

A lot of hype, less effective aid

Development Aid organizations get carried away by emotional hypes, claims Thea Hilhorst. This makes them less effective. Hilhorst's research was on aid to victims of sexual violence in the Congo.

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Researcher Nynke Douma and Thea Hilhorst, professor of Disaster Studies at Wageningen, part of Wageningen UR, analysed aid to victims of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo towards the end of 2011. A long and devastating war which officially ended in 2002 was in reality still being waged. Both government forces and rebel militias made extensive use of rape as a weapon of war during the conflict.

Reports of mass rapes drew an indignant response from the international community. As a consequence, international aid organizations began to rush into the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu, where Hilhorst did her research. There are now

about 400 local and international aid organizations helping the victims, with a total budget of almost 90 million dollars since 2010. That is almost as much as the aid funding for the entire health sector.

Rape is indisputably a big problem. The UN estimates the number of cases since 1998 at 200,000, but estimates vary considerably and are often based on extrapolation, says Hilhorst. She believes numbers are sometimes exaggerated with a view to fundraising.

'Of course it is right to help women who have been raped,' says Hilhorst, 'but the efforts in the Congo were out of proportion.' The focus on rape led to other needs being neglected: needs such as maternity care, ed-



ucation and poverty alleviation. This is set out in the research report, *Fond de commerce?* In the course of her research, Hilhorst came across cases of poor women pretending to have been rape victims because this was the only way to qualify for aid.

The aid was one-sided, moreover. In most cases, it took the form of short-term medical care for the victims of sexual violence. There was little attention to the underlying cause, namely the powerless position of women in the Congo.

CARRIED AWAY BY THE HYPE

The reason why the aid got so out of proportion, in Hilhorst's view, is that the aid organizations allowed themselves to get



‘Fundraising based on emotions works’

through emotional appeals: that works.’ Cordaid, too, seeks donors by drawing attention to sexual violence in the Congo. De Voogd confirms that there was a massive influx of organizations in the Congo, all bent on quickly setting up projects and getting results to show for them. ‘That is no good: you must set up projects carefully. Cordaid had already been working in the region for some time and also works on educating both men and women on the position of women.’

Another issue was a lack of coordination between the organizations in the Congo, says Hilhorst. All too often, the aid was orchestrated from the head offices of international aid organizations, without taking into account what other organizations were doing.

The solution to this problem lies, in Hilhorst’s opinion, in professional aid delivery coordinated by the UN or another body above the various aid organizations. She therefore sees her research results as an argument for publicly funded development aid. This is something that is no longer taken for granted: in the Netherlands, for example, a debate on proposed cuts to development aid has been raging for a year. Hilhorst is afraid that if aid organizations become entirely dependent on donors, there will be even more emotionality and hypes. ‘This shows what could happen to development aid if government funding is cut.’ ■

carried away by the hype. Rape is a subject that makes a strong impression on both government and individual donors. After meeting rape victims in a hospital, American minister of foreign affairs Hillary Clinton immediately pledged 19 million dollars. ‘Development organizations appeal to the emotions too much and chase after hypes like this, as a way of getting money out of donors’, says Hilhorst.

Aid to victims of sexual violence has become big business, the research concludes. And this business impedes rather than contributes to a real solution to the problem. A solution, says Hilhorst, which will come from improving the position of women rather than from short-term medical care.

The disproportionate focus on rape is an issue specific to the Congo, says Hilhorst. But a tendency for development organizations to focus on subjects that appeal to the general public is a wider problem, she believes. ‘Malnourished orphans or other images of poverty that appeal to the imagination come in for more attention than other less visible but no less pressing problems.’

Dutch aid organization Cordaid has been running projects in the Congo for years and is dependent on donors for one third of its funding, with the rest coming from the Dutch government. Jos de Voogd of Cordaid acknowledges the problem. ‘It’s a fact that a fundraiser tries to raise funds