
**Humanitarian
Assistance and Conflict:
A-State-of-the-Art Report**

**Bente Hybertsen, Astri Suhrke and
Gro Tjore**

R 1998: 2

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Summary

The rapid growth of international aid allocated to "complex humanitarian emergencies" has led to parallel calls for preventive action. It is also asked how humanitarian assistance and other forms of international civilian presence can help prevent and mitigate violent conflict.

The key question raised in the report are: What do we know about how, and why, humanitarian presence may help prevent or contain conflict? What are the conditions for failure or success? Can humanitarian presence have counterproductive effects and exacerbate conflict? How can unintended consequences be avoided?

The report reviews the relationship between humanitarian assistance and violent conflict. It is basically a "state-of-the-art review, supplemented with data drawn from some classic cases and interviews with Norwegian NGOs.

The report is based on work carried out by Bente Hybertsen and Gro Tjore, research assistants at the Chr. Michelsen Institute, with assistance from Emery Brusset and Bruce Jones, Ph.D. students at the London School of Economics. Astri Suhrke, Senior Researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute was team leader. The report was prepared with financial assistance from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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APPENDIX II: TERMS OF REFERENCE HUMANITARIAN PRESENCE AND THE PREVENTION AND MITIGATION OF CONFLICT: A "STATE OF THE ARTS" REPORT REVISED VERSION, NOVEMBER 1996 CHR. MICHELSEN INSTITUTE 87

Summary: Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict

This is a summary of a "state-of-the-arts" report entitled *Humanitarian Assistance and Conflict*, completed by the Chr. Michelsen Institute for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1997. The report reviews the policy-relevant literature on the relationship between humanitarian assistance and violent conflict, records the principal experiences of Norwegian NGOs, and indicates areas for further study. A bibliography of references from the literature is attached.

Key issues

The rapid growth of international aid channeled to "complex humanitarian emergencies" has led to parallel calls for preventive action. The question is also asked how humanitarian assistance and other forms of international civilian presence can help to prevent and mitigate violent conflict. A small but significant literature has emerged in this area - some works are in the tradition of the social sciences, others in the form of advocacy writings, policy debate, evaluations and mission reports. This report analyzes the foci of inquiry and the findings in the literature, and, in an original collection of data, also systematizes the main conclusions of Norwegian NGOs in the relevant issue-areas by means of structured interviews undertaken for this purpose.

Four key questions are addressed:

- What do we know about how, and why, humanitarian presence can help to prevent or limit conflict?
- What are the conditions for failure or success?
- Can humanitarian presence have counterproductive effects by making the conflict worse?
- How can one control for unintended consequences?

The report does not review the record of humanitarian agencies with respect to their primary objectives, i.e. to save lives and reduce suffering in the short run by providing food and medical assistance. There is a significant literature which documents the impressive achievements of humanitarian assistance in this regard, also in contemporary complex emergencies (see e.g. Forsythe 1996). But it is precisely this achievement which has given rise to the additional question of whether the long-term and unintended consequences of aid may be to keep the conflict alive as well. The issue currently is in the frontline of the policy debate among humanitarian practitioners as well as observers, and consequently figures centrally in this report.

It is important to recognize that since conflict is a process, so is prevention. Preventive action can occur during several phases of a conflict - on the

upswing, when the conflict in theory can get worse, and on the downswing, when strife in theory may resume. Nor is there a sharp conceptual distinction between mitigation and prevention. Reduced violence (i.e. mitigation of the conflict) is the result of some form of prevention if it is reasonable to assume that violence otherwise would have continued or worsened. For instance, the creation of pockets of peace or "humanitarian zones" within a theater of conflict is both mitigative and preventive in this sense, as is negotiated reduction of strife.

If the focus is on prevention, methodological reasons inevitably bias the inquiry in a negative direction. It is easier to study failures than successes (since we can never know precisely what was prevented if preventive measures succeeded). The literature, moreover, contains very few studies that detail the positive-preventive impact of humanitarian presence.

Principles and schools of thoughts

The review of the literature, drawn from the social science, and reports and policy discussions of aid agencies/organizations, suggests four major conclusions. All are concerned with humanitarian assistance in "complex emergencies" where aid actors operate in (or near) a conflict area, and where violence is man-made but exacerbated by natural conditions. The conclusions are as follows:

Humanitarian aid cannot be a substitute for political action. The current conventional wisdom echoes the major findings of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (1996). Humanitarian assistance has only a limited, moderating influence on the political forces and the nature of violence in the target area. Humanitarian presence can only buy time for political solutions, and must be undertaken in tandem with a political and military engagement if the forces driving a conflict are to be dealt with. Hence, it is unrealistic and counterproductive to assign humanitarian assistance an ambitious agenda in terms of mitigating existing violence or preventing further conflict. Not only does this raise false expectations, humanitarian assistance may become a "fig leaf" for political inaction towards the conflict and its underlying causes.

Humanitarian assistance has manifold consequences in the conflict area: negative as well as positive, unintended as well as intended. There is growing recognition among humanitarian actors and observers that humanitarian assistance has complex consequences in the target area. There are significant short-term positive consequences (e.g. saving lives), but there is increasing awareness of negative, unintended and indirect consequences in the longer run such as helping to prolong a conflict, enhancing the vulnerability of

beneficiaries - e.g. by attracting people to feeding areas that become "killer traps", as the French-based *Medicins Sans Frontiers* (MSF) describes the aid pattern in Ethiopia in 1984 (*World in Crisis*, 1997) - or by undermining local coping and long-term strategies. There is growing articulation of the argument made by William Shawcross in his study of Cambodia already in 1984 - *The Quality of Mercy* - that aid agencies have a vested interest in channeling relief, and hence become willing participants in the institutional accommodation which the North is fashioning towards the repeated or permanent emergencies in the South. In this view, elaborated by the British scholar Mark Duffield in *The Symphony of the Damned* (1996), humanitarian aid becomes for the North a principal mechanism of conflict management in the South.

A guiding principle of humanitarian assistance must therefore be minimalist - "Do No Harm". Mounting concern with the negative effects of humanitarian assistance has been countered variously. One response is that aid agencies operating in conflict areas should adopt the motto: "Do no harm". Articulated in a 1989 book by US-based experts Mary Anderson and Peter Woodrow, *Rising from the Ashes*, the "do no harm" approach has become increasingly accepted by aid agencies and NGOs. The principle formed the point of departure for a major conference of North American-based NGOs and aid agencies in 1996 that sought to develop concrete strategies of action.

Growing awareness of the complex consequences of humanitarian assistance has sharpened the division between the "pure humanitarians" and the "solidarity humanitarians". An old debate has intensified. The "age of innocence" has passed with the recognition that humanitarian assistance necessarily has political consequences. However, the "purists" - exemplified by the Swiss-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) - argue that the principle must be to provide neutral and impartial assistance, and that ways can be devised to reduce the political consequences. The "solidarity" view, on the other hand - increasingly exemplified by the MSF - maintains that neutrality is a form of moral bankruptcy, and argues that humanitarian organizations must take sides in the struggle against injustice and inhumane practices.

Strategies and practices

Humanitarian organizations have shown some reluctance to become involved in explicit conflict management, as well as forms of protection such as human rights monitoring. The reluctance is based on fear that such activity may undermine their continued presence in a conflict area and hence jeopardize their primary mission to deliver aid. Nevertheless, insofar as "complex emergencies" have come to be viewed in the international aid community generally (and especially in the UN system) as having a human rights

component, humanitarian NGOs increasingly have moved in this direction as well. The major Norwegian NGOs have all adopted this approach (see below).

Humanitarian NGOs that work in "war-torn societies" increasingly include reconciliation or confidence building dimensions in their projects. Consciously or not, these NGOs typically base their work on a sociological theory of integrative cooperation which holds that by working together to achieve a common aim, preferably a concrete task, the parties will develop mutual trust that transcends their conflicting interest. For many NGOs involved in rehabilitation projects, these kinds of projects appear as a natural and relatively simple extension of their traditional activity. A prototype is multi-ethnic brick-making in Rwanda to rebuild houses that were destroyed by ethnic violence in 1994, and in the process to rebuild communication across ethnic lines. Norwegian NGOs have moved rapidly into this area.

Humanitarian NGOs that deliberately take on conflict management/resolution tasks use three tools:

- i) handling of information (overt or "quiet" advocacy, denunciation, lobbying)
- ii) providing good offices to facilitate dialogue, mediate, or conciliate on the margins of standard aid work
- iii) using the power of the resources which they introduce into the conflict area to extract concessions from the conflicting parties.

The first two are most commonly used. As for (iii), given their position as providers of very significant resources in situations typified by extreme scarcities, NGOs have in theory considerable bargaining power. Humanitarian imperatives limit, however, their willingness to manipulate emergency aid for political purposes. The major and partial success story in this respect is Operation Lifeline Sudan, as recounted by a team for the Humanitarianism and War Project of Brown University (USA) (Minear 1991).

Less dramatic ways to enhance the positive effects of humanitarian presence in terms of mitigating existing violence, and preventing further conflict, have been identified by US-based NGOs (Smock 1996). These are:

- Closer dialogue with donors that have limited field knowledge so as to avoid unrealistic restrictions and inappropriate mandates on NGOs;
- Improved planning to (i) assess needs more accurately, and (ii) analyze the consequences of agreements negotiated to gain access to needy populations and obtain security for NGO personnel;
- Provide aid that will have the longest-term benefit to targeted groups and empower local institutions;
- Deploy human rights monitors to help protect local populations from the fighting factions;

- Coordinate closely with other aid organizations that operate in the same conflict area;
- Contract for independent monitoring and evaluation of assistance programs to reduce mismanagement and the diversion of supplies.

In a more targeted strategy, NGOs have identified at least three ways of using provision of resources in a conflict-preventive manner. If conflict is a rational choice in the context of shrinking resources, humanitarian aid can be used to reshape opportunity structures in desired directions by:

- providing alternative channels for conflict-oriented leaders, (ex-)soldiers and militia;
- supporting moderating distributive institutions;
- reducing resource scarcities in conflict areas.

A traditional means of mitigating violence in a conflict area is to establish protected areas. In its classic humanitarian form, this was the Red Cross zone (hospitals, etc.), protected only by a symbol and, implicitly, by the value of the services rendered to all parties to the conflict. In the 20th century, non-military protected areas have developed in various forms. Experience shows that they are mostly effective when they

- are demilitarized;
- serve the humanitarian needs of both/all parties to the conflict;
- are established with the consent of the parties concerned.

Protected areas of this kind serve to modify the *symptoms* of conflict in the sense that they limit the extent of violence and reduce the suffering of victims. As such they have a mitigating rather than preventive effect, and do not address the underlying causes of the conflict.

Human rights monitoring are related to conflict mitigation and prevention in three ways: a) human rights reporting as an instrument of early warning of humanitarian crises, b) human rights monitoring as an instrument to deter abuse against individuals, and c) human rights reporting as an instrument to trigger stronger policy measures. In addition, human rights education is viewed as a generalized, indirect but still important conflict prevention measure.

There is not yet a cumulative literature that assesses these propositions in a systematic manner. Some studies focus on the design, some on the impact, of individual human rights operations. Analysis is typically lacking of factors which may account for success or failure across operations - the level of violence, consent of the government, the numbers and professionalism of the monitors, etc. Two major NGOs - Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch - have analyzed the effectiveness of human rights reporting in recent UN operations. Amnesty (1994) concluded that UN human rights observers in El Salvador and Cambodia had significant mitigative and deterring effects,

resulting in the release of detainees and the improvement of prison conditions. They also made important contributions to the legislative and institutional reform of the legal order, and raised public awareness of human rights issues. In the UN operations in Somalia, northern Iraq, and the former Yugoslavia, Human Rights Watch (1993) found that the human rights monitoring component was given less emphasis. In Rwanda, the initial monitoring operation was criticized for lack of professionalism and effectiveness (Joint Evaluation 1996).

Experiences of Norwegian NGOs

Given the limited written literature on the subject, this report also sought to systematize some aspects of the experience of Norwegian NGOs. NGO representatives were asked to draw on their organizational experience to assess the potential impact of various forms of humanitarian presence on concrete conflict situations that fell in the category of complex humanitarian emergencies. The following organizations were interviewed: the Norwegian Resource Bank for Democracy and Human Rights (NORDEM) which is primarily engaged in democracy or peace building activities,¹ and the five principal humanitarian NGOs: the Norwegian Red Cross (NRC), the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), the Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA), the Norwegian Save the Children (NSC), and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

In general, the NGOs are primarily concerned with the problems of i) how to deliver assistance, ii) how to protect civilians, and possibly as a spin-off effect iii) how to prevent further conflict. The dual challenge of managing conflict and providing aid has increasingly come into focus in the international community, and is also part of an ongoing debate among the Norwegian humanitarian NGOs.

Human rights monitoring

Human rights monitoring is a relatively recent activity that expanded when the Cold War ended. Monitoring is an important part of the broader process of promoting human rights. All the Norwegian organizations interviewed carry out some monitoring activities, but the emphasis varies in accordance with organizational objectives.

1. NORDEM is a collaborative project between the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Institute for Human Rights and the Norwegian Refugee Council and is therefore a more "impure" type of NGO than the other organizations reviewed here. All Norwegian NGOs, it should be noted, receive large funds from the Norwegian state, and many receive core funding.

Human rights monitoring, election assistance and observation, constitute over 90% of NORDEM's workload. Human rights monitoring is also part of the practical work of the organization, which can produce a spin-off effect on the human rights situation even though it does not directly involve monitoring. The Norwegian Refugee Council co-operates with NORDEM in direct human rights monitoring

The Norwegian Church Aid does not include human rights monitoring as a major part of its activity, which it defines as humanitarian work. However, human rights, conflict resolution and peace building are increasingly being incorporated as dimensions of relief work. For human rights monitoring and democratization work, the NCA co-operates with NORDEM or the World Council of Churches. The Norwegian People's Aid has entered an internal debate on the organization's role in matters of human rights monitoring. Yet, it has already been involved in such activities in Bosnia and Guatemala. Save the Children is working for greater recognition of children's rights in a conflict situation, pointing out that children are among those most strongly affected by war or conflict. Greater respect for children's rights will have a positive impact at least on the consequences of conflict.

The Red Cross is also engaged in human rights monitoring and promotion as a preventive activity. In several conflict situations, the organization works with the parties to the conflict to enhance knowledge of human rights and the Geneva Conventions governing the conduct of war, often using local cultural and historical reference points in the educational message (as recently in Sudan, Somalia and Burundi). As a humanitarian organization it feels compelled to react to human rights violations, but public reporting may jeopardize its efforts to work on all sides of a conflict. Hence, it more often encourages other organizations to report on violations.

Of the Norwegian NGOs interviewed, only NORDEM participates in election monitoring. International election observation started in the early 1980s and a more consistent framework has gradually evolved. In NORDEM's view, election monitoring has a positive preventive impact. However, no systematic assessment has been undertaken. There is growing recognition of the importance and impact of long-term observation where observers are present over a longer period of time, including the electoral campaign. In this way, essential rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly etc. are also being promoted.

None of the five principal NGOs cites human rights monitoring as a main task. Nevertheless, as "complex emergencies" have come to be viewed in the international aid community generally as having a human rights component, also Norwegian humanitarian NGOs have moved in this direction. Most of them now see human rights monitoring as an important extension of their

traditional mandate. The NGOs generally concluded that human rights monitoring have a positive impact, but note that a) it is difficult to assess impact, and b) they lack systematic evaluations to make full assessments.

A general problem noted by all the actors is the lack of coherence in the field of human rights work (how to report, on what cases, to whom etc.). However, they all underline the difficulties of creating a common, standardized manual for human rights work, as there are several different human rights conventions, and different mandates in different situations. Another generally perceived problem is the low quality of reporting and training. This is partly attributed to the recent and rapid growth of human rights monitoring.

The potential conflict between human rights monitoring and maintaining other forms of humanitarian presence was noted. To reduce such conflicts, NGOs have developed cooperative strategies based on a division of labor: In a situation where human rights violations have been observed, the NGOs can agree on who is to speak out loudly. The organization that reports runs the risk of being expelled, but the others can stay and continue their work. In this way, co-operation among NGOs on reporting can enhance their over-all impact.

Humanitarian presence

General views

All the humanitarian NGOs claim that their presence generally has mitigative and preventive effects on violence, if not on the underlying sources of the conflict. However, the only evidence cited in support of this claim was anecdotal. Systematic evaluations/assessments on the subject had not been undertaken, or were not known to exist.

Norwegian Church Aid maintains that the most efficient protection does not stem from active reporting to external parties, but from making it clear within the conflict area that human rights violations are not tolerated. NCA emphasizes the need for more active strategies to communicate visibility. Visible presence may limit violence, for instance, if NGOs move their headquarters to an area where violence is known to take place, or by simply being more visible in other ways, e.g. by driving cars marked with NGO emblems.

The Norwegian People's Aid maintains that presence per se has an important preventive effect on the level of violence and on the overall conflict. The presence of international delegates, for instance, makes the local employees feel safer (Kurdistan is cited as an example of this: the presence of Norwegian

relief workers "guaranteed" the safety of local personnel). The Norwegian Refugee Council is convinced that presence means prevention or reduction of violence, and points to the presence of NGOs in Bosnia where they claim the visible presence did reduce the level of violence. The NRC also emphasizes that presence is a precondition for reporting; the preventive effects are thus associated with reporting. Norwegian Save the Children believes that the presence of NGOs has several positive preventive effects. For instance, the presence of the SC in conflicts helps prevent the recruitment of child soldiers. The general psychological effect on the civilian population of international presence is also seen as very important.

Relief assistance

All the NGOs interviewed agreed that the level of consciousness concerning the different effects of humanitarian aid is much higher than it was in the 1980s and before. Their experiences differed with respect to strategies that might reduce the negative effects of relief assistance, and the extent to which these are possible to undertake.

The Norwegian People's Aid notes that emergency relief can create passivity, although this risk must be balanced against the acute needs of the population in question. While humanitarian aid and supplies can prolong the conflict, lack of resources is often the main reason for conflict in the first place, and food shortages can obviously lead to violence. Another potential negative function of emergency relief noted by the NPA is the creation of new economic structures that are kept alive artificially through continuous deliveries, thus undermining traditional and otherwise viable structures.

The delivery of food in conflict situations has been criticized since some of it will go to the warring parties. In the Somalia famine in the early 1990s, food was handed out as ready-made meals in order to reduce the stealing and trading of food. There are ways of separating civilians from soldiers when handing out food, but in many situations it is preferable to supply as much food as possible. Creating an abundance or surplus of food will reduce the potential for conflict, according to the Norwegian Red Cross.

The Norwegian Refugee Council notes that humanitarian aid may have negative consequences, but believes that these are by far outweighed by the positive effects. According to the NRC, it is naive to exclude the possibility that food deliveries may prolong a conflict, but the humanitarian imperative is always more important. Humanitarian organizations should not stop bringing in deliveries to civilians even if it keeps the warring parties going. The NCA cites cases where humanitarian action has worsened the human rights situation (Srebrenica). This may happen also in remote areas where food deliveries attract large number of people, thereby increasing local tension (Ethiopia).

Neutrality and impartiality

The organizations recognize that humanitarian aid generally has political consequences, but that policies of "impartiality" - which most distinguish from "neutrality" - still are possible. Approaches to the impartiality/neutrality question differ, however.

The NPA's policy permits partiality, *inter alia* when this facilitates access to certain areas. This is the case in Sudan, where the NPA does not co-operate with the Sudanese government and therefore does not wait for its approval, as do NGOs in Operation Lifeline Sudan. Generally, however, the NPA considers it useful to co-operate as far as possible with national governments and with the UN. In the NCA experience, humanitarian aid has had political consequences even when thought the NCA does not have specifically political objectives.

The NRC has found that political neutrality can only be intended, and not fully achieved, because presence in a conflict necessarily carries a political dimension. "Impartiality" is thus a better word than "neutrality". The NRC also points out that not taking sides on grounds of "neutrality" does not always mean being neutral. Not seeing or hearing is not neutrality, but an indirect support of the stronger party. In the NRC experience, it is important in such cases to report with reference to conventions/agreements. For instance, the NRC reported that the Serbs were ignoring the UN Convention on refugees in former Yugoslavia.

Confidence-building

Some of the organizations are engaged in activities that can be grouped under the general heading of confidence building measures (including reconciliation and negotiations related to a peace process), others find that their regular work has confidence-building effects. The organizations work at different levels (state level, community level, individual level), but all emphasize the importance of the local level. Some have found indirect, low-profile projects most useful; here groups work on concrete projects and "confidence" or "reconciliation" appears as a positive side effect.

To exert a preventive effect, the Red Cross movement has found it is essential to be present at an early stage of a conflict, or even before a conflict starts. Early warning of potential areas of conflict or natural disasters requires institutional networks. The national RC societies can serve this purpose, and are being developed with local branches that cover the entire country. The idea that local agencies will have a stronger preventive effect emerged in the 1990s. The establishment of local RC societies is a continuous task, and in Africa goes back to the 1970s. Until the late 1980s, however, the IFRC concentrated on strengthening the central agency of the national societies, and hoped for a cascading effect downwards (local branches). As experience showed that this

was rare, institutional strategy shifted to focus on local branches as well as national headquarters. Increasingly, efforts are made to work locally in human rights and tension reduction programs by educating locals, building on local, traditional values, etc.

The NPA supports existing grass root movements as well as the establishment of new local organizations. The NPA has found that the most important task is to build or rebuild confidence to "others" and to key social structures. When supporting local organizations, the NPA assists with expertise and provides material. It seeks to create channels of contact between local organizations and the authorities. While no systematic assessments of impact have been done, the general conclusion in the NPA is that confidence-building can work. For instance, in Tuzla, the only remaining multicultural municipality in Bosnia, the presence of NPA, the NCA and other international agencies is considered to have enabled the population to resist ethnic cleansing.

The NCA has several confidence-building activities on both the local and national level. Two current "multicultural projects" are underway in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. A 3-year project for persons from the former Yugoslavia seeks to educate "multicultural" opinion leaders from different parts of former country. In Rwanda, the project is aimed at women from different ethnic groups. The women work together to find solutions to common problems. The project has a practical focus, but the process of problem-solving is expected to promote communication between the different ethnic groups. A review of the project concluded: (i) the project was most successful when building on already existing groups, and (ii) problems experienced were related to insufficient training and knowledge of personnel, as well as lack of clearly defined objectives. NCA participation in the peace process in Mali (1995) has been reviewed in an internal report which found that the foundation for success was a bottom-up socio-political movement, with negotiation below the government level.

The Norwegian Refugee Council is not engaged in confidence building measures at the political level, but works to bring together people from different sides of a conflict in various activities. Confidence building is considered a positive spin-off effect, and not the main objective.

Save the Children is not involved in explicit reconciliation or confidence building activities. The organization's experience is that this is an extremely complex area of work. Reconciliation is seen as a private and personal matter, and the SC finds that the work of the international community in this regard is too mechanical. Reconciliation works at a slow pace: direct reconciliation work must be avoided, even the word "reconciliation" should not be flagged. If one moves into this area at all, community workers must be carefully trained and able to inspire confidence. Indirectly this may generate further confidence

