

# **SAVING LIVES OR SAVING SOCIETIES? REALITIES OF RELIEF AND RECONSTRUCTION**

door prof.dr.ir. Dorothea Hilhorst



**WAGENINGEN UNIVERSITEIT**

**WAGENINGEN UR**

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## **Saving lives or saving societies? Realities of relief and reconstruction**

Many people that are coping to survive in war and disasters not only have each other to lean on, but find additional relief in the protection, food and basic care provided by international aid. Once the emergency is over, more aid comes in yet moves away from individual people towards the major project of rebuilding society. The desire to assist people in need is as old as humanity. Babies have the in-born empathic capacity of sensing other people's pains and every culture and religion has produced arrangements to protect the most vulnerable inside their community, to regulate violence and to contain war.<sup>1</sup> The universal articulation of this desire in International Humanitarian Law and its manifestation in global aid mechanisms is relatively new. Relief and reconstruction find their modern pedigree in events that continue to symbolize their practice.

Modern humanitarian aid is set into motion by Henry Dunant, who after witnessing the unnecessary suffering at the battlefields of Solferino in 1859, initiated the Geneva Conventions and established the International Committee of the Red Cross. The basic principle of humanity is phrased by the Red Cross as "the desire to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found". The catchwords of the principle are in the words "wherever it may be found". Every social constellation has safety nets for its own needy, excluding others, yet here humanity is perceived as a universal whole, without distinguishing between 'uses' and 'thems'. Humanitarian aid is meant to be purely needs-based: decisions to help must not be driven by political motives or by discrimination of any kind.

Modern reconstruction finds its forebear in the ambitious Marshall Plan following the Second World War. The Marshall Plan was part of an integrated programme for political reconstruction of Germany, the restoration of justice (through the Nuremberg Trials) and the economic recovery of Europe. The 16 states involved in the Plan together received 11,8 Billion US\$, which today would equal around 100 Billion US\$ plus additional loans. The Marshall Plan was a major success, being credited with a one third jump in European Gross National Product in 3 years and laying the foundation of the European Union.<sup>2</sup>

Acts of assistance are never purely altruistic and we have to qualify the definitions of aid with their political sub-texts. The Marshall Plan was not only meant to help war-torn Europe, but explicitly designed to enhance security in Europe, contain the spread of communism and create a viable economic counterpart to boost the American economy. Today's reconstruction efforts are not dissimilar, and reconstruction assistance finds an important motivation in deterring security threats of the assisting parties, more openly so since the start of the Global War on Terror in 2001. Humanitarian aid is also tainted by politics, which is amongst others visible from its skewed allocation, with only a fraction of funds going to large but neglected crises like in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the uneven international preparedness to protect people against violence and hunger as demonstrated by the deplorable situation of the Palestinian people that suffer immensely from the international boycott against Hamas.

Perceptions and response mechanisms of today's humanitarian aid and reconstruction continue to draw on their predecessors. Humanitarian policy aims to save lives, alle-

viate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of war and disasters à la Henri Dunant. Reconstruction policy is designed in the integrated and comprehensive Marshall tradition. It is guided by the concept of human security, that after the long period of the Cold War, became the new expression of the UN founding missions of achieving 'freedom from want' as much as 'freedom from fear'.<sup>3</sup> Reconstruction is defined as an integrated process designed to reactivate development, and at the same time create a peaceful environment.<sup>4</sup>

The realities of humanitarian aid and reconstruction, on the other hand, have travelled quite away from these two models and have become highly diverse in terms of the actors involved and the scenes in which they take place. The core of my chair is to study the multiple realities of aid in humanitarian emergencies and reconstruction.

Assistance in reconstruction and humanitarian aid are both criticized for their inability to adjust to local realities of emergency and post-emergency. This can be attributed to the organisation of aid and its built-in premises of what happens with societies during and after conflict. This is the twin logic that constructs crisis as a temporary and total disruption of society and reconstruction as restoring the normality of a neo-liberal modern state that democratically interacts with other constituent powers in society. A focus on multiple realities can deconstruct this logic and point out the continuities between crisis and normality. This has partly been recognised in the recent attention for continuity in the use of violence and other threats to human security during periods of reconstruction. However, there is an other side to continuity which remains largely unnoticed. This is the

continuity of the economies of survival, the remaining safety nets and sources of service delivery and the practices of local peace brokers that protect societies from total breakdown during crises and drive reconstruction processes when the room for manoeuvre opens up after crisis. Although the two sides of continuity are intertwined, they tend to be divorced in different bodies of policy and practice of humanitarian aid, the so-called classic relief and developmental relief. This distinction led to challenging debates in the 1990s, but this was unfortunately silenced after the start of the Global War on Terror in 1991. I will elaborate how ensuing events have encouraged the aid system to stick to its old logics and organization, and argue that it is time to re-open this debate and explore how a focus on local practices can help to resolve the disconnect between emergency response and reconstruction. Because the foundations of relief and reconstruction are in war situations, these are given more attention, but when speaking of crisis I mean all humanitarian emergencies, including natural disasters.

### **(Dis)ordering processes of crisis and normality**

Emergency and reconstruction are sometimes clear-cut situations, but more often they are labels that are socially constructed. The declaration of a state of emergency can often be interpreted as an act of securitization providing a rationale for the militarization of governance and the suppression of democratic rights. Declaring the end of emergency and start of reconstruction can be equally controversial, as we witness in international debate over the question whether Iraq is in a process of reconstruction or in a state of war. In the Netherlands, the symbolic meaning of reconstruction played a decisive role in the political crisis over the decision to send a peacekeeping force to Uruzgan in Afghanistan.

The government barely survived by assuring Parliament that the troops would enhance reconstruction, rather than fighting the continued presence of the Taliban. This dominated political debate to the extent that members of parliament were bickering over the question if sewing clubs and other small projects organised by the peacekeepers could indeed pass the test for reconstruction or not.

Empirically, the distinction between emergency and post-emergency or as we call it the distinction between crisis and normality is hard to draw. Violent conflict has an enormous and traumatizing impact on societies, and people know the difference between war and peace very well. They resent researchers who sanitize their situation and euphemistically speak of conflict, food insecurity and gender-based violence when they really mean war, hunger and rape. But acknowledging the suffering of war does not make the distinction between war and peace easier to draw. A peace agreement is an international marker of peace and sets into motion a reconstruction response. Yet, conflict does not operate according to a single logic, and its drivers, interests and practices are redefined by actors creating their localised and largely unintended conflict dynamics of varying intensity.<sup>5</sup> Crises are the outcome of conditions that build up over long periods of time and the transition to normality is also often marked by long periods of "no war no peace" situations. Violence and predatory behaviour may continue long after war is formally over.<sup>6</sup>

In my view, the transition from normality to crisis and back entail new ways of ordering and disordering of spaces, power, regulation and interaction. Conflicts and disasters are breakpoints of social order, with a considerable degree of

chaos and disruption, but they are also marked by processes of continuity and re-ordering, or the creation of new institutions and linkages. Much has been written, for example, about economies of war: the systems where the production, mobilization and allocation of resources are organized to sustain the violence.<sup>7</sup> These economies are intricately linked to global networks of drugs, arms and human trafficking, until they surface in the normality of currency transactions. Although fully unfolding in war, these economies are the continuation of informal practices of globalized economies where violence regulates people's livelihoods without escalating into full war.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, we should not forget nor underestimate that there is a flip-side of war economies in the continuation of the normality of economies of production, transactions and distributions that we may call the economies of survival during crises.<sup>9</sup> Although economies may largely collapse during war, people hold on to normality as much as they can and continue planting their fields and trading their products. The father who leaves his family in the safety of the refugee camp to cross back into the dangers of the war zone and harvest the remains of their fields is as much a face of war as the diamond smuggler or the mercenary. People in protracted crises want to make more out of their life than mere survival. I met families in South Sudan that walked for weeks to register in one of the refugee camps, not to find protection against violence but to give their children a chance to go to school. The two types of economies are deeply intertwined, and most activities are multi-faceted.<sup>10</sup> The woman who brews beer for soldiers or barter products with rebels to make ends meet also contributes to alcohol-related insecurity and the maintenance of violence. Trucking

companies supplying communities with food aid but taking a profit on the side by selling some of the relief-goods are a normal feature of crisis. Nonetheless, it would be a gross mistake to dismiss all economic activity during conflict as part of the war economy, and disrespect the creativity and perseverance people display to organize their own, their kin's and their neighbour's survival. Most theoretical perspectives have an exclusive focus on the logics of violence, survival or conflict resolution. By studying everyday practices, it becomes apparent how these logics are renegotiated in their local context and how they work upon each other.

A similar argument can be made about social institutions of governance, security, justice and service delivery. Informal safety nets continue to be operative to some extent. Where national governments have collapsed or are party in the conflict, line ministries in many cases nonetheless continue to be responsive to people's needs, even though their services have become severely restricted. This can also be the case with parallel structures of rebel movements and even violent movements like Hamas nonetheless maintain service provisions for their followers which sheds a different light on their popular base and embeddedness in society. In every conflict there are forces working to contain violence and forge peace. These are localized and informal activities that often draw on the social ties between people and perpetrators of violence to negotiate the release of prisoners or achieve a local cease-fire, yet sometimes grow into country-wide movements like the Liberia Women's Initiative, that advocated peace since the beginning of the war until it turned into a country-wide movement enhancing women's roles in the post-war politics.<sup>11</sup> The everyday realities of war are not all-encompassing, and foregrounding war "risks disabling pre-



cisely the strategies and tools of social organization, culture and politics through which violence can be reduced and its adverse effects mitigated".<sup>12</sup>

I conceive of aid as an integrated part of these everyday realities of crisis and post-crisis situations. Although aid volumes usually make up a very minor part of the resource flows in societies, in the locales of implementation, aid can strongly affect local power relations and (re)ordering processes. In line with the actor-oriented theory of Norman Long, I view aid interventions not as the chain of implementation of pre-defined plans but the negotiated product of a series of interfaces between different social fields.<sup>13</sup> As programmes gain meaning throughout formulation and implementation processes, they increasingly become part of local realities in many intended and unintended ways.

Aid agencies are part of the field of actors that together constitute the realities of crisis and survival, and the motives and attitudes of agencies deserve the same attention as the life-worlds of local actors. Agency staff are local actors that play multiple roles in their society and bring broader politics to their work, as was most painfully demonstrated when development agencies turned out to be one of the vehicles used to organize the Rwandan genocide.<sup>14</sup> But also their role as service provider can be problematic. The relation between service providers and receivers is unequal, and can easily foster an attitude whereby the service providers think for their clients and tend to perceive of their own significance as higher than their recipients give them credit for. When programmes fail, they first tend to blame this on the attitude of their clients.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, (self) criticism through ritualized evaluations usually leads to a list of issues to improve that require

continued and more intervention.<sup>16</sup> Institutional interests to survive and expand always play a role in organizational strategies, and politics often hide behind more legitimate considerations.<sup>17</sup> Agencies that write appeals on behalf of people in need, can have a second or perhaps first motivation in seeking their own survival.

It is important to stretch the analyses of aid beyond single programmes, and study the effect of the *ensemble* of aid establishments and interventions.<sup>18</sup> We are used to conceive of the make-up of society as the relations between state, civil society, private sector and popular participation. The international aid establishments are left out of the equation, even though they have a strong and rather permanent presence in many places. It is hard to tell how the negotiations over power and social contracts would evolve without international actors playing an intermediary or engineering role. The presence of aid effects the economy, it makes rents and market prices shoot up and the skewed salary structures of the parallel systems create social unrest and an artificial middle class. In Afghanistan a local employee of the UN or an INGO would earn up to 400 times more than his counterpart working in the government.<sup>19</sup> This is not just a political economic problem. People who earn more convince themselves they are worth more and start to feel superior. The people they work with resent this, and never really trust the Lords of Poverty.<sup>20</sup> The result is a mutual sense of disrespect and it is important to take into account how this creeps into the interactions between aid workers and their environment.

Everyday practices are our starting point to study the continuity and discontinuity in crisis and post-crisis and to unravel

the multiple realities of institutions and actors including aid establishments and interventions in the dynamics of violence, survival and conflict resolution. This approach allows us to document these dynamics, explain their contradictions and bring the different stories of local actors' perceptions, interests and concerns to the surface. Based on the study of everyday practice, we examine the multiple uses of policy notions and their discursive working in shaping reality and critically review the theoretical concepts that inform policy. For example, studying a resettlement programme that aimed to ease the tension between the Hutu and Tutsi population after the Rwanda genocide, we found that people locally perceived of the programme as just another imposition of a government that was urban-biased and failed to respect ordinary people. They found this more disturbing than their inter-ethnic community relations. Analyzing these different interpretations provided an important key to understand the dynamics of the programme and helped to reformulate ethnic relations in Rwanda in the context of urban-rural relations and patterns of governance.<sup>21</sup> Studying everyday practice leads to developing new concepts and classifications that are empirically grounded and provide an interpretive frame for understanding the realities of humanitarian aid and reconstruction.

### **Reconstruction**

In a country going through transition after conflict, reconstruction finds its pace and shape. It is a fluid process, where social relations and the meaning of institutions are renegotiated while people carefully probe their room for manoeuvre waiting if the conditions of relative peace will hold. When I was in Angola 6 months after the war, people seemed to just be waiting to find out what would happen to them. 4 years

later, I could almost taste reconstruction in the air. People clearly believed peace had settled in and despite the overwhelming poverty, had started taking new initiatives, accessing new markets and services, and were busy discussing how they wanted their communities to look like. Every place has its own story of reconstruction. It follows from the pre-conflict situation and what the conflict has done, and gets shaped within the confines of what the security situation allows and what opportunities open up. It is a process driven by social actors: people, government employees, organizations and businesses, re-establishing relations and reconfiguring hierarchies. Above all, recovery is a process that happens. Societies reconstruct, they are not being reconstructed, even though most writings make us believe that reconstruction is a project to completely renew and fix a country, like the Marshall Plan planned and driven by external aid.

Reconstruction programmes have been part of the current international system since its inception after the second World War, for decades mainly couched in the frames of decolonization and cold war politics. Integrated approaches towards reconstruction like the Marshall Plan were revived after the fall of the Berlin wall, when the world thought it was ready for peace. The decade that followed was a major disillusion when many more conflicts erupted, which created an image of the world as getting increasingly insecure. What has received much less attention is that many more conflicts have ended than begun: more than 100 between 1989 and 2003. Even though around 30% of these have resumed within 5 years, this has still brought the total number of conflicts down considerably<sup>22</sup> and has created a vast demand for reconstruction.

Reconstruction programmes often refer back to the Marshall Plan, yet there are a number of important differences.<sup>23</sup> The Marshall Plan targeted relatively well-established and wealthy democracies with a clear order to return to. Many countries presently under reconstruction come from a period of fragile states and fragile economies, where the pre-conflict state is a major cause of conflict or is long forgotten. The financial commitment to the Marshall Plan was very large, whereas today despite the rhetoric on the importance of reconstruction for global security, commitments are much lower than pledged, and take long to materialise. The risk is real that by the time reconstruction can start in full swing the international attention has already shifted to the next big job. Unlike the Marshall Plan, that was led by the US, external reconstruction interventions now are multi-donor efforts, with a large role for the international financial institutions. This complicates coordination, as many actors formulate their own plan for the country. Coordination should ideally be forged by the new local authorities, but in practice donors and other interveners are reluctant to hand over control.

Reconstruction in the 1990s was evaluated as being too much geared towards the quick introduction of formal democracy through elections.<sup>24</sup> Reconstruction strategies have now shifted to a more balanced institutional approach aiming to simultaneously advance recovery in governance and participation; security; justice and reconciliation and socio-economic development. This can lead to dilemmas especially when contradictions occur between the domains. This is for example the case in the trade off between peace and justice. In most people's worldview, peace, justice and human rights belong together. In reality, there are tensions between them and the international community may pri-

oritise stability over justice and human rights. One explanation of the late response to atrocities in Darfur was that the international community did not want to address the human rights abuses in order not to jeopardize the peace process in South Sudan. Realising integrated reconstruction is not easy, especially when peace is not the beginning but meant to be the outcome of the reconstruction process, like in Afghanistan. It requires good linkages between diplomatic, development and military endeavours, which is hampered by the fact that the aid world is organised around the axes of relief and development, with reconstruction falling in between. The modern development instruments, such as balance of payment support that are designed for stable environments and properly working governments are not suitable for reconstruction while relief does not tally with the wish to build institutions.

Although reconstruction processes take place in many different contexts and situations<sup>25</sup>, Sultan Barakat concluded after comparative research that there is a recurrent pattern in reconstruction processes of using too short a time horizon, of reducing reconstruction to a technical fix instead of a process of reshuffling state-society relations and power, and of leaving local people out of the equation.<sup>26</sup> Reconstruction processes, are too oriented to national level reconstruction. This bears the risk of overlooking threats to people's security and the spoilers of reconstruction. Framing the problem in Afghanistan as a conflict against the Taliban, may for example overlook the localised dynamics of complex ethnic rivalry compounded by competition over land.<sup>27</sup> Localised security needs can also be different. Whereas national security may dictate a need for army reform, local women may prioritize

the development of a reliable police force, or the restoration of a credible court to settle disputes over property.

Focusing on national reconstruction also bears the risk of overlooking and ignoring self-generated processes of reconstruction. An example may illustrate this point. In Afghanistan, the government insisted in 2003 that aid flows were channelled through their offices, instead of through the dominant presence of more than 2000 NGOs in the country. This claim seemed legitimate. One of the dilemmas of reconstruction is the pacing of institution building in relation to service delivery. Humanitarian needs continue for a long time, often increasing when refugees return, and a quick and visible improvement in service delivery is needed to create confidence in the peace process. However, when service delivery is done by INGOs, this may undermine the legitimacy of the state, and hinder its development because people prefer working for better paying NGOs.<sup>28</sup> The problem in Afghanistan was framed in such a way that it made reconstruction a choice between two new strategies, the newly developed government versus the influx of international NGOs. There was no room to acknowledge processes of reconstruction that were a continuation of service delivery under the Taliban regime by a number of local and international NGOs. As a result, these programmes increasingly came under financial pressure, and more importantly the valuable experiences accumulated over the years were not used as a springboard for reconstruction.

A major reconstruction blunder along this line was the complete dismantling in 2003 of the Iraqis' army and the removal of all Ba'aht Party members from their offices, destroying in one strike the entire health and education sec-

tors where employees had compulsory Party membership.<sup>29</sup> This was a major factor in the uncontrollable war that followed, where now 50.000 people have been killed, up to 600.000 more died as a result of the war, 3,5 million people are displaced while one third of the population suffers from food insecurity.<sup>30</sup>

Overlooking localised reconstruction dynamics leads to the ignorance of those forces that created peace in the first place. The majority of conflicts that have ended in the past decade did so through negotiated settlement, not through victory, yet in many cases the groups that forged peace feel excluded from reconstruction processes. It also leads to the underestimation of resources and energies for reconstruction. It is only now that a trend starts to emerge to develop localised reconstruction programmes.<sup>31</sup> This lack of attention for spontaneous reconstruction processes is partly related, in my mind, to the underlying mindset that assumes that societies stop functioning during crisis or become totally emerged in the logic of conflict. It is important therefore to start the analysis of reconstruction with the dynamics of responding to crisis. That takes me to the discussion of humanitarian aid.

### **Humanitarian aid.**

The icon of humanitarian aid, Henri Dunant's International Committee of the Red Cross with its principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, was set up to provide medical care on the battlefields of Europe. The considerable humanitarian budgets of today are spent in a large variety of conditions: sudden onset natural disasters like the Tsunami and chronic food crises, such as the food aid that yearly eases the seasonal hunger gap of more than 5 million Ethiopians. It concerns sudden and massive refugee flows like the one



following the Rwandan genocide, as well as the care and maintenance of refugee camps that have existed for the past 20 years. It is directed to protracted wars that have fallen in a rhythm of varying intensity throughout the seasons and areas as was the case in South Sudan, as well as to intense outbursts of violence where aid workers perform hit and run operations at great personal risk. Humanitarian budgets are also spent in post-conflict contexts to cater to ongoing humanitarian needs, deal with returning refugees and set out the first steps towards reconstruction. Despite the diversification of aid, humanitarian debate and strategies do not differentiate much between these situations, although they set very different parameters to the provision of aid. The aid-architecture has remained largely the same, and funding cycles continue to be organised around short-cycle temporary measures, and a strict administrative separation of relief and development. An exception are situations of chronic food insecurity, where we increasingly see new forms of programming that operate outside and across the boxes of relief and development throughout drought cycles.

The vast majority of official humanitarian budgets are delegated to UN organizations like UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Programme. A significant share is spent by international NGOs. Among the thousands of INGOs, a few hundred have regular large-scale operations. Only few are purely humanitarian, the majority has additional mandates and a pedigree in faith-based charity or rights-based development. It is estimated that up to 90% of funds available for NGOs is spent by only a dozen titan NGO confederations or families, such as the Red Cross movement (actually not an NGO), World Vision, Care, Oxfam and MSF.<sup>32</sup> This UN/ RedCross/ INGO whole forms the most

visible part of the humanitarian spectrum, and the almost exclusive focal point of attention of policy and debate on humanitarian aid.

The spectrum is however much larger, and the picture more complicated. The survival, protection and relief of affected people rest in the first place in local hands. People help each other and find protection with local institutions and social networks. Diaspora initiatives, private funding and private initiatives from what I call the Non-Governmental Individuals make up an abundance of additional programmes, and so do non-registered humanitarian aid flows from other donors, including Islamic countries and China. In addition, it is good to remember that the Western branding of humanitarian aid does not mean aid is given by people from the West. The more typical picture is a large staff of local people and a handful of expatriates, increasingly from non-Western countries, except that the decision making power, financial control, coordination and representations usually rests with these expatriates.

Humanitarian aid has been strongly criticised since the 1980s, starting with Barbara Harrell-Bond showing how the refugee regime makes people dependent and how part of this can be explained by the built-in anti-participatory ideology of the aid givers.<sup>33</sup> This was soon followed by a seminal book of Alex de Waal on the negative side-effects of food aid, including the undermining the local markets and its use to fuel conflict.<sup>34</sup> This kind of publications led to intense debate about the question how aid could avoid doing harm.<sup>35</sup> Do no harm, however, has been understood in two ways that each imply an opposite solution. Do no harm can in the first place refer to avoiding the political abuse of aid,

as exemplified by the famous case of Riek Machar in South Sudan who deliberately kept a camp of underfed children to force agencies to provide his rebel forces with food.<sup>36</sup> The 1990s gave light to a number of influential studies focusing on the many large and small-scale ways in which aid can fuel economies of violence.<sup>37</sup> The answer to this kind of harm is to minimize the impact of aid on society and restrict to strictly neutral service delivery, more or less according to the classic relief model of Henri Dunant.

Do no harm can also refer to the tendency of aid to violate local structures and undermine local economic systems. There is an other body of research that confirms that when relief is given without recognizing people's own capacities, it can undermine and weaken them, leaving those whom it is intended to help worse off than they were before.<sup>38</sup> It is not just eroding *people's* capacity, symbolized by the unnoticed doctors among refugee populations or the lazy and cheating beneficiary, but also undermining society. This means that aid may actually undermine the social networks that provide people with safety nets, civil society, local business, markets and financial institutions, the public sector, and those local norms that institutionalize how people regulate conflict and protect and assist each other. Of course, this social fabric may be heavily eroded by conflict and (to a far lesser extent) disaster, but this can be worsened by aid that is insensitive to local realities.<sup>39</sup> The answer to this type of harm is to maximize the engagement of aid with society and build more on existing institutions, the protection of social and economic systems and the linkage between relief and development processes. This type of aid can be labelled developmental relief.

The two types of aid: classic relief and developmental relief, correspond to the different faces of war that I have just described. The classic minimalist aid emphasizes the disruptive characteristics of crisis and tends to assume that local institutions have ceased to exist or have been absorbed in the economy of violence. Although aid in this tradition is motivated by the desire to relieve suffering and based on the ethics of a shared humanity, in practice it is basically delivered on the basis of mistrust of the society in which it operates and the providers of aid must be kept under close surveillance. The developmental conception of aid focuses more on the image of continuity and on institutions that are geared towards the protection of people and the realization of peace. Aid is delivered on the basis of trust: entrusting people with the capacity to participate and encouraging service providers to creatively engage with local communities.

### **Practices of developmental and classic relief**

In the course of the years, diverse bodies of humanitarian practice have evolved around these two types of aid. They are often considered to correspond with the mandate of agencies, with ICRC and MSF representing the more classic relief agencies. However, in practice contrasting approaches may be found among representatives of INGO families, and even within organisations where development divisions advocate a different approach to their humanitarian counterparts. One of the markers of difference between the two approaches is the question whether agencies implement programmes directly, or work through implementing partners. This is in fact misleading, because of the different meanings that can be attached to partnership. Many agencies work with partners in an instrumental way, because the situation is too dangerous for international agencies like in Iraq or in

Somalia, or because of cost-efficiency when part of service delivery is sub-contracted to local agencies, without adjusting the objectives of the relief operation.<sup>40</sup> Developmental relief has a preference for working through local partners, but is much broader in aiming to overcome the artificial distinction between relief and development aid, in aiming to protect livelihoods instead of only saving lives, and in aiming to safeguard and strengthen local capacities.

The distinction between the two types of relief is difficult to draw, because most agencies have adopted the language of rights-based, partnered, participatory and accountable aid that is associated with developmental relief. The differences only become apparent in practice, as I may illustrate with experiences in Sri Lanka, where I accompanied a local humanitarian advocacy programme for the past two years.<sup>41</sup> Most agencies in the Tsunami response emphasized their rights-based approach. However, local staff observed that the rights-based approach of agencies was dividing people and communities. Tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka were educated about their rights and people's aid satisfaction was monitored.<sup>42</sup> It turned out that these initiatives defined people as clients of service providers, with consumer rights, instead of addressing them as citizens, with citizen rights. I came to see the distinction as crucial: making the difference of individualizing and atomising aid, or embedding aid in local social structures, and making people responsible and in charge of their own disaster. People were not encouraged to act like citizens with entitlements as well as moral obligations to play a role in the protection of more vulnerable people and the reconstruction of the community. Equipped with the language of consumer rights people simply demanded more aid and social conflicts over aid kept erupting. The rights-

based approaches that were framed in a relation of service provider and clients, did not contribute to development aid in practice. Examples of a contrasting approach were rare, and included for instance a programme of a fisher association that voluntarily committed to use part of the generated aid to establish a community solidarity fund.<sup>43</sup>

### **Two complementary approaches?**

Classic and more developmental relief each have their own advantages and each bear particular risks. Developmental relief is geared towards the reduction of vulnerabilities yet is not without problems. Supporting local organisations and working through informal institutions can play into the politics of the conflict and lead to the exclusion of particular groups of people. Where local implementers are weak, developmental relief may jeopardize the very core business of humanitarian aid: the relief of suffering through service delivery and when too many agencies all want to work with the same local partner, programmes may grow so fast that the local organisation gets destroyed in downward spirals of quarrels and corruption.<sup>44</sup> Classic forms of relief are criticised for undermining local people and institutions, but are crucial for getting large life-saving operations running within a matter of days. The neutrality of the operations can enhance the needs-based character of aid and help agencies to stay out of political trouble.

A case can be made to state that the co-existence of classic and developmental relief results in a diversity that enriches the aid response, and is complementary. A division of labour implicitly arises where in the more security-tense and fluid contexts classic relief prevails, while in more relaxed situations developmental approaches can flourish. This could be

captured in a strategy to have classic relief where it is needed and encourage developmental relief where it is possible. In reality, however, it appears that agencies, due to a combination of deeply set cultural patterns and organizational interests, are not very self-reflective about the need to adjust styles to conditions. One of the major complaints of people in the Tsunami affected areas was that the humanitarians who came, were totally unaware of operating in functioning societies and behaved as if they were in Darfur or Somalia (sic!).<sup>45</sup> In the long-term setting of Kakuma refugee camp, where the levels of crime and violence are probably lower than anywhere in the wider region, Bram Jansen found that agencies continued to enclose themselves in a compound while considering the camp too dangerous to allow any informal interaction between staff and refugees.

A recurring problem is that classic relief aid tends to have a blind eye for local actors and institutions. When I was in Darfur in 2005, I met several agencies working in a developmental relief style, for instance by working with the government health services: managing despite the adverse conditions to keep a number of government clinics running. Most agencies, however, worked in the classic relief style, which was necessary as the needs surpassed what existing institutions could handle. But was it also necessary to maintain an isolation from society? In one of the provincial towns that had not yet come under attack local agencies that had been running development programmes before the war were idly standing by and watching how relief agencies had taken over the town. It took 18 months before they were invited to take part in coordination meetings. One of these local NGOs had formed women's groups in the context of an environmental programme before the war. These women

groups had informally re-assembled around their leaders in the camps after displacement. The international agencies were not aware of this, and had been busy considering how to organise women themselves. There was also a group of young medical doctors that had been campaigning against female circumcision and sexual abuse, out of medical and ethical more than feminist concerns. They had not been consulted by any of the respected UN and relief organizations to help with the gender programmes that agencies had formed to protect women against sexual violence around the camps. When we discussed this, the agencies dismissed the information by stating that these doctors were government doctors and hence could not be trusted. This distrust was expressed and accepted as a self-evident fact that needed no further explanation. This had nothing to do with time limitations in the heat of emergency. Mathijs van Leeuwen found the same attitude among INGOs that had been active for more than 15 years in Southern Sudan!

The disengagement of classic relief from the society in which it operates, has increased since the start of the Global War on Terror, which has made security an overriding concern of aid agencies. The security of aid personnel and protection of the operation has become an important operational issue in those crises where aid agencies risk to be associated with the Western alliances that started the war. In Iraq, the Red Cross and United Nation buildings have been bombed and 64 known and perhaps many more unknown aid workers have been killed over the past 4 years<sup>46</sup>. The discussions triggered by Afghanistan and Iraq have spilled over to dominate all domains of aid. The idea has become widespread that providing aid is a dangerous occupation. Research does not confirm this. If Iraq is left out of the equation, the number



of war-casualties amongst aid workers has remained relatively constant over the past decade.<sup>47</sup> Feinstein research indicates that in some cases, particularly in Burundi and Sierra Leone, there has been an over-securitization which has further restricted the interaction between personnel of the UN and many NGOs and local people and institutions.<sup>48</sup> Although this research does not capture the experience of agencies that continued their developmental relief, for instance with a programme that upheld the governmental health services in large parts of Burundi, it remains a fact that humanitarian workers in many parts of the world feel that the relationship with local populations is deteriorating. The little research done on the topic indicates that often it is not the perceived political association of aid with the West that puts people off, but a more generalised reaction against the cultural distance between the Toyota driving aid workers and local people. This implies that in many places aid should invest in trust more than in security. There are many trust-forgers that work differently in different contexts.<sup>49</sup> Sometimes strict neutrality, isolation and highly protective measures are necessary, in most areas good relations with partner organizations, displaying confidence in local staff, respectful behaviour and accountability pay off more in terms of security than the use of heavily armed guards.

### **Re-opening the debate on developmental relief**

In the 1990s there has been much debate over the relative advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches of classic and developmental relief. In the case of natural disasters, the debate question seems largely resolved, at least at the paradigmatic level. There is a broad consensus that the priority should be with enhancing local capacities for disaster preparedness and response. The evidence that preparedness

helps, for example by spectacularly reducing the cyclone-related death tolls in Bangladesh and the Caribbean, seem to have turned the tide.<sup>50</sup> Over the last four decades, the yearly average number of disasters has more than doubled, yet the average number of deaths has been reduced by half, which is largely due to preparedness measures.<sup>51</sup> In the case of conflict, the question if aid must concentrate on saving lives or whether there is a case for more developmental approaches has not been resolved, but was taken over by events. Since the Global War on Terror, humanitarian debate has focused more on the question how to relate to the occupying powers in Afghanistan and Iraq than on how to relate to society. The phrase of linking relief to development is now exclusively used to denote the transition from crisis to post-crisis, but is hardly used to refer to the challenge to make aid during crisis more developmental.

While the debate has been largely silenced, this is not a silence that implicitly accepts the validity of both approaches as they continue in practice. Instead, the coordination and financing system of humanitarian aid is consolidating its organization along the objectives and organisation of the externally-driven minimal relief approach of classic relief. In a recent reform meant to rule the increasingly unruly humanitarian actors, the coordination structure of the UN is organized along sectoral lines with clusters for food, shelter, water and sanitation, etcetera. In this technocratic setup, integration and local control over the response process are secondary principles of coordination at best.<sup>52</sup> The process by which needs are defined and programmes financed tilts heavily towards a minimalist approach. Humanitarian appeals formulate relief provisions that are needed (for food aid, water and sanitation, shelter and so forth) but these are

not analysed in conjunction with capacities and livelihood opportunities. Ambitions for developmental relief are implicitly considered additional objectives that agencies must finance by their own means as budgets are largely reserved for strict life saving service delivery. In 1996 Jan Pronk made an appeal to his colleagues in the donor community to create pockets of development in conflict, which was inspired by the situation in Sudan where despite the war, many areas stayed relatively peaceful for long periods of time.<sup>53</sup> Yet, official humanitarian objectives and flows of funding have stayed within the confines of saving lives, instead of protecting livelihoods to enable people to cope during conflict.<sup>54</sup> Donors refused, for example, to contribute to veterinary services because they were not part of the core life-saving package. Since pastoralism is the main livelihood in South Sudan, the increase in cattle diseases effectively turned more people dependent on food aid than was necessary on account of the conflict. Even disaster preparedness, despite the common acceptance of its importance is not covered under most humanitarian budgets. Since disaster preparedness is also not part of development objectives, agencies working on preparedness continue to find it difficult to secure funding.

With regard to reconstruction, the present organization of relief by maintaining a separation between crisis and normality, is more constraining than facilitating the transition towards reconstruction. Developmental relief that can anticipate on reconstruction continues in practice, yet is relegated to shadows of the aid system. Even the agencies engaged in more developmental relief have largely reduced the discussion to the question of implementation by local organizations. It is time to define what the parameters of developmental relief are and resume a critical reflection on

its practices and possibilities in emergency situations.<sup>55</sup> It is time to make some policy choices about the desirability and feasibility of developmental relief. In most situations an explicit preference and space for developmental relief could make a major difference for people struggling to protect their livelihoods and social safety nets in times of emergency. Let us not forget that the transition from relief to development is an optimistic slogan that does not apply to most people in emergency situations.<sup>56</sup> Their normality is not one of development but of bare survival, with few services to fall back on. Their return to normality is not a transition from relief to development but a transition from relief to muddling through. Safeguarding the meagre livelihood, safety nets and service options of these people should be a major driving force of humanitarian aid.

### **Our research agenda**

The independence of aid is seen as a major condition for its quality. It is rarely understood that the same applies for research. By far most research on aid is based on commissioned consultancy work. This can be high quality, but often leads to the omission of critical findings and rarely allows for research that is in-depth and embedded in people's life-worlds. Research on aid tends to be strongly informed by the politics of the latest disaster, with few research programmes capable to unravel the continuities and discontinuities in the realities behind these politics.

My research group has a number of programmes that aim to understand the working of aid interventions in their environment. This research focuses especially on programmes that link emergency response with development, peace and (social) security programming. We currently do research into

community-driven disaster preparedness, reconstruction and peace building in the Philippines, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Mozambique, Guatemala and the Great Lakes Region. Success and failure of developmental relief and reconstruction is produced throughout policy chains and depends on functional linkages with related domains of intervention. Our research moves up, down and sideways of policies, and analyzes how these different linkages work in practice and affect the chances for emergency response and reconstruction. Together with the Law and Governance group we are preparing research to study practices of how food aid during emergency situations is organised to enhance development and (social) security. These researches start inside a programme, and stretch outside as far as needed, often travelling along multiple sites and applying a range of methods.

We also have have research that focuses in the first place on the multiple realities outside of aid interventions. Aid interventions play a role in research, primarily as spaces where people manoeuvre to realize their own projects and to study the impact of the ensemble of interventions in society. PhD work in Kakuma Refugee Camp explores how refugees manage to take over and alter to a large extent the grid of control that is seemingly exercised by the UNHCR and the Kenian authorities, creating their own powerful realities for (re) distributing jobs and other resources. Research in Angola ambitiously reconstructs how people organised their lives and communities in the different periods of consecutive wars and how aid affected these processes. This type of research requires long periods of immersion in local communities and relies mostly on ethnography.

Finally, we do research that focuses inside the policies and practices of humanitarian and development agencies. It partly springs off our academic research, and is enhanced by a range of activities varying from evaluations, contract research, seminars and advice work. It is about strategy, principles and praxis of aid. Topics include the use of the Code of Conduct, issues of coordination, organizational culture, beneficiary participation, complaint handling, gender and disaster preparedness. Much of this work is done in partnership with NGOs and facilitated by PSO, a membership-based capacity building organization. Our latest project is to organize a peer review on humanitarian partnerships. This summer, agency staff will do fieldwork in different countries to compare how they and their colleagues relate to local implementing partners.

Most of our research is interactive in nature, and is done in close dialogue with societal stakeholders. Interactive research offers many analytical and practical advantages, yet also bears the risk to be biased towards realities of intervening agencies more than people. Gemma van der Haar is presently documenting our experiences with interactive research. One of the major findings is that it is crucial to maintain a solid body of financially independent, in-depth research into the realities of disaster, conflict and reconstruction to feed and critically interrogate the findings of more applied research. We hope to foster this academic tradition by organising the first World Congress of Humanitarian Studies in 2009, together with the universities of Groningen and Bochum.

#### **Humanitarian movement.**

Mister rector, ladies and gentlemen, I am very glad the world community has invented humanitarian aid. Countless num-

bers of people have found survival through the protection, refuge and relief offered by humanitarians. Humanitarian ideals have inspired the social movement of the Red Cross, with a global membership of hundred million people, and they find daily expression in the work of thousands of committed and idealistic humanitarian workers.

Humanitarian emergencies will continue to be part of our future. We already see the numbers of natural disasters sharply rising and if nothing is done about climate change, the Stern report predicts 200 million people will be displaced by the end of this century due to sea-level rise. Many people will have to survive in increasingly inhabitable places, where they live in conditions of chronic food insecurity without the assets to catch up with the globalized economy. We cannot predict the courses of conflict, but even without large-scale wars, patterns of structural, criminal and political violence will continue to create pockets of misery and abuse. The different trends signal a world where humanitarian needs become more chronic and large scale. The present humanitarian apparatus that is designed to provide a temporary stop gap to alleviate suffering in war and disaster, may be increasingly inadequate to deal with these challenges. What will be the safety nets for the majority of people that are excluded from the benefits of globalization and those that are finding their livelihoods destroyed because of climate-related environmental depletion?

When we stop thinking of crises as temporary problems, and recognise the continuity in people's vulnerability for conflict and disaster, the need becomes more urgent to think outside of the boxes of humanitarian aid and development, and seek more durable ways to make communities resilient, while

upholding the resolve to protect people that need help for their immediate survival. In his time, Henri Dunant was a visionary but not a very radical thinker. He advocated in the 1860s for the alleviation of life-threatening suffering in the charity tradition of the Good Samaritan, while his contemporary Karl Marx had just written the Communist Manifest envisioning a global regime change to eradicate poverty and related suffering. In these days, upholding the ideal of humanity: "to relieve suffering wherever it may be found" begs increasingly radical action to reduce people's vulnerabilities and resolve the threats against human security.

I do believe that we must muster the individual and political will to increasingly share resources with people in need. But help can only be effective when the agency and acting capacity of the recipients of aid are acknowledged and respected. Providing relief marks solidarity but it also marks superiority: it defines 'the other' as victim and the assister as the one who determines what help is in order. The victim's sole attribute is found in his suffering, and although the assister grants him the right to survival, the victim is stripped of the capacity to act that would recognise him as a fellow human being.<sup>57</sup> It is not in their suffering that we can know people, we can only reach out by respecting people's dignity as actors that own their lives and futures.

### **Thank you**

Combining academic and family life is often not unlike a humanitarian emergency and I am sure I would not have survived without the help so many of you have extended to me. My first and biggest thank you goes to Fred Claasen, my wonderful husband and intellectual sparring partner, who generously provides me with the most basic need of



love. Iana, Ellis, Franka and Don, together with our mothers, family and friends, with special mention for Renske Schamhart, Marie Jose Vervest and my cousin and namesake Thea Hilhorst, form the homely shelter that help us to sustain the most extreme conditions. I am most grateful to Georg Frerks, Gemma van der Haar, Mathijs van Leeuwen, Bram Jansen, Annelies Heijmans, Hilde van Dijkhorst, Maliana Serrano, Luis Artur, Jeroen Warner, Rens de Man, Lucie van Zaalen and Jos Michel. They are my colleagues and friends at Disaster Studies, who kindly share their daily rations of food-for-thought-aid. The good work relations combined with lots of fun provide the perfect mental health care to sustain the hardships of academic life, with Lucie as the most loyal and effective disaster manager. We all know that social networks are crucial for surviving, and I am deeply grateful for the many people I am fortunate enough to work with, here in Wageningen, especially with the Rural Development Group where my chair has found refuge, in the CERES research school, and in the many organizations in the Netherlands and internationally. I look forward to continue working with you. There is no programme without donors, and I do thank the science councils of WOTRO and NWO for enabling so much of our research and the Foundation Nationaal Erfgoed Hotel de Wereld for sponsoring my chair.

Finally, I would like to thank Wageningen University that has invested trust in me and endowed me with this esteemed position. Kees Schuyt considers the institute of an independent scientific academe as one of the major social inventions to advance societies and protect them against cycles of exclusion and conflict escalation.<sup>58</sup> I feel proud to be part of the ranks of this academe. I was raised by my parents with the

strong persuasion that gifts cannot be appreciated lightly, but create social responsibility too. I will do the utmost to live up to the confidence all of you are giving me today, and thank you for your attention.

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