be questioned based on where projects are located. It may come to the point, as it did in Lebanon, where an NGO is scrutinised for the number of projects it has in each sectarian area, but as yet people are not monitoring this very closely. More research into opinion on the ground is needed to see to what degree this is the case, because if this perception holds true it can have serious security-related consequences. After the first Gulf war, some international NGOs were criticised as being pro-Kurdish, since the majority of programmes were in the Kurdish north of Iraq. When Iraq was under the control of Saddam Hussein's regime, this criticism never developed into a security threat. In the current lawless environment, this may no longer hold.

The threat from within: the hidden face of international humanitarianism?

The identity of humanitarian assistance in Iraq is also under threat from within. The lack of independence has received a great deal of attention from European agencies, which criticise the relationship between their US counterparts and the occupying forces. However, Islamic, especially Gulf-based, NGOs operating in Iraq pose a much greater, and as yet unrealised, threat to humanitarian principles. Whereas US NGOs may be criticised for a lack of independence (and perhaps eventually neutrality and impartiality should the conflict devolve into a large-scale US–Iraqi conflict), some Islamic NGOs reject impartiality in a much more blatant way, in particular in making a distinction between Sunni and Shi'a in Iraq. While many Islamic NGOs claim to be



Iraqi women wait for humanitarian aid, Baghdad, April 2003

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privately funded, the freedom that this usually implies is a myth. In the case of Gulf states, and the international Islamic NGOs deriving funding from them, there is a tendency towards the Salafi interpretation of Islam. This is important as regards Iraq in that, in this interpretation, Shi'a are considered as virtual infidels. Thus, when funding is given to meet the appeals of the international Islamic NGOs in Iraq, private donors are thinking of their Sunni Iraqi 'brothers', not the whole of Iraq, especially the Shi'a. Impartiality is therefore compromised, through the earmarking of funds, on which programme decisions are based. In interviews conducted with some of these NGOs, executives lament the earmarking of donor money, and are distressed at being compelled to serve Sunnis and not all Iraqis. The concrete results of this earmarking of funds are reflected in the geographic distribution of international Islamic NGO programmes, which overwhelmingly focus on the Sunni Triangle. Therefore, some Islamic NGOs, though independent of political influence, are constrained by donor bias. In the same way, US NGOs are tied to the US government indirectly through funding.

Another possibility is that Islamic NGOs may be guided by local, especially Gulf, governments. In this case, ties to some of these NGOs may also shape their programme choices according to political machinations. It is likely that the Sunni Gulf states fear an expansion of hostile Shi'a influence along their borders, and wish to stem it. Thus government-driven aid via government-dominated Islamic NGOs may be used to 'buy' the goodwill of the Shi'a south, perhaps in the hope of creating a friendly neighbour out of a one-time foe.

**the identity of humanitarian aid
is under threat from within**

States may also try to influence political developments through spreading a state-particular interpretation of Islam. Da'wa (the spreading and revitalisation of Islam) is a primary tool thereof, a religious principle that is often manipulated for political ends. By creating co-religionists, through drawing people to a particular interpretation of Islam, adherents may be drawn into the sphere of influence of the state whose ideology they share. A prime example is the spread of Wahabism, an ideology particular to Saudi Arabia. Within development or relief programmes, those that focus on education are the most likely vehicle for efforts at ideology dissemination and assimilation.

It is unclear to what degree and in what form neighbouring governments are involved in Iraq, but the country is strategically important, and logic dictates that they are seeking a way to influence developments in their national interest.

Conclusions

The potential manipulation of aid by local groups in Iraq has many historical parallels: the opportunistic explosion of civil society in Somalia, the Lebanese example of extreme sectarian division down to the provision of aid, and the universal appropriation of aid by regional factions, to name but a few. What is distressing in Iraq is the lack of awareness of these pitfalls, and the active cooperation from parts of the humanitarian community in actions which erode humanitarian principles. If the international NGO community hopes to maintain some semblance of neutrality in the eyes of the

local population, it must seriously examine itself, and more strictly define what it means by neutral, impartial and independent aid. Without knowing how all humanitarian actors are funded, politically aligned and ideologically driven, the humanitarian community risks passively linking itself to organisations and objectives that many of its members would strenuously reject, and actively seek to distance themselves from. This is an environment where even an NGO with the privilege of independent funding may easily find itself entangled in partisan aid, if not by its own actions then by its association with the actions of other NGOs, or through affiliation with local religious/political groups.

It is essential for the security of all international actors in Iraq that the principles of humanitarian assistance are upheld. Unfortunately, the argument that the ends justify the means, or that the Coalition's objectives amount to humanitarian ideals, prevails with the majority of the aid community in Iraq, who view the exigencies of funding as their primary concern. In the process of securing funding, agencies are happy to join the Coalition as 'force multipliers' or field agents of the 'hearts and minds campaign'. In such an environment, the principles of aid are set aside as anachronistic keepsakes of another era.

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Humanitarian futures: practical policy perspectives by Randolph Kent Network Paper 46, April 2004

This paper is about the future, and about how agencies can adapt to meet it. The humanitarian environment of tomorrow may well not look much like the humanitarian environment of today.

It argues that many of the changes that are occurring now are likely to impinge in some way on the humanitarian community. In the foreseeable future, we may face new types of humanitarian crisis, with new tools at our disposal to reduce their impact.

In turn, many of the assumptions upon which humanitarian organisations base their work may be becoming increasingly less relevant. The question – and the central issue addressed here – is whether and how humanitarian organisations can deal with the dynamics of change, and its consequences. What strategies do they need to develop, and how should such strategies be linked to policies and practice on the ground?

For a copy of this Network Paper, contact a.prescott@odi.org.uk. The paper is available for download at the HPN website: www.odihpn.org.

Natural disasters amid complex political emergencies

Margie Buchanan-Smith, independent consultant, and Ian Christoplos, ODI Research Associate

There is a sharp operational and conceptual distinction between natural disasters and complex political emergencies (CPEs). Yet this is often inappropriate: natural disasters are rarely truly 'natural', while many areas suffering from complex political emergencies are also subject to periodic natural hazards. In the last five years, at least 140 'natural' disasters have occurred in countries experiencing complex political emergencies.

Operating at the interface between natural disasters and complex political emergencies raises some difficult challenges. How can a humanitarian emergency caused by a combination of conflict and natural hazard best be assessed and portrayed? How can a more holistic and flexible approach to early warning and analysis, that is sensitive to both natural disasters and to conflict, be promoted? Whose responsibility is preparedness, especially if there is no functioning state? These and other issues were debated at a one-day seminar hosted by the British Red Cross Society (BRCS) in November 2003, entitled 'Natural Disasters and Complex Political Emergencies'. This article summarises the key conclusions that emerged.

The interface between natural disasters and CPEs

In advance of the seminar, four case studies were prepared of situations where a natural disaster coincided with a CPE, or at least with conditions of political instability:

- the Bahr El Ghazal famine in South Sudan in 1997 to 1998;
- the drought in Afghanistan between 1999 and 2001;
- the combination of natural disaster and conflict in Colombia (the Eje Cafetero ('Coffee Belt') earthquake in January 1999 and recurrent flooding in Atrato Medio); and
- the earthquake in Gujarat in India in 2001, followed by communal rioting in Ahmedabad in 2002.

In all of these situations, it was usually the *indirect* effects of conflict that increased the impact of the natural disaster. Where conflict has had a long-term impoverishing effect, the asset base has been weakened, substantially reducing the viability of local coping strategies and therefore local resilience to a natural disaster. By the time the drought hit Afghanistan, most of the population had suffered years of conflict. In Bahr El Ghazal, three years of drought and many years of conflict-related impoverishment had left the population in a state of high vulnerability by the end of 1997. Rebel attacks in early 1998 caused massive displacement from towns into rural areas already facing acute food insecurity, thus triggering a famine marked by some of the highest malnutrition and mortality rates ever recorded. In Colombia, the increased risk of natural hazards has been linked to the weakening

effect of conflict on local institutions. The lack of institutional capacity to enforce land use regulations has allowed the unchecked exploitation of forests, increasing the risk of floods and landslides.

it is the indirect effects of conflict that increase the impact of a natural disaster

Vulnerability assessments – a key role to play

A greater commitment to broad-based vulnerability assessments is the key to strengthening the ability to respond in an appropriate and timely fashion to compound emergencies. Assessments constitute an opportunity to raise attention to both the risks of natural disaster, and the risks associated with violent conflict and/or political marginalisation. Yet in conflict areas there is a tendency to overlook the risk of natural disaster, and how local capacity to cope and respond may have been weakened by years of conflict.

In a more peaceful environment, a vulnerability assessment focused on natural hazards should also capture the underlying social and political factors that make some groups particularly vulnerable. Yet this kind of holistic approach is rare, either because the emergency is narrowly defined, or because of a failure to look beyond assumptions about the direct destructive impact of a climatic or seismic event. After the Gujarat earthquake, many agencies were slow to pick up on the underlying patterns of discrimination and unequal power relations in society. As a result, the poorest and most marginalised groups often received the least by way of relief and rehabilitation resources. Exploitative social structures and power relations were simply reproduced, with even more devastating consequences as limited relief and rehabilitation resources were captured by the better-off, unless positive and sometimes controversial steps were taken.

South Sudan offers an example of good practice. There has been long-term investment in information gathering and analysis, particularly through the food economy work of Save the Children-UK (SC-UK) and WFP. In 1998, SC-UK commissioned a seminal vulnerability study, providing insight into the causes of vulnerability amongst the Dinka and how these were changing. This report has been significant in helping aid workers rethink their intervention strategies, particularly their approach to targeting.

The challenge of early warning

Understanding these longer-term dynamics is critical for early warning, so that when a crisis is imminent the early

warning system can communicate why 'this year is different', in other words why an acute crisis is impending amidst an extended period of chronic distress. This can be particularly challenging when there are multiple and complex causes of the crisis.

In Bahr El Ghazal, the long-term investment in information-gathering paid off, at least in terms of understanding what was happening. More than nine months before the famine, SC-UK issued a statement that parts of South Sudan were heading for the worst year since Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) had begun in 1989. But the impact of the long-term erosion of livelihoods and coping strategies was hard to convey. Donor governments, looking for simple, concise messages, were not well-disposed to receiving and acting upon these early warnings of famine. Significant resources were only made available when there was hard evidence of widespread starvation. Where conventional early warning had failed, shocking media coverage provided the trigger, but by then in response to full-blown famine.

So what can an early warning system do to convince sceptical decision-makers (particularly donors but also NGOs) to respond, *in time*? First, when trying to persuade a sceptical donor audience to respond, NGOs and other agencies must be coordinated and coherent in their early warning messages – a particular challenge in a complex crisis where the causal linkages may be contested and hard to predict. Second, agencies which have done the early warning analysis must be prepared to engage in effective and sustained advocacy in delivering the early warning message, even more so in a hostile political environment where donors are reluctant to respond.

Conditions required for preparedness

Preparedness to implement mitigating interventions requires a conducive funding environment, adequate skills and clarity about who is leading preparedness initiatives. Afghanistan offers an example of how difficult it may be to guarantee all of these. Prior to 11 September 2001, preparedness was reasonably strong amongst international aid agencies in terms of skills and experience. But as long as the *Taliban* regime was in power, it was difficult for aid agencies to access donor funding to tackle the underlying issues that made people so vulnerable to the drought. By the end of 2000, the scale of the drought was close to overwhelming all the agencies involved. After the *Taliban* government fell, the funding environment changed, and there was a huge influx of donor resources. At the same time, there was a massive turnover of international staff and poaching of skilled Afghan staff by the UN, private contractors and embassies. This weakened the ability of NGOs to do in-depth vulnerability assessments at just the moment when the financial resources were available. When the new UN mission to Afghanistan, UNAMA, was set up in early 2002, the influx of international staff meant that many national staff were effectively demoted. These new arrivals often lacked local knowledge and the experience of negotiating in Afghanistan.

Institutional distinctions between natural disasters and CPEs

Often, agencies become lopsided in their focus on one type of emergency rather than on both. In Atrato Media in Colombia, for example, some humanitarian agencies decided to focus on conflict alone, even when they were working in an area affected by natural disaster in the form of recurrent flooding. The responsibility for responding was left to state institutions or the Colombian Red Cross. Yet the response to the floods could have been strengthened by the involvement of these humanitarian agencies. They are often in a position to respond more rapidly and effectively than the state, have teams already in the area, and have knowledge of the local context.

Colombia also offers a positive example of humanitarian agencies taking a more integrated approach. After the earthquake in the Coffee Belt, a number of agencies sought to ensure good communication and transparency, to minimise the likelihood of armed groups interfering in their work. Caritas, for instance, paid special attention to the standard of housing they were building, recognising that new houses could become a source of conflict. They also included some beneficiaries who had not been directly affected by the earthquake, but were nevertheless equally vulnerable, again to reduce the likelihood of conflict.

a more comprehensive analysis of risk would help break down the distinction between natural hazards and conflict

Closing the gap between the natural disaster and CPE discourses: a way forward

The strong message that emerged from the case studies and the seminar discussions is that there is a need for aid agencies to strengthen their contextual – and especially political – analysis in these compound emergencies, regardless of whether they are labelled 'natural disaster' or 'complex political emergency', and to strengthen preparedness for all types of emergency. The humanitarian discourse has become overly focused on CPEs, just as the natural disaster discourse has remained tied to technical risk reduction at the expense of understanding the political complexities that are inevitably involved. If policies are to become more coherent in reducing vulnerability, these barriers must be reduced.

A more comprehensive analysis of risk, that breaks down the distinction between natural hazards and conflict, is one way of achieving this. Vulnerability analyses associated with natural disasters could break out of technocratic ruts by drawing lessons from the growing focus on political economy analyses in CPEs. Those working with CPEs could learn about the practical challenges facing disaster-affected people from those working with natural hazards. The common denominator for both is the need to focus on the risks faced by vulnerable people.

Seminar participants were strongly persuaded of the unifying potential of the vulnerability assessment, particularly if it promotes understanding of the underlying causes of vulnerability, on top of which an analysis of immediate causes of the emergency can be overlaid. This is possibly the most productive area for research, to strengthen vulnerability assessments (and other analytical tools) to capture the interconnectedness and complexity of 'natural-disaster-plus-conflict' in order to elicit a more timely and appropriate response.

Key questions to be addressed would include:

1. How does conflict/political instability affect vulnerability to natural disasters, at household, district and national levels? How can this best be measured?
2. How can risk assessment be broadened from a technical approach to incorporate social and political factors?
3. How can practitioners communicate their findings to decision-makers convincingly, conveying the complexity of a compound crisis in an accessible and convincing way?
4. What kind of funding support is required for this type of analysis/assessment, which takes a long-term perspective?

This agenda would lend itself to real-time research in countries where conflict and political instability are having an impact on the population's vulnerability to recurrent natural disasters, for example in Indonesia, Nepal or Zimbabwe. In all of these countries the impact and inter-

connectedness of conflict and natural disaster are not sufficiently understood, nor are adequate preparedness measures in place.

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Reproductive health for conflict-affected people: policies, research and programmes by Therese McGinn, Sara Casey, Susan Purdin and Mendy Marsh Network Paper 45, April 2004

Over the past decade, significant progress has been made in developing a capacity to respond to reproductive health needs in emergencies. This paper describes advances in policy; outlines what we know about the magnitude of reproductive health needs; and explores the lessons for programming. It aims to equip humanitarian practitioners with essential information for delivering effective reproductive health services to people in crises.

While the scope of reproductive health services available to conflict-affected populations is without question better today than in the past, substantial gaps in programme coverage, content and quality remain, making it difficult or impossible for affected populations actually to obtain reproductive health services.

This paper argues that bridging the gaps in the coverage, content and quality of services will require a greater reliance on evidence and experience to enable the design of technically and culturally sound programmes; good training and technical support; good management; and good monitoring and evaluation systems. There is a paramount need to address the issue of equity between refugees and the internally displaced, forced migrants and host populations, men and women, adults and adolescents.

For a copy of this Network Paper, contact a.prescott@odi.org.uk. The paper is available for download at the HPN website: www.odihpn.org.

Including the environment in humanitarian assistance

Charles Kelly, Benfield Hazard Research Centre, University College London

The idea of considering the environment as part of humanitarian assistance might seem illogical. The midst of a humanitarian crisis may not look like the best time to start trying to hug trees; trying to combine environmental action with humanitarian aid could jeopardise both. Still, not considering the environment during a humanitarian crisis risks a number of significant negative outcomes. The environment is a major contributing factor to the origins of most humanitarian crises. Failing to consider the links between the crisis and the environment means that humanitarian aid will be based on an incomplete and incorrect understanding of the crisis. A likely result is that the aid will do less good than intended, or could actually contribute to the worsening or prolonging of the crisis.

Humanitarian relief can itself lead to negative impacts on the environment. The concentration of Kosovo refugees in Kukes in Albania, for example, exceeded local waste-handling capacities. As a result, refuse tips overflowed and raw sewage was dumped into stream courses. These waste problems were exacerbated by the provision of relief supplies in excessive packaging and the distribution of disposable sanitary items. At the same time, humanitarian assistance can improve environmental conditions. Following urban fighting, for example, an intervention using food for work in a clean-up campaign can be an effective way of improving the local environment, as well as getting food to the needy.

This article provides a brief progress-to-date summary of the Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment in Disasters project. The project has developed and field tested a structured process to identify and prioritise linkages between disasters and the environment which need to be considered for effective relief and short-term recovery.

Contrasting normal and rapid environmental impact assessments

An environmental impact assessment (EIA) is intended to identify disaster-related impacts on the environment before they occur, so that they can be mitigated or avoided. Normal EIA procedures are not, however, always appropriate for humanitarian crises. The differences between a normal and a crisis environmental impact assessment context are summarised in Table 1.

Normal EIA procedures should be used when a crisis has been under way for some time (beyond six months), or where a change in status is gradual, as in the case of the slow implementation of a peace agreement. From this perspective, doing (and periodically updating) an EIA for a protracted humanitarian crisis such as the conflict in Sri Lanka is feasible. Similarly, the slow transition to peace in Sudan provides more than enough time to develop, execute and use the results of strategic and programmatic environmental impact assessments as input into planning and managing the post-conflict transition process.

a normal environmental impact assessment will not work in a quick-onset crisis

A normal EIA will not work in a quick-onset crisis such as a war, or when a crisis goes through a rapid transition. For example, the normal EIA process would not produce useful results until long after the relief phase following a cyclone, or when a change in government leads to dramatic and rapid changes in the social and economic

Table 1: Differences in context between normal and crisis environmental impact assessment

Normal assessment	Crisis assessment
A legal requirement often exists	Rarely a legal requirement
Deliberate and proactive	Reactive
Will be thorough and extensive	May need to be partial in coverage
Comprehensive data collection	Based on available data
'No project' option is a possible outcome	'No project' outcome is not an option
Completed in months to years	Completed in hours to weeks
Project launch planned	Sudden-onset
Location chosen	Unpredictable location
Duration planned	Uncertain duration
Beneficiary population identifiable and static	Beneficiary population heterogeneous and dynamic
Environmental goals may be made compatible with socio-economic ones	Priority given to life-saving activities sometimes difficult to reconcile with environmental goals

Modified from a normal-disaster comparison developed by UNHCR and CARE

order. At these crisis points, salient environmental issues need to be identified and provided as input into plans and operations in a matter of days, not months or years (the output horizon for a normal EIA).

An EIA process which can work in a crisis needs to meet a number of criteria. It needs to:

1. Produce results quickly. These results need to be updatable with minimal effort.
2. Be usable by non-specialists. Specialists are important to the assessment and response process, but rarely is the right specialist available at the right time in the early stages of a crisis. The assessment should not wait for the specialists.
3. Not require quantitative data. In the initial phases of many humanitarian crises, quantitative data is scarce or unreliable. A quantitative-based process risks producing bad results due to bad data, or being stalled when critical data is not available.
4. Be linked directly to crisis response. While the identification of medium- to long-term issues is important, the process results must be related to the immediacy of crisis if they are to feed into plans and operations.
5. Incorporate participatory input as and when available.
6. Be integratable into other assessment tools and processes. Environment is a cross-cutting issue. The assessment process needs to link into and be part of other sectoral assessment processes so that environmental results do not exist in isolation.

Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment in Disasters

Over the past four years, the Benfield Hazard Research Centre at University College London and CARE International have collaborated to develop and test a process to rapidly conduct environmental impact assessments in disasters and other crisis situations. The Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment in Disasters (REA) project has just completed a first phase of activities.

The REA process is designed to provide the non-specialist with the means to rapidly identify salient environmental issues. It uses a subjective process which incorporates organisational (e.g. NGO, local government) and community perspectives on the most important environmental issues related to the crisis. The REA process is designed for use in the first 120 days after the crisis, after which routine EIA procedures should be possible.

The REA process involves a series of 11 steps designed to focus attention on salient environmental issues (see Figure 1). These steps are not a lock-step process, and can be accomplished in a different order as conditions allow.

The Organisational and Community Assessments, though significantly different in operation, both move from general information about possible linkages between the crisis and the environment (The Context Statement) to relief-specific considerations (e.g. Unmet Needs) to the impact of relief assistance as well as local coping strategies (Negative Environmental Consequences of Relief Activities). The

Organisational Assessment uses narrative and a set of tables covering a broad range of potential environmental issues to identify those disaster-related environmental issues which are important from the perspective of the organisation(s) providing humanitarian assistance.

The Community Assessment uses a set of questions to identify disaster-related environmental issues of concern to communities directly and indirectly affected by a crisis. Information to answer the questions can be collected through a variety of means, including detailed field surveys, key informants or from other assessment reports. The process of collecting community data for the REA can be integrated into other field assessments (e.g., a food security assessment) to save cost, time and effort.

Issues identified in the organisational and community assessments are then consolidated and prioritised in the Consolidation and Analysis module, with the resulting actions then screened again for potential negative environmental impacts.

It is not necessary, but is recommended, to do both the Organisational and Community Assessments at the same time. If conditions mean that only the Organisational Assessment can be done initially, the Community Assessment should be completed as soon as information from communities becomes available. Alternatively, the Community Assessment could be done first, with a later integration of the Organization Assessment results in a revision of the Consolidation and Analysis process. The intent of the REA is not to create a lock-step process, but to provide a set of procedures which can be used as needed and as appropriate in disasters and crisis.

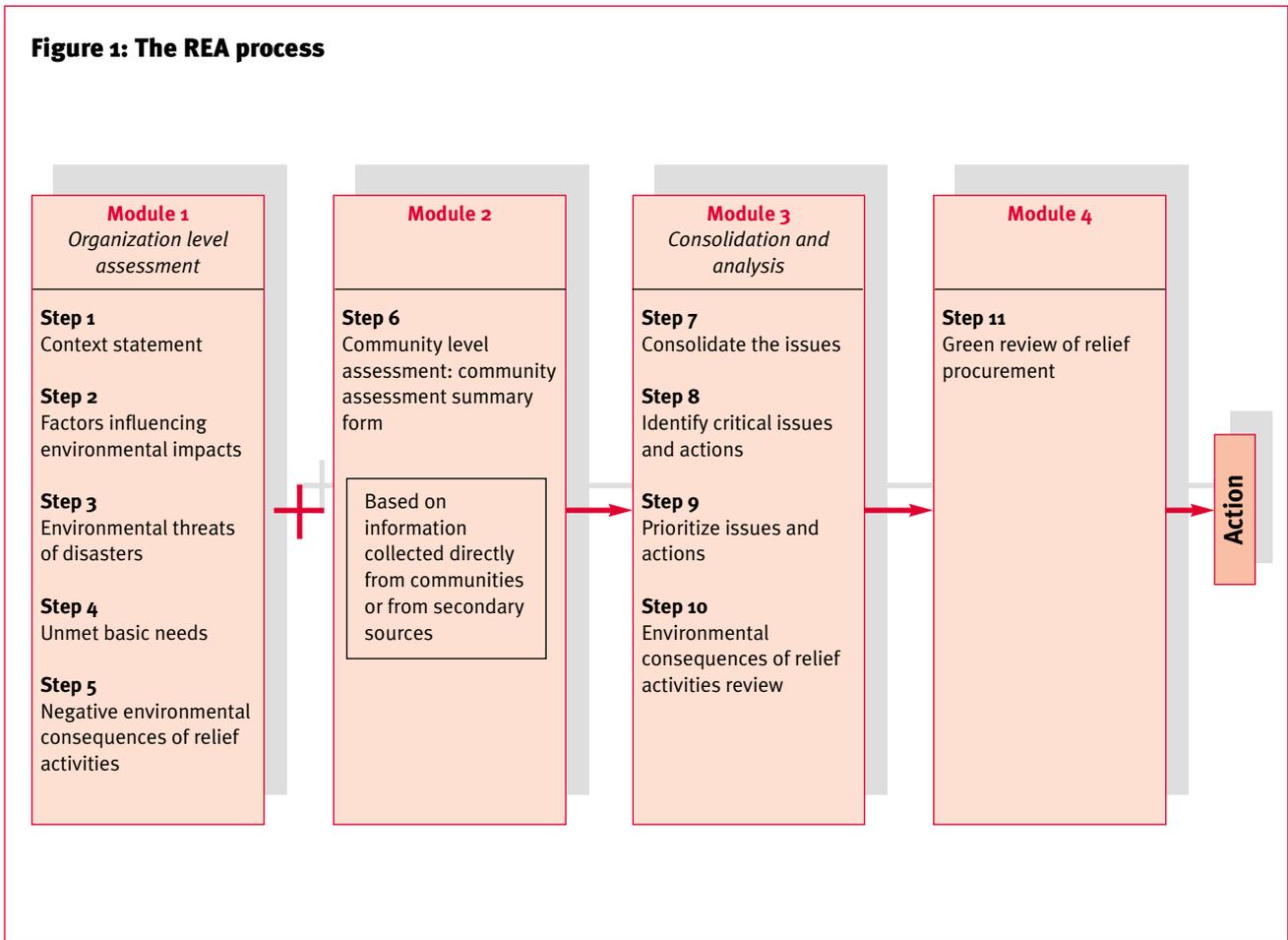
A separate but linked process is used to identify the 'greenness' (sustainability) of assistance provided in response to the crisis. This screening process, involving a checklist of eight questions, can be used at the design, review or procurement stages of a project, to minimise the immediate and long-term negative impacts of assistance.

Although it is possible to do the greenness procurement review during a disaster (e.g., as part of the development of emergency procurement plans), it is more effective to integrate the process into standard emergency procurement policies and plans. Some humanitarian assistance organisations have green procurement policies and procedures, but this is the exception rather than the norm. The general lack of sustainable procurement policies on the part of humanitarian organisations suggests that the humanitarian assistance community has not fully understood that the assistance they provide can have negative environmental impacts and adversely affect the very people they are trying to help.

Lessons learned in using the REA

The REA has been field tested in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Indonesia during or shortly after crises events in these countries. Five REA training events have been held, in Europe, Central America, India, North America and Australia. The field tests and training events have

Figure 1: The REA process



identified a number of changes to improve the REA process. Key among the points learned were that:

- There is considerable resistance to doing yet another crisis assessment.
- Although the assessment process was designed to be simple and easy to use, some aspects can become complicated if the process is not fully understood. The REA was initially written in English, and it can be hard for those who do not have a good grasp of the English language. It has been translated into Spanish, and additional translations are planned.
- Despite these difficulties, the process does produce usable results, and these lead to improvements in the environmental and other aspects of humanitarian operations.
- Initially, the REA process and Sphere indicators were closely linked. However, it was found that knowledge of Sphere was not universal. It became necessary to decouple the REA from Sphere, although this linkage can be easily re-established by users familiar with Sphere. (The environment is a cross-cutting issue in Sphere. The REA is a way of considering the environment in the Sphere-mandated assessment process.)
- Community input is critical. This can be said for any assessment, but the broad scope of environmental impacts and the close link between environmental and humanitarian conditions in many communities makes

identifying community concerns vital to a successful assessment of environmental impact.

- Individuals who are currently or who have been involved in field-level operations seem to find it easier to understand and use the REA than people with less hands-on experience in rapid crisis assessment.
- There is a tendency to make the REA process more complicated than was intended in the design. This seems to come from users (both in the field tests and in training) trying to extract maximum output from the process. Unfortunately, this tendency makes the assessment process more demanding and time-consuming, which increases complaints that the process is too long and complicated.
- Use and review of the REA have led to a number of suggestions for improving and expanding crisis and post-crisis environmental impact assessment. One is to develop a quantitative data-driven assessment tool to fill the gap between a rapid assessment in the first weeks of a crisis, and when EIA results would be available. Another suggestion is to develop REA versions which are localised to specific countries or regions. These REAs would be simpler to use and more directly linked to local environmental issues and responses than the generic REA developed under the project.

Two other aspects of the REA which have emerged in testing and training are worth noting. First, the REA takes

a very broad look at the crisis situation. This contrasts with most other impact assessment tools used in a crisis, which are sector-specific. It can, however, be difficult to integrate the REA into sector-specific assessments. This integration process, which is important in reducing the workload and cost involved, needs further attention.

Second, the REA is one of the few assessment tools which explicitly considers the perspectives of the humanitarian response organisation and the crisis victim (community) separately in framing issues and actions. Because information on survivor views may not be immediately available or representative, plans for immediate response are necessarily based on a variety of formal and informal assessments. These inputs are filtered by the perceptions which the humanitarian assistance providers bring to the crisis. The organisational module of the REA forces users to recognise the role that these perceptions play in shaping the response, as well as raising issues which may not initially be considered. Integrating the issues important to organisations with issues identified by those directly affected by a crisis leads to a convergence of purpose for relief and recovery plans and activities. This improves the impact and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

Conclusions

The REA offers significant advantages in broadening our understanding of the links between the environment and crises, and bringing together the perceptions of assistance providers and of those experiencing the crisis. Both these outcomes improve the planning and execution of humanitarian assistance.

The REA continues to evolve. It is a generic approach and is most effective when adapted to specific contexts. These contexts can include conditions found in a specific country or region, or specific types of disaster. Adaptations to the

REA are likely to be developed by users in a bottom-up process, rather than through centralised design. In parallel, the REA needs to be integrated into other assessment tools to make it easier to do, and because critical linkages between the environment and crises exist in all humanitarian assistance sectors.

A second phase of the REA project began in March 2004. This will focus on three areas:

- Training, including training of field staff and REA trainers.
- Disseminating and perfecting the REA process.
- Support for use of the REA in large-scale disasters.

These efforts are expected to increase awareness, use and adaptation of the REA process.

There was no purpose-built way to systematically consider environmental issues in humanitarian crises when the project started four years ago. This has now changed. With the existence of a tested REA process, the years ahead should see a greater integration of environmental issues into humanitarian assistance, and the increased effectiveness of this assistance.

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Further details of the REA project, including *Guidelines for Rapid Environmental Impact Assessment*, background information and training materials developed by InterWorks with project funding, can be found at www.benfieldhrc.org/SiteRoot/disaster_studies/rea/rea_index.htm. A CD containing a beta version of an eLearning (self-study) module on the REA is available on request.

Useful websites

USAID Africa Bureau Environmental Assessment Capacity Building Program (ENCAP): www.encapafrika.org.

Food Aid Management (resource and procedure documents on environmental impact assessments): www.foodaid-management.org/envmt3.htm.

The International Association for Impact Assessment: www.iaia.org. The UN Environment Programme: www.unep.org. UNHCR's pages on the environment and refugees: www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home?page=PROTECT&id=3b94c47b4.

Other resources

Environmental Documentation Manual (Washington DC: USAID Environmental Working Group, Food Aid Management, January 1999).

Environmentally-friendlier Procurement Guidelines (Geneva: UNHCR, 1997).

Joseph Bishop, *Guidelines For Environmental Assessment Following Chemical Emergencies* (Geneva: UNEP/OCHA Environmental Unit, 1999).

Richard Black, *Refugees, Environment and Development* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998).

HIV/AIDS and humanitarian action by Paul Harvey HPG Report 16, April 2004

What are the implications of HIV/AIDS for our understanding of crisis and humanitarian aid? HIV/AIDS is both a long-term crisis in its own right, and a contributory factor in acute emergencies. The epidemic presents key challenges for both humanitarian and development assistance, and for the interface between them. These challenges and the role of the humanitarian system in responding to them are the subject of a recent HPG report, *HIV/AIDS and Humanitarian Action*, HPG Report 16 (London: ODI, 2004). The full report, a resource guide on HIV/AIDS and emergencies and background papers are available from the ODI website at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/hiv.html.

The southern Africa crisis in 2002 and 2003 raised a series of practical questions around the programming of humanitarian aid in the context of an HIV/AIDS epidemic, ranging from whether and how food aid rations need to be adapted, to the question of whether AIDS-related stigma affects participation in relief programmes. These programmatic findings are summarised below:

- Early-warning systems and assessments need to incorporate analysis of HIV/AIDS and its impact on livelihoods.
- The emergence of new types and areas of vulnerability due to HIV/AIDS should be considered in assessment and targeting. Groups such as widows, the elderly and orphans may be particularly vulnerable, and urban and peri-urban areas may need to be assessed.
- The targeting and delivery of aid must be sensitive to the possibility of AIDS-related stigma and discrimination.
- The HIV/AIDS epidemic reinforces the existing need for humanitarian programmes to be gender-sensitive.
- Emergency interventions must aim to ensure that they do not increase people's susceptibility to infection with HIV/AIDS.
- Food aid in the context of HIV/AIDS should review ration sizes and types of food and assess delivery and distribution mechanisms in the light of HIV/AIDS-related vulnerabilities, such as illness, reduced labour and increased caring burdens.
- Labour-intensive public works programmes should consider the needs of labour-constrained households, the elderly and the chronically ill.
- HIV/AIDS reinforces the need for health issues to be considered as part of a humanitarian response.
- Support to agricultural production (including seed distributions) should recognise adaptations that people are making in response to HIV/AIDS.

The report also raises more fundamental questions about what the HIV/AIDS epidemic means for existing models of relief and development. Some of the key findings of the research in relation to these questions are summarised below:

- HIV/AIDS clearly has profound humanitarian consequences, both in terms of directly causing illness and death and in terms of the wider impact it is having on societies. These effects will inevitably deepen as the impact of the epidemic grows. Existing models of development and relief assistance are likely to prove inadequate to cope with the consequences of HIV/AIDS.
- Aid agencies should endeavour to analyse the complex ways in which HIV/AIDS is affecting people's livelihoods and the impacts of livelihood insecurity on HIV/AIDS.
- The response of development assistance actors may need to draw on expertise and experience available within the humanitarian system, and vice-versa.
- Greater resources need to be invested in prevention, care, treatment and mitigation. Urgent thought needs to be given to what this implies for public expenditure management systems within African countries, and how expanding access to treatment for HIV/AIDS can be part of expanding access to basic health care more broadly.
- HIV/AIDS reinforces the risk of periodic crisis, and may make crises more likely. This underlines the existing need for greater investment in disaster preparedness and mitigation.
- HIV/AIDS will increasingly add to the burden of chronic poverty and destitution in Africa. This highlights the need for greater investment in social protection and long-term welfare. Given the limited capacity and resources of many African governments, this implies a need for long-term commitment by donor governments.
- Aid agencies should endeavour to link humanitarian aid programming where possible to the development of local capacity for long-term welfare provision.

For a copy of the report and briefing paper, contact c.kern@odi.org.uk. The report and the briefing paper are available for download at the HPG website: www.odi.org.uk/hpg.

Beyond the damage: probing the economic and financial consequences of natural disasters

Charlotte Benson and Edward Clay, ODI

The reported global cost of 'natural' disasters rose 15-fold between the 1950s and the 1990s. During the 1990s, major catastrophes resulted in reported economic losses averaging an estimated \$66 billion per year (in 2002 prices). Record losses of some \$178bn were recorded in 1995, the year of the Kobe earthquake in Japan – equivalent to 0.7% of global GDP.¹ Numbers of people affected have also risen sharply, with a three-fold increase between the 1970s and 1990.

These alarming increases have triggered growing awareness of the potential human, structural and economic threats natural hazards pose. However, there is only a limited sense of their broad economy-wide or macroeconomic significance, or their implications for longer-term development. This is partly because impact assessments often concentrate on the most easily measured *direct* losses occurring as a consequence of a disaster. This largely reflects immediate concerns to meet the most visible short-term humanitarian needs of affected people, and to determine replacement investment requirements and insured losses. There has been much less focus on *indirect* and *secondary* impacts, such as on the demand for goods and services and livelihood opportunities.

These effects can also have significant humanitarian consequences, as well as implications for poverty reduction and other development objectives.

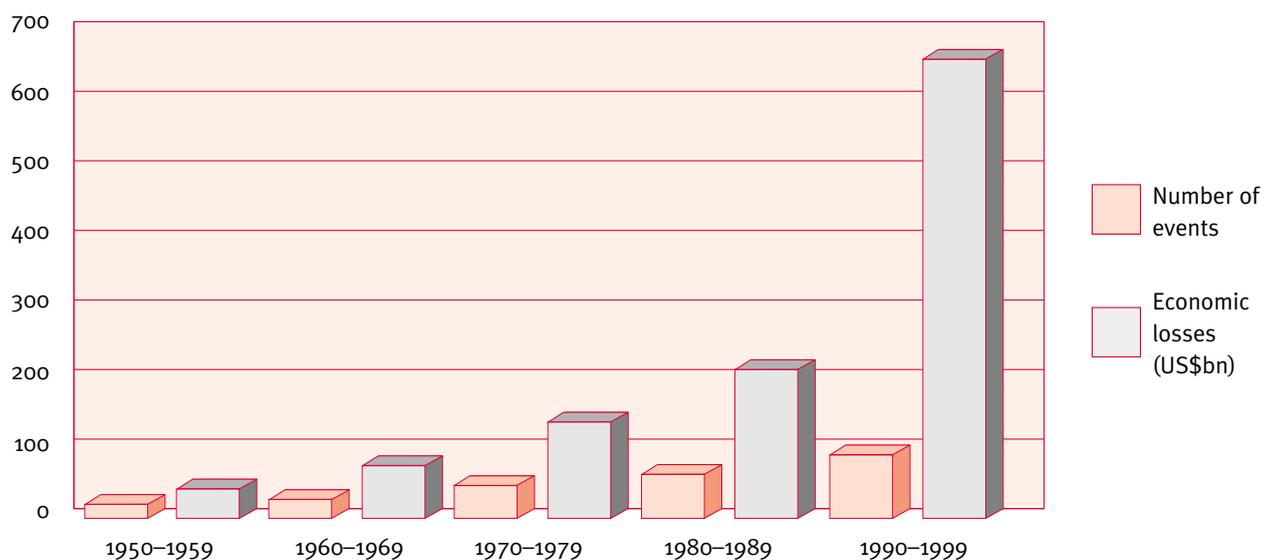
Issues of vulnerability

Underlying the impact of a disaster is the issue of vulnerability. There has been relatively little work on this from a national perspective, although there is a considerable body of work at a household level, particularly on drought in sub-Saharan Africa. Household-level research plays an important part in informing both risk reduction and post-disaster response efforts. National-level analysis should play a significant complementary role, placing vulnerability within a broader socio-economic, political and policy context, and capturing shifts over time more clearly.

Research at a national level shows that vulnerability to natural hazards is determined by a complex and dynamic set of influences, such as the economic structure of a country, its stage of development and prevailing economic conditions and policy. Vulnerability changes quickly, particularly in countries experiencing rapid growth, urbanisation and socio-economic change. Regular re-assessment of vulnerability is required to ensure that disaster management strategies, including the nature and form of post-disaster relief and rehabilitation, remain appropriate.

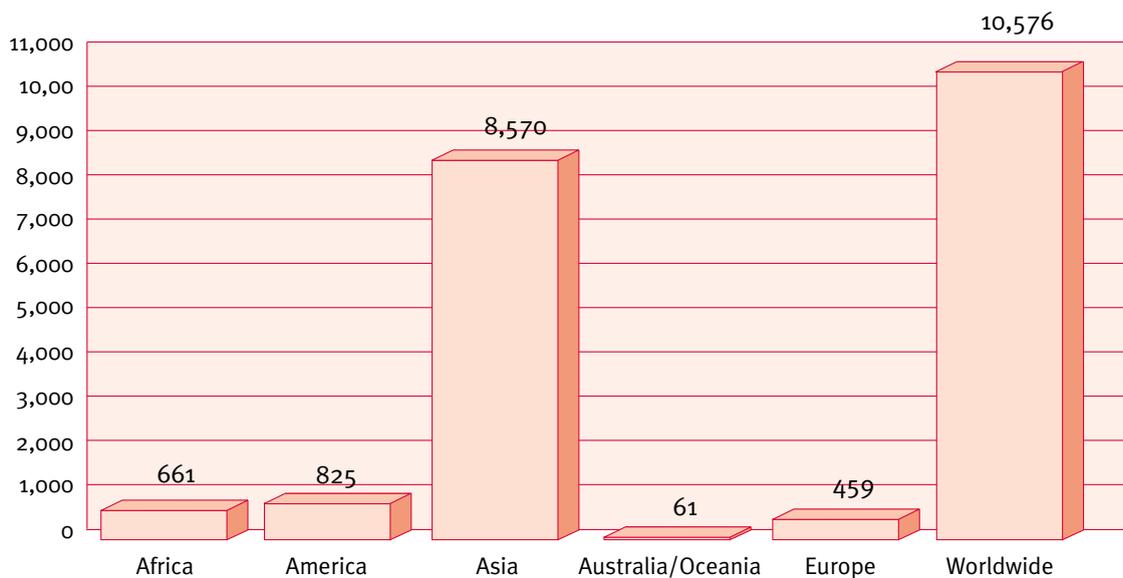
¹ Munich Re, *Topics Annual Review: Natural Catastrophes 2002* (Munich: Munich Reinsurance, 2002), www.munichre.com/pdf/topics.

Figure 1: Economic losses caused by natural disasters, 1950–2002



Source: Munich Re, *Topics Annual Review: Natural Catastrophes 2002* (Munich: Munich Reinsurance, 2002), www.munichre.com/pdf/topics.

Figure 2: Number of fatalities (2002)



Munich Re, *Topics Annual Review: Natural Catastrophes 2002* (Munich: Munich Reinsurance, 2002), www.munichre.com/pdf/topics.

Reduced vulnerability in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, vulnerability to cyclones and related coastal storm surges has been reduced through a combination of shelters, embankments that reduce impacts, enhanced early warning and evacuation planning.² Meanwhile, the economy's sensitivity to extreme monsoon flooding and drought has also declined. This is partly due to structural change in agriculture, with a rapid expansion of much lower-risk dry season irrigated rice, internal market integration and increased private food imports during disaster years. Despite extreme and long-lasting flooding in October and November 1998, cereal production was actually 5.6% higher year-on-year in 1998/99 (the government's pre-flood forecast was for 2.4% growth).³ Initial assessments of losses, which anticipated a 10-11% decline in output, underestimated the country's greatly enhanced capacity to increase dry season production when required.⁴

Changes in the composition of productive activity have been another factor in Bangladesh's increased resilience to flooding; export-oriented garment manufacturing has expanded, and to date has been relatively flood-proof. Other developments have included relative financial

2 IFRC, *World Disasters Report 2002* (Geneva: International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2002).

3 Government of Bangladesh, *Memorandum for Bangladesh Development Forum 2000-200* (Dhaka: Economic Relations Division, Ministry of Finance and Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning, 2000).

4 Quazi Shahabuddin, '1998 Floods, Post-flood Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme and Growth Performance', in R. Sobhan (ed.), *Trends in the Post-Flood Economy: A Review of Bangladesh's Development 1998-99* (Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue and University Press, 2000).

stability in recent years; the growth of micro credit, enabling the poor to better withstand disaster shocks; and labour migration. Remittance flows have increased post-disaster – for instance, rising by 18% following the 1998 floods – providing those affected with a new form of coping mechanism.

vulnerability to natural hazards is determined by a complex and dynamic set of influences

Increased vulnerability in Malawi

In contrast, Malawi's economy has become increasingly sensitive to climatic variability (drought, erratic rainfall, extremely high rainfall and related floods). This too reflects a complex of factors, including:

- non-sustainable agricultural practice;
- structural changes in agriculture, where a shift to smallholder production has not been accompanied by the establishing of a viable credit system, support in providing seeds and other inputs and a supportive marketing structure for smaller producers;
- institutional weaknesses in the agricultural sector;
- de-industrialisation, with the reintegration of South Africa into the regional economy;
- political instability and problems of governance;
- the short-term behaviour of aid donors, contributing to the volatility of public finances; and
- the effects of HIV/AIDS on human resources.

The unfavourable effects of high rainfall on maize and tobacco in 2001 were recognised only following the harvest. By then many costly decisions, notably the sale of grain reserves by a cash-strapped government, had been made on the basis of poor advice from the IMF and others. When the food crisis came, it was widely assumed to have been either caused or exacerbated by a drought in 2002. However, the supposed drought was not reflected in meteorological reports.

The implications for relief and post-disaster reconstruction

Changes such as those in Bangladesh and Malawi imply that a relief programme that was highly successful a decade ago may no longer be appropriate. Food aid requirements can alter. New pockets of vulnerable groups can emerge, not least amongst the urban poor. The nature of community support networks can shift. The appropriate balance of channels for providing aid can also change, reflecting relative strengths and capacities of government and civil society. Low-income countries are most vulnerable to disaster shocks, financially and economically, when there are severe and growing problems of governance and weak fiscal and monetary management.

Post-disaster reconstruction needs serious contingency thinking prior to a potential event, and its implementation needs to be orchestrated so that it exploits risk reduction possibilities in rebuilding a country. This is a particularly critical moment of opportunity. A disaster creates a significantly heightened awareness of the need for risk reduction, but this interest rapidly fades as communities and economic systems are re-established and other more immediate priorities reassert themselves in ministries of finance and aid agencies.

There is a clear related need for greater longitudinal analysis of the impact of particular disaster events in order to help facilitate better understanding of the factors determining vulnerability, and how these can change over time. National or economy-wide disaster impacts, including total financial losses, should be reassessed 12–18 months after an event, as the fuller economic consequences only become apparent over time. Later, say after five or ten years, there should be a review of the longer-term consequences, including investment in disaster mitigation. Such exercises should be complemented by studies exploring impacts on affected households and communities. How have they fared, on both met and unmet needs arising as a consequence of a disaster? How could they be supported, both in reducing vulnerability to future events and recovering as rapidly as possible from them?

Reallocation of public finance

Public finance is widely seen as obscure, unexciting and the domain of a few experts. Yet it is a critical dimension in understanding the wider impacts of disasters. Post-disaster sourcing of finance can have a significant influence on both the short and longer-term impacts of a shock.

disasters have little impact on trends in total aid flows to disaster-affected countries

The behaviour of broad fiscal aggregates, total annual expenditure and revenue and the budgetary deficit, suggest misleadingly that disasters have little discernible impact in many countries. (The notable exception is many low-income sub-Saharan countries with a weak revenue basis and high aid dependence.) However, more disaggregated investigation of current and capital expenditure by sectors and sources of revenue shows how disasters can create significant budgetary pressures. The apparent insensitivity of fiscal aggregates in many countries in fact reflects successful post-disaster efforts to remain within the overall budgetary envelope established before the disaster, leaving levels of expenditure and fiscal deficits unchanged. In other words, disasters often result in widespread, but largely non-transparent, *reallocations* of resources.

Reallocations are typically poorly documented and cannot be easily quantified. The available evidence suggests that the brunt of financial reallocations appears to fall primarily on capital expenditure and in the social sectors. This may have a severe impact on the poor, and often on those worst affected by disaster. Donor agencies providing humanitarian support post-disaster need to be aware that existing welfare and benefit schemes and other pro-poor programmes may have been eroded, indirectly intensifying impacts on the poorest segments of society. The post-disaster diversion of resources can hamper longer-term efforts to reduce poverty – and, ultimately, vulnerability – and to achieve sustainable development. Decisions on post-disaster reallocations of budgetary resources are typically made with no system in place to protect priority areas of expenditure.

The available statistics similarly suggest that disasters have little impact on trends in total aid flows to disaster-affected countries. It is widely believed that the international community responds to disasters by increasing its aid, particularly in the form of emergency relief and food aid. However, some donors appear to respond to disaster crises by reallocating resources within projects and from existing projects, and by bringing forward commitments under existing multi-year country programmes and budget envelopes. Reflecting these practices, total aid commitments typically increase in the year of, or immediately following, a major disaster. Reallocations can be an appropriate way of quickly responding, in the sense that they involve a lesser administrative burden than the negotiation of fresh aid commitments. However, reallocated resources are typically not subsequently made good, with new commitments instead falling back after the crisis to reflect longer-term trends in aid.

After a disaster, there is often a substantial gap between projected and actual aid disbursement, reflecting

management constraints – such as procedural difficulties, procurement delays and lack of local counterpart finance (problems that can also delay the disbursement of development aid). Rapid disbursement of food aid may be particularly important as even relatively short delays can prejudice post-disaster agricultural recovery and cause financial pressures.

Conclusion

A more complete assessment of the impact of disasters, exploring indirect and secondary effects as well as direct impacts, can contribute to ensuring that post-disaster response is effective and timely, enhancing the success of humanitarian response and reconstruction efforts. Analysis of the longer-term impacts of disasters and underlying determinants of vulnerability from an economic perspective helps to highlight a number of clear lessons for reducing hazard risk, and for making post-disaster assistance more appropriate.

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This article is based on Benson and Clay, *Understanding the Economic and Financial Impacts of Natural Disasters* (Washington DC: World Bank, 2004). The study was undertaken on behalf of the World Bank's Hazard Management Unit with the financial support of the UK Department for International Development's Conflict and Humanitarian Aid Department (CHAD). Financial and professional support from these two organisations is

gratefully acknowledged. The views expressed in this article and other outputs from the study listed below are those of the authors.

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Disaster risk reduction: mitigation and preparedness in aid programming

by John Twigg

Good Practice Review 9, March 2004

Natural disasters are widespread and numerous in developing and middle-income countries. They can cause great loss of life and immense damage to communities, infrastructure and national economies. Ethical, humanitarian considerations oblige us to act to protect human life and prevent suffering. Many researchers and aid institutions have identified natural disasters as a major threat to sustainable development.

This Good Practice Review aims to help project planners and managers to:

- appreciate the significance of hazards (primarily natural hazards) and the risks associated with them;
- appreciate the need for risk management in project planning and implementation, and the value of such efforts;
- recognise the main issues that must be understood and addressed when carrying out risk reduction or disaster mitigation and preparedness initiatives; and
- understand – at least in broad terms - how to address these issues in practice, throughout the project cycle.

Lasting protection against disasters will not be reached overnight. It is a long-term goal to be attained through a continuous process of improvement. Community resilience to hazards can be built up incrementally over time, as long as the basic approach is sound.

This Review is above all a practical document. However, it is not a manual. Its emphasis is on the process of planning and implementing risk reduction initiatives. It focuses on key issues and decision points and how to address them. Readers are referred to more detailed technical manuals and studies where appropriate. It has been difficult to present a balanced coverage of such a broad and diverse subject, and there are inevitable gaps. Nevertheless, the book is evidence-based. The descriptions and discussions are supported by case studies, which aim to give a sense of the range and diversity of practical approaches that can be used.

For a copy of this Good Practice Review, contact a.prescott@odi.org.uk. The review is available for download at the HPN website: www.odihpn.org/publistgprg.asp. It is also available on CD-ROM.

Some myths about faith-based humanitarian aid

Wilfred Mlay, World Vision International

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, many commentators have devoted attention to an apparent clash between the values of the West and those of Islam. The humanitarian sector has not escaped this debate. Unfortunately, the discussion is impoverished by persistent myths and an inappropriate focus on the values of the humanitarians, rather than on the value of those being assisted.

A familiar story is being repeated along the following lines: humanitarianism is a Western-driven, neo-colonial enterprise. In particular, the story goes, the threats to international aid workers and the assets of Western aid organisations in Afghanistan and Iraq are simply the manifestation of a growing clash between Islam and the West.

Samuel Huntington's well-known work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, supposedly exposes the causes of this confrontation, while David Rieff's book *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* pronounces the near-death of a humanitarianism allegedly beholden to Western governments and their interests. Even the UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, has mused privately that aid organisations in Afghanistan are 'too Western'.

many commentators have devoted attention to an apparent clash between the values of the West and those of Islam

This search to find cultural underpinnings for the travails of humanitarianism is remarkable in its neglect of any serious exploration of its religious aspects. Thin attempts to do this often create caricatures of religious humanitarianism, and thus perpetuate misunderstanding. Humanitarianism is best served not by a navel-gazing examination of the many values of its large cast, but by a dedication to greater accountability and transparency to those for whom faith-based humanitarian agencies claim to act. However, caricatures and generalisations lead to commonly-held assumptions about the role of faith in humanitarian assistance that are false and inhibit the effectiveness of the ensemble. Three prevalent myths about Christian humanitarian organisations are worth our attention.



©Janet Rice/World Vision

World Vision Afghanistan staff measure sugar as part of a nutrition programme

Myth no. 1: Christian humanitarian organisations embody the West's clash with Islam

Adherents of the 'culture clash' theory often make the uncharitable claim that today's Western aid organisations are simply last century's white European missionaries in new clothing. Furthermore, they contend that Christian humanitarians are particularly pernicious in carrying out a 'civilising mission' that unwittingly or deliberately promotes the values of the world's major Western powers. According to this theory, a web-page image of a Christian aid worker kneeling next to a burqa-clad Afghan woman is just a modern version of the lithograph of the pith-helmeted missionary standing next to a Masai warrior in battle dress. While such caricatures distort both past and present, they are hurled broadly at Western-based aid agencies, but particularly at Christian organisations.

Such conflation falsely presents Christianity as a 'Western' religion and Islam as an 'Eastern' religion. In fact, both faiths are global religions whose adherents live predominantly in developing countries of the South. Christianity, like Islam, began in the Middle East, and now has 1.1 billion followers in Latin America, Africa and Asia, compared with 800 million in North America and Europe. In demographic terms, the average Anglican is African, female, under the age of 30, a mother of three, walks four kilometres a day to fetch water, lives on less than \$1.50 a day, and is related to someone with HIV/AIDS.¹

¹ Rev. Canon Richard Marsh, Anglican Communion News Service, 9 February 2004, www.anglicancommunion.org.

To conflate Christianity with the West is delusion. As Philip Jenkins notes in his book *The Next Christendom*, Christianity has been in China about as long as it has been in England, and the Ethiopian church prospered for centuries before the first Anglo-Saxon was converted.

It is equally misleading to treat Islam as if it were synonymous with the Middle East or with speaking Arabic. More Muslims speak non-Arabic languages than Arabic. Indonesia accounts for more Muslims than any other single country. Throughout the West – in North America and Europe in particular – mosques are almost as easy to find as churches.

Just as Christianity and Islam are global, so are most of the large, international humanitarian organisations. Far from being Western enterprises, the composition of the staff and governance structures of many aid organisations reflects a true global diversity. This is a global diversity usually lacking from the boardrooms of the largest multinational corporations, and even the senior management level of UN agencies.

World Vision International is one example of this diversity. Its 24-strong board includes members from 19 different countries, with an equal balance from the North and South. Of the organisation's 49 member offices, 27 are full-fledged indigenous entities with staff and governing boards composed almost entirely of nationals. Another 22 are guided by indigenous advisory councils that are expected to become self-governing. Most of the agency's staff embrace one of three Christian expressions: Catholicism, Protestantism or Eastern Orthodoxy. However, despite the organisation's Christian character, many non-Christians seek employment and are employed by World Vision in countries where Christians are a minority. In the Middle East and Asia, many staff members are Muslim. In South-east Asia, many are Buddhist.

What is true for its staff and organisation is also true for World Vision's private donors. In the West, Christians

provide the majority of private contributions to World Vision's relief and development work. But World Vision also raises substantial funds in developing countries, some of which have very modest Christian populations. For example, in Taiwan, Japan, Thailand and elsewhere, the overwhelming majority of contributors to World Vision are non-Christians. World Vision's appeal to assist those afflicted by poverty, HIV/AIDS or disaster presumably touches their compassion and common humanity, not their religious affiliation.

World Vision is not unique among Christian NGOs. Other Christian humanitarian organisations are equally diverse in staffing, governance and funding sources. Such global diversity suggests that the blanket charge against them of Western cultural imperialism is mislaid.

the blanket charge of 'Western cultural imperialism' is mislaid

Myth no. 2: Religious approaches create conflicts, rather than solve them

The argument here is three-fold:

- a) Religions define themselves by competing truth-claims.
- b) This competition inevitably provokes violent conflicts for which religion is inescapably culpable (the Balkans, the Horn of Africa, South Asia and so on).
- c) Therefore, religious organisations or persons have nothing to offer societies wracked by religious conflicts, even when those societies are in need of humanitarian assistance.

R. Scott Appleby's *Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* explodes this myth. Appleby does not shy away from examining 'religion's violent accomplices', namely religious zealots who invoke faith to justify violent acts. But he distinguishes between militants for violence and 'militants for peace', namely religious zealots who sacrifice their lives for reconciliation, for the poor, or for the common good. Positive examples of 'zealots for peace' include the Buddhist Dhammayietra in Cambodia, the Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio in Mozambique and the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone. Appleby notes two things about such groups: 1) explicitly religious approaches to humanitarianism succeeded in the midst of religiously 'loaded' conflicts; and 2) religious approaches succeeded where non-religious ones had failed.



A World Vision Program Officer and a young Iranian in the village of Nartij, Iran, after the earthquake in late 2003

©Janet Rice/World Vision

The character of religious organisations often opens up conversations that are not available to secular humanitarian organisations. An NGO case study by the Conflict Transformation Working Group in 2002 demonstrated that religious leaders are often viewed within a conflict as non-partisan actors. Thus, they are able to mobilise large constituencies in peace-building efforts. All major conflicts have a complex, multifaceted political economy that goes far beyond any single issue, such as faith; but, in conflicts that are openly defined by religious differences, having an ear for religion is preferable to being religiously tone deaf.

For example, in Indonesia, World Vision has been able to work effectively with Muslim communities, including in areas suffering ongoing Muslim–Christian violence. In the North Maluku region of Indonesia, World Vision recruited Muslim and Christian staff members, then paired them together to work in communities divided along religious lines. The strategy helped to build bridges between Muslims and Christians.

examples abound of secular and faith-based agencies using aid to advance their cause

In 1999, in Mitrovica, the Kosovo city bitterly divided ethnically (between Albanians and Serbs) and religiously (between Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic), World Vision facilitated the formation of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Community Council on Peace and Tolerance. The Council, which drew together representatives of five ethnic groups and three faiths, established a dialogue that reduced violence, eased tensions and created community-building initiatives. Council participants said that the faith-based nature of World Vision was important in establishing trust and mutual respect.

Myth no. 3: Faith-based organisations cannot carry out neutral or impartial humanitarian assistance because their real intent, whether overt or covert, is religious conversion

Several codes of conduct govern the humanitarian sector. These normative principles, which cover the provision of humanitarian assistance, are the result of wide inter-agency consultation, predominantly, though not exclusively, among Western humanitarian organisations.

Almost all of these codes of conduct explicitly eliminate religious ‘transactions’ from the humanitarian equation. Most importantly, they establish that human need alone should determine humanitarian assistance. Moreover, they stipulate that recipients should evaluate the effectiveness of that assistance.

Two principles in the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-*

Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief speak clearly to the question of religious humanitarianism:

Principle 2: Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind.

Principle 3: Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint.

While Principle 3 explicitly prohibits ‘the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to the embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed’, it adds an important nuance. It emphasises that humanitarian NGOs can espouse ‘particular political or religious opinions’ and still adhere to the letter and spirit of the Code.

It is important to distinguish between the erroneous belief that being motivated by faith to assist people fundamentally undermines principles of impartiality and neutrality, and the real examples of the partial delivery of assistance that have led to the development of these codified principles. Any organisation, whether overtly faith-based or firmly rooted in secular humanism, is capable of taking advantage of its position of power to promote an organisational agenda. Similarly, individuals within organisations may do the same to promote an individual agenda. Examples abound of secular and faith-based agencies, or members of agencies, that have used aid to advance their cause, have directed aid to those of their own creed, or have delivered aid only to the side of the conflict that adheres to the same political ideology as they do, at the expense of others. This is precisely what gave rise to initiatives such as the Code of Conduct, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International and the Sphere standards. These self-regulation efforts add to the legitimacy of humanitarian action and provide a gauge by which to measure specific actions, and avoid generalised stereotypes. Not only do World Vision and many other faith-based organisations adhere to these codes, but they belong to the organisations that safeguard them; World Vision helps to fund the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, and is represented on its board of directors.

Jesus articulated the humanitarian imperative codified in the ICRC/NGO Code. He taught that the most important task in doing God’s will is to respond to people’s needs as if every person is God:

for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25:35-36)

Far from being at odds with humanitarianism, this spiritual vision common to many faiths establishes the principle that ‘aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone’. Faith-based organisations marry their

spiritual vision to the neutral and impartial humanitarian imperative when they heed their own religious texts. Loving one's neighbour is a Jewish and Christian commandment. Assisting the poor is one of the five pillars of Islam. It is a sacred task for Buddhism and a holy injunction for other religions. Humanitarianism is a task that unites religions, rather than divides them.

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