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HUMANITARIANISM IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Errata

In Currents No. 19/20 the personal particulars on Gunnar Nordanstig unfortunately were mixed up. The correct text should be as follows:

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Editorial

Humanitarian assistance used to be simple.

In the past there was general agreement regarding both the problem that humanitarianism was supposed to address, and the solution that it was to provide. People are starving. They need food. A war is on. Provide protection. Humanitarianism meant short-term fixes for short-term problems. It was just a matter of keeping people alive until the disaster-event was over and we could get back to doing development again. This is no longer the case. The way back to the grand path of development has proven increasingly hard to find. Seemingly temporary technical problems are turning out to be highly complex, drawn-out and Byzantinely political. The assumption that relief workers need only provide inputs for a short, defined and predictable time span before the development people can take over again has been profoundly questioned. Where does relief lead in a collapsed state? What is 'normal development' in North Korea, and should we be supporting it? How can a massive feeding programme differentiate between civilian supporters of an armed faction and the soldiers themselves, especially when both are children? When, where and why should a school or clinic be rebuilt after a natural disaster when the government no longer pays the teachers and nurses? Who should or could co-ordinate 200 NGO's, of all sizes, shapes and levels of competence, when the state is weak and the UN is struggling just to co-ordinate itself? Who is accountable to whom? Where do the voices of the beneficiaries enter into these questions? There is no longer a consensus on the very nature of humanitarian action. It is often even being asked whether humanitarian action may cause more suffering, in the long-term, than it alleviates in the short-term. In the interest of broadening the Swedish discussion of these changing points of reference for humanitarian action, this issue of Currents reviews many of the basic debates and uncertainties facing humanitarians today.

In the first article, Hugo Slim surveys the challenges in rethinking humanitarianism in a changing world. Despite the fact that the fundamental traditional assumptions governing humanitarian action are in question, passivity is no solution. The Ombudsman Project presents a concrete initiative to deal with these questions by establishing a humanitarian ombudsman, whose task it will be to increase accountability to the beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance and improve practice. The humanitarian imperative, the belief that people in a survival crisis must be helped by those with the resources to provide that help, stands fast for most observers. The consequences of ignoring disasters are too great, both in terms of the human suffering involved and with regard to the impacts on future social stability and economic development. Clay and Benson describe the tremendous but often overlooked impacts of disasters on economic development. Despite scan-

dals and reports of chaos and incompetence in major relief operations, public opinion regarding disaster victims' rights to food and to an absolute minimal level of well-being remain clear. Humanitarian assistance is becoming more popular among the public, relative to development co-operation.

Growing attention is being given to rights-based approaches to both humanitarianism and development. This is leading to a solid bottom-line for concepts, such as the right to food, which formerly rarely consisted of more than altruistic rhetoric. Britta Ogle presents an overview of how human rights to food are being dealt with in an increasingly concerted manner. In order to guarantee these new rights we must, however, rethink how humanitarianism operates in the changing world order, and how it relates to development. Sida's thoughts on "developmental humanitarian assistance" set the tone for this changing debate. Rocha and Christoplos present some surprising findings regarding the links between relief and development from a recent study of disaster mitigation and preparedness in Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch. A problem in addressing the uncertainties of humanitarian aid has been that the lively debate on the future of humanitarianism has largely been an internal discourse within the humanitarian community. Development experts have tended to have a condescending view of 'relief', seeing it as best as a necessary evil, and at worst as an irritant to development planning. This is starting to change. Former hopes have faded that development might soon make the world a manageable place, free from insecurity. Even those working with development are starting to realise that they must adapt their work to turbulence and uncertainty. This means that humanitarian and development workers must both look beyond their short-sighted zero-sum competition over shrinking aid budgets. Common interests and modalities for collaboration can and must be found if the relevance of those budget allocations is to be justified for politicians, voters and tax payers.

We hope that this issue will stimulate some fresh thinking across the relief - development divide. Development co-operation is also experiencing an identity crisis. The seemingly self-evident truths about growth, poverty and human progress are also in question. Perhaps some reflection on the humanitarian imperative, and the battering it is experiencing in places like Angola or Afghanistan, might stimulate some mutual reflection on aid in a changing world.

Ian Christoplos
Guest Editor

To the rescue: Radicals or Poodles?

by Hugo Slim

The crises of the latter part of the century, whether within or between states, have drawn a response from a growing army of non-governmental organisations. Many are now comparable with international companies, spending as much as small countries. But just which side are they on, and to whom are they responsible and accountable?

In the terrible famine of 1984-85, hard-pressed Ethiopian aid officials were occasionally heard to remark that if only the people could eat acronyms, there would be no famine.

Ethiopia in 1985, like many other war-torn countries before and since, endured an invasion of international aid agencies, the most numerous of which were the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). SCF, MSF, OXFAM, CARE, IRC, AICF, MERLIN, NOVIB, CUSO are just a few of the estimated 4,000 based in developed countries which work as relief and development agencies in the poorer parts of the world. These organisations and their acronyms remain an integral and high-profile part of the international response to poverty and disaster.

Boom time

The 1980s and early 1990s have been a boom time for NGOs – particularly in relief work. By 1990 there were 100 international NGOs operating in Mozambique. In 1994, some 175 turned up in Rwanda, with 100 working in the camps in East Zaire. At one point in the war in

former Yugoslavia, more than 200 such organisations had offices in Zagreb.

What has been called the ‘gold rush’ aspect of contemporary humanitarianism has ridden on the back of a Western policy which has prized NGOs as the international and national organisations of choice for responding to poverty, transition and the humanitarian dimensions of political conflict.

They have become a significant, if disparate, political force in international humanitarianism and development alike – an increasingly important aspect of foreign affairs and a priority instrument in the pursuit of foreign policy. But the pre-eminence of NGOs is increasingly controversial. It invites a mixture of hagiography, demonising, empirical criticism and conspiracy theory.

Much of the critique suggests that a backlash against them has already begun, not least from within progressive NGOs, which realise that they must be more independent, more representative and more radical if they are to survive with credibility into the next century.

The term NGO can be applied as easily to a locally run soup kitchen for the

hungry in Mogadishu as to a \$200 million a year multinational relief and development organisation with international headquarters in the United States. So broad a term makes analysis of the sector hazardous, but it is possible to distinguish certain essential key features in the make-up and *modus operandi* of these agencies.

Moral entrepreneurs

All NGOs are self-mandating. Almost anyone can start one and can write the mission statement of their choice. Such a mission might be as broad as ‘eradicating world poverty’ or as relatively precise as to ‘support disable children gain access to schooling in country X’. The plethora of different and often overlapping mandates contributes to the notorious problems of duplication and coordination which so exasperates governments, UN leaders and NGOs themselves.

NGOs and their mandates are normally formed from a particular moral vision and an initial spirit of voluntarism. They may operate like entrepreneurial private companies in the freedom they have to set up and to seek work and funds, but they are primarily moral entrepreneurs and their overriding commitment is to the moral economy. This makes a difference in the way they see themselves and the way they demand to be seen by others.

While increasingly professional in their fund-raising and media management, the great majority of NGO workers are not primarily commercial animals.

Most have some sense of calling and, deep down, they set as much store by representing their values as on achieving tangible results. This moral aspect to their entrepreneurship means that even the most determinedly secular organisations can have a quasi-religious aspect to their work which makes them peculiarly resilient to normal judgements of success and failure.

The third sector

Often referred to as the 'third sector', NGOs fall between private and government sectors. In broad terms they are divided between northern NGOs and southern NGOs. There are 4,000 of the former based in the donor countries and operating internationally, and some 20,000 of the latter, indigenous to aid recipient countries.

A further divide exists between those with an overtly religious mission and those which remain resolutely secular, increasingly allying themselves to international human rights as the touchstone of their values.

In 1995 some \$6 billion was invested in NGOs¹. The great majority of this is channelled through northern agencies, which increasingly allocate it to southern counterparts. Within these northern organisations, a definite premier league has emerged, with the largest becoming transnational organisations².

By opening affiliate organisations in countries beyond their home base, the large NGOs have been able to tap into a wide range of donor money beyond their original national constituency. CARE has ten fund raising offices, the International Save the Children Alliance has twenty-four members and Médecins Sans Frontières has twenty.

Using the language of the mafia, Antonio Donnini and others identify eight major transnational NGO 'families' which control about 50 per cent of all funds³. In humanitarian aid, their control rises to nearer 75 per cent of all emergency funds.

Despite its confusing multitudes, the effective structure of the global NGO sector is thus most frequently described as an oligopoly, and its proliferation of players obscures the locus of real power.

The sector is distinguished by age as well as wealth. New NGOs are formed every day in north and south alike, while older ones try to cope with growth and adaptation. 'First generation' organisations born out of this century's European wars, such as Save the Children and CARE, inevitably expend a lot of energy grappling with the maintenance and restructuring of their large transnational bureaucracies. Meanwhile, newer thrusting NGOs – such as MERLIN, Children's Aid Direct, Médecins du Monde and Emergency Medical Corps – have risen to challenge traditional first-generation territory.

The sector also diversifies. For example, as the problems of war have come more to the fore, NGOs have worked hard to develop new skills in psycho-social care, conflict resolution and peace-building. New specialist agencies have been created to respond to these demands, and old ones have tried to integrate such work into their normal portfolio. Similarly, as cities creep up the development agenda, NGOs are gradu-

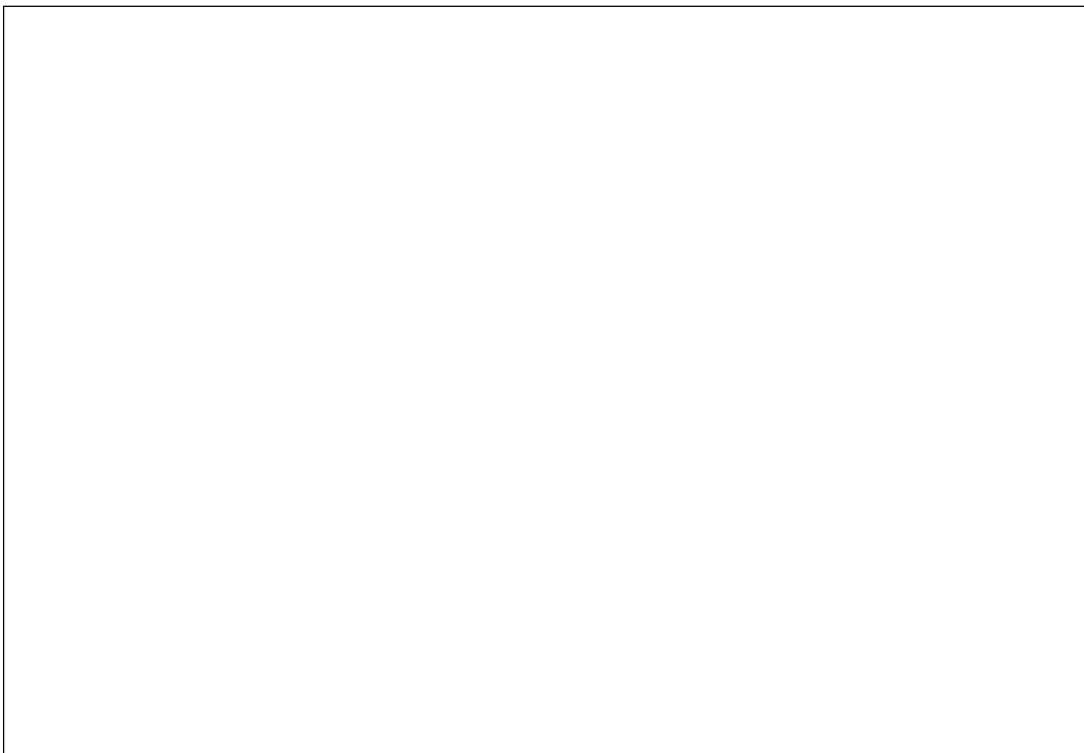
ally re-orientating from rural to urban priorities. Urban sieges, such as Sarajevo, Grozny and Kuito have reoriented the former overwhelmingly rural focus of humanitarian action.

Finally, like any sector, these organisations are differentiated by quality. Some are obviously better than others. Small one-off impulse organisations are a feature of most emergencies, particularly if they are within driving distance, like Bosnia. These organisations are often known as Come 'N' Gos. Governments and political parties often set up and control NGO look-alike organisations to pursue their own objectives. Increasingly sinister in some parts of the world, these organisations are known as GONGOs (government-owned NGOs) or PONGOs (party-owned NGOs).

All they are cracked up to be?

NGOs have been championed as the only organisations with the 'reach', daring and innovation to touch and represent the grass-roots of poverty and disaster. Yet simultaneously, a steady stream of data from hard-nosed researchers has shown that there is little real evidence to suggest that they are having a sustainable impact on poverty alleviation and empowerment⁴. And if they do,

Waiting for food distribution. South Wollo, Ethiopia 1999. Photo: Ian Christophos



it is usually by the creation of little oases of development – the perennial problem of charity being merely a drop in the ocean.

NGO operations in today's war zones are also criticised for playing into the political economy of war by providing resources and cover to the violent. Although there is nothing new in this critique of aid in war – relief in war is a notoriously difficult thing to get right – there is evidence that the vast numbers of agencies operating, combined with a lack of political savvy in many organisations, has led to some poor quality programmes.

Conspiracies

An increasing number of commentators place NGOs at the centre of international conspiracy theories. Two are dominant at present. Both implicate NGOs as inadvertent political *ingénues* manipulated by the realpolitik guiding the onward global march of Western neo-liberal capitalism and its deliberate polarisation of the world into haves and have-nots.

The first theory, best expounded by Mark Duffield⁵, claims that NGOs are being cynically used by great-power politicians as the providers of minimalist international welfare to contain the insoluble problem of the poor and hungry masses in 'the south' and prevent them from fleeing towards the rich, contented 'north'. This assumes that the West has essentially abandoned its modernisation project for all parts of the world by giving up the ideal of universal development. With characteristic hardness of

heart, the great powers are accused of consigning parts of the poor world to the margins of the new world order. By giving out food and medicines paid for the Western governments and their ill-informed but altruistic citizens, the theory argues that NGOs are used – or abused – as the main vehicles of this policy of poverty containment.

Neo-colonialism

The second main conspiracy theory, best expressed by someone like Yash Tandon⁶, grounds the cynical motives of Western realpolitik in colonialism rather than containment. It argues that, like their nineteenth century missionary predecessors, NGOs are the advance guard of the effective recolonisation of Africa and other parts of the south.

As the most penetrating carriers of the values and methods of Western neo-liberalism – universal human rights, feminism, market economics, civil society and the minimal state – NGOs are seen as crucial actors in a process which softens up a potentially confrontational middle class in any given country, preparing it for effective recolonisation through global business empires and 'good government' Western-style.

Like many conspiracy theories, both these views may serve a more useful function as instructive dystopias rather than simple statements of fact. While some of their smoke may come from real fires, the intention of Western policy and its use of NGOs is probably more complicated and less malevolent. As dominant theories, however, they are increasingly important as a backdrop to many

of the debates about aid organisations today. Interestingly, and paradoxically, they are believed and propounded by many NGO workers, giving rise to something akin to paranoia in the sector.

Many regard the popularity of their own organisations with grave suspicion, anxious that they may be being manipulated by Western realpolitik and that their supposed beneficiaries, the world's poor, may prove to be the ultimate victims of their own success.

NGOs and civil society

While opinion may differ in verdicts on the intentions and achievements behind the growth in NGOs, most commentators would agree that their extraordinary rise in the past fifteen years is due to an uncanny convergence of interests between the politics of left and right. Analysts like David Sogge and Jenny Pearce describe how NGOs have been 'lionised' by both right and left as integral to their rather different interpretations of that most mystical part of the body politic known as civil society⁷.

For the right, the proliferation of NGOs working in all sectors from health to micro-enterprise represents a major movement towards the creation of a healthier and more democratic civil society. The privatisation of public services, the creation of a competitive market in development initiatives and the genesis of a liberal society of ideas, all combine to reduce the role and power of the central state.

For the left, the infusion of power into rights-based NGOs and their broader-based allies in community-based organisations such as workers' cooperatives and women's groups, or people's organisations such as trade unions, guarantees some organised protection against authoritarian governments. Ironically, this same civil society also provides the left with a forum for opposition against the market-led political agenda of the right which, via structural adjustment, the weakening of state services and unfair trading, is seen by many as the main cause of increasing poverty.

Burning issues

NGOs face several burning issues affecting their roles in development pro-

Typhoon Linda, Viet Nam 1997. Photo: Ian Christophos

grammes against poverty and their humanitarian work in war. Most of these now stand as hardy perennials – difficult questions regarded almost fatalistically by NGOs as problems which go with the territory. These must now be addressed if the organisations are going to ride the wave of their favoured status and the exponential growth which has resulted, and still remain as relevant and radical.

Accountability


The first concerns the questions of legitimacy and accountability⁸. As organisations, they are good at giving themselves mandates but not so good at being accountable to them. Obviously they face multiple accountabilities: to those they seek to help; to international humanitarian and human rights instruments; to their private and governmental donors; to their staff and to the law.

NGOs have been extremely slow to develop democratic and inclusive ways of including these various parties in their organisations and accounting to them. Most are not membership organisations; instead, they tend to be governed by self-selecting trustees and have much less formal accountability than public companies.

Most accountability is limited upwards to donors and based on accounting procedures and spot evaluations. While this is technically legal, it hardly gives the depth of popular legitimacy to which many of their pronouncements and their self-image pretend. They need to find ways of becoming more representative and accountable.

Regulation

As part of its drive for better accountability, the sector needs to take regulation more seriously. It is doing so in its relief work with a Red Cross-inspired Code of Conduct gaining more than 100 NGO signatories. With “SPHERE” a set of minimum standards and a ‘beneficiaries charter’ in humanitarian operations has been prepared, and discussions are underway regarding how to ensure that these standards are upheld. This is self-regulation, something NGOs have always been quick to criticise in others. NGOs are starting to be braver and are even considering submitting themselves



Destruction at the front line. Kuito, Angola, 1996. Photo: Ian Christoplos

to the regulation of an international ombudsman, in line with international humanitarian law and human rights instruments.

Partners or patrons?

The relationship between northern and southern organisations remains problematic. In many cases, the notion of partnership used to describe the situation disguises a colonial relationship between patron and client. There is surely no future for just and equal development in such an anachronistic arrangement.

Responsible agencies must continue to move beyond such paternalistic ties as a matter of urgency. If they do not, donors may outflank them by directly funding southern NGOs, cutting out the northern middleman. This is already increasing, and it would be most surprising if genuine partnership flourished any better with northern governments.

Alongside proper partnership must come indigenisation. Northern agencies are often criticised for having ‘shallow roots’ in recipient countries. Despite their committed middle class national staff and their connections with local communities and elites alike, very few have made the effort to indigenise. The majority of transnational models are still mainly northern-biased. If anybody is ahead in this, it is the churches, which can sometimes make the northern NGOs look very old-fashioned. Indigenisation and genuine internationalisation must be tried.

A drop or an ocean?

The agencies must measure and extend the impact of their work. Important steps are already being taken by many to become learning organisations. This needs to continue if they are increasingly to understand the results and implications of what they do. In particular, organisations must continue to see if there really is virtue in the relatively small size of their programmes.

Some NGOs have applied much thought to the problem of ‘scaling up’ – seeing how their work at the micro level can be used to inform and influence policy and practice at the meso and macro levels of development. This needs to be explored further, even if the search reveals that local successes are irrelevant to, and incompatible with, widespread development. Knowing this would at least allow organisations and their project communities to decide if it is worth being a drop in the ocean. Some NGOs have clearly feared such conclusions, and have therefore remained resolutely opposed to critical self-reflection, satisfied in the knowledge that they are the good guys.

Being developmental in war

There is a crisis in emergency thinking and practice about the split between relief and development work. Known in the jargon as ‘the problem of the relief and development continuum’, it begs the question of how best to work with people in chronic long-term crisis. So-called ‘complex emergencies’ – the UN’s

euphemism for political emergencies and war – now last an average of eight years, but often for whole generations.

Must NGOs confine themselves to a minimalist package of relief in war, or can they simultaneously pursue their broader development agenda of education, economic development, women's rights, empowerment and social justice? In other words, is it possible and politically desirable to be developmental in war? This question may not be as conceptual as it seems. Relief and development have never been mutually exclusive and the problem lies more in the nature of today's wars and their unenlightened leaders.

Many of the liberation movements during the Cold War prioritised education, health and economic development as part of their war effort. In an important sense, their wars were developmental. Most of today's wars are more base, and their leaders much less responsive to the needs of their people. In such a context, it is simply much more difficult to be developmental in war, but it should still be tried.

A tension between humanitarianism and human rights persists throughout agency operations in war and is a cause of considerable anguish to staff. Should these organisations also act as human rights monitors and reporters as they administer relief in the midst of the horrors of war? To make public the vicious abuses of ruthless political and military forces may risk an agency's programme and endanger the lives of its staff.

With some exceptions, most NGOs operate as pointers rather than whistle-blowers in such cases. They try to draw the attention of other authorities to abuses without being identified. Such a policy is both pragmatic and, if it works, ethical. The problem is that it often does not work.

Beyond the risk of whistle-blowing is the fear of collaboration. Violent factions increasingly attempt to lure NGOs into their own politico-military strategies: ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and *regroupement* in Burundi are two obvious examples. This means that agencies are being forced more and more to make programming decisions on primarily ethical rather than technical grounds. They are having to face the fact that some-

times there are people whom they must not try to reach because to do so would involve not just dining with the devil but feasting with him.

These are hard and by no means obvious decisions to take. They have rightly given rise to a revival of committed debates about the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality, and what to do in war.

Independence and alternatives

Perhaps the greatest issue affecting NGOs in their development and humanitarian work concerns their independence and the alternatives they offer to new world order policies. Increasingly dependent on government funding, it is becoming commonplace to question the appropriateness of the 'N' in the NGO acronym.

Are NGOs really nothing more than the sub-contractors of Western governments' humanitarian and development policy, and thereby also of the realpolitik behind it? The conspiracy theorists would answer a resounding yes. Most NGOs would still argue no. But they must do more to really dispute the charge. They must clearly identify those aspects of Western policy and realpolitik with which they agree and disagree. They must risk their funding in doing so and must clearly shape and set out alternative visions.

Not all NGOs are sophisticated enough to do this and to be heard doing it. The onus is therefore on the big ones to lead, and they are of course the ones with the most to lose. A large organisation carries with it heavy fixed running costs, and overheads on donor financed public service contracts have proven the most reliable ways to cover these expenses.

Despite the best efforts of NGO hagiographers and lionisers, the most important favour that foreign policy-makers can do for these organisations is to recognise them as fallible and to be frank about their role in world affairs.

To repay this favour and the obligations they have to the world's poor, NGOs might do well to address some of the perennial issues which dominate their organisations.

They might thus be able to ensure that their current favouritism does not

turn sour and that they remain truly representative and radical well into the next century. Without doing so, as any court favourite will testify, it is all too easy to travel the fast and well worn road from favourite to scapegoat.

Footnotes

1. DAC figures, reckoned to be conservative, kindly supplied by Development Initiatives UK.
2. See Ian Smillie, *The Alms Bazaar: Altruism Under Fire – Non-Profit Organizations and International Development* (IT Publications, 1995), especially ch. XI.
3. In Weiss and Gordenker, *NGOs, the United Nations and Changing World Politics* (Boulder, CO, and London: Lynne Rienner, 1996).
4. See Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart, 'Do Private Agencies Really Make A Difference?', in D. Sogge, *Compassion and Calculations: The Business of Private Foreign Aid* (London: Pluto Press, 1996).
5. Mark Duffield, 'Relief in War Zones: Towards an Analysis of the New Aid Paradigm', *Third World Quarterly*, 18 (3), 1997.
6. Yash Tandon, 'An African Perspective', in *Compassion and Calculation: The Business of Private Foreign Aid*, edited by David Sogge (London: Pluto Press, 1996).
7. D. Sogge, *Compassion and Calculation: The Business of Private Foreign Aid*, (London, Pluto Press, 1996); J. Pearce, *Civil Society: Trick or Treat*, CIIR, London.
8. See the excellent treatment of this topic in M. Edwards and D. Hulme, *Non-Governmental Organizations: Performance and Accountability Beyond the Magic Bullet*, (London: Earthscan and Save the Children, 1996).

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An Ombudsman for Humanitarian Assistance?

A Report on the Findings from a Feasibility Study

The 'Ombudsman Project' is a non-governmental inter-agency initiative to establish a Humanitarian Ombudsman to act as an impartial and independent voice for people affected by disaster and conflict. This paper provides a summary¹ of the original feasibility study that was conducted during 1997 and 1998, and launched at the World Disasters Forum in London on 10 June 1998. The purpose of the study was to establish whether an ombudsman system could be adapted for use in humanitarian emergencies. Its findings concluded that, in principle, it is possible to develop an ombudsman system for use in the humanitarian environment. At the same time, a number of critical issues still require thorough investigation, such as beneficiary access, internationalisation, financing and remit. The final recommendation was that a pilot project should take place to develop a clearer understanding of the methodological realities of an ombudsman and help to establish a modus operandi for such an office.

Introduction

Background and Overview

In recent years humanitarian agencies have often debated how to improve their practice and make it more accountable to beneficiaries of assistance. Critical efforts have been made to establish codes and analytical frameworks by which humanitarian action can be judged and to provide a basis for agreement on what constitutes good practice. The first of these efforts saw the establishment in 1992 of the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross Movement and International NGOs in Disaster Relief. By the end of 1997, 149 agencies had signed the code and 144 countries had pledged to promote it in their own countries. The accountability

agenda gained further momentum in the aftermath of chaotic relief operations in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, resulting in the development of other complementary initiatives, including the Sphere Project: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response; the People-in-Aid Code of Best Practice, and Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP).

In spite of the diversity of agencies within the humanitarian system, these initiatives have helped to develop a common understanding of what is meant by standards of good practice. While there will be differences of opinion between agencies (indeed, this is probably a positive thing) real progress has been

made towards developing a stronger basis for discussion and understanding. At the same time, it has proved more difficult to reach agreement on how these various codes and standards are brought into operational decision-making and, most importantly, who (if anybody) should monitor and enforce them. The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda suggested that such a task might be carried out by an ombudsman's office and recommended that the international community should:

Identify a respected, independent organisation or network of organisations to act on behalf of beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance to perform the functions described in option (ii)... [including to undertake regular field-level

monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian assistance, and review the adequacy of standards followed; serve as an ombudsman to which any party can express a concern related to provision of assistance.]

This concept was revisited at the World Disasters Forum, held in London on 17 June 1997. The theme was 'Accountability in Humanitarian Assistance' and one of the main conclusions was that 'there is a clear need for a body that reports on agencies in the field. However, at present there is very little consensus about how such a body would function' (World Disasters Forum 1997). Furthermore, it was explicitly recognised that while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have to respond to a wide range of interested bodies to whom they are accountable in some way, the current system is in no way accountable directly to beneficiaries or 'claimants'; - the very people it purports to assist. The Forum's main recommendation, therefore, was to investigate the feasibility of creating an Ombudsman for Humanitarian Assistance.²

Why an ombudsman? The main rationale was that an ombudsman may be the most appropriate mechanism to help bridge the accountability gap between the agencies and the claimants. There was a general consensus at the Forum that the humanitarian community in the

United Kingdom (UK) needed to know more about this idea.

The British Red Cross co-ordinated a study on behalf of the NGO community in the UK. The study was funded by the British Red Cross, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Oxfam. Support was also provided by the Swedish Red Cross. The work was carried out by a Working Group over a period of 8 months, with guidance by a Steering Committee of humanitarian agencies, research bodies and government in the UK.³

Findings

What is an Ombudsman?

Origins and the Ombudsman Today

The historical origins of an ombudsman can be traced to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Sweden. The initial purpose of the post was to ensure that all public officials performed their duties with justice, honesty and public responsibility, and to hold them accountable for incorrectly applying laws, overstepping their authority or failing in their obligations to citizens.

Since the 1950's, the idea has gained considerable momentum. Ombudsmen now operate in over 40 countries on a national, state, regional or municipal level, both in the public and private sectors. In the UK at least 27 ombudsman offices are in operation and the trend indicates that this number will grow. The

modern ombudsman has been adapted to respond to the varying needs of each sector and gives consumers of any type of service, public or private, a voice in the delivery of that service and a means of redress.

Although most ombudsmen operate within a national jurisdiction, there are some who operate within a trans-national arena; notably the Ombudsman for the European Community and the World Bank Inspection Panel.

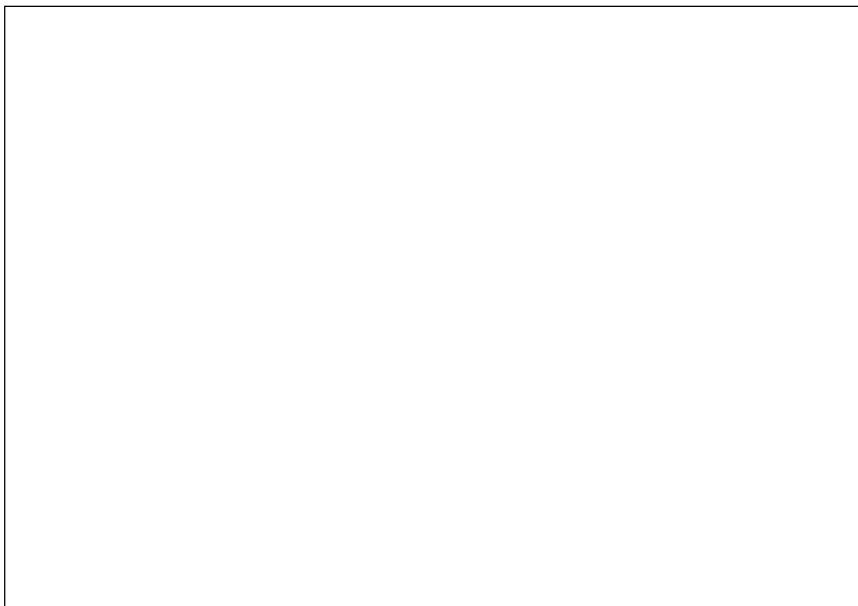
It is important to note that two distinctive models of ombudsmen were found: the proactive and reactive ombudsman. The reactive ombudsman waits for complaints and acts on issues or concerns that have been brought forward, while a proactive ombudsman seeks out matters of concern, undertakes inspections and initiates investigations without prompting. While ombudsmen in the UK are characterised by the reactive style, in Sweden, for example, the Public Justice Ombudsman, keeps a watchful eye on public administration and takes action to ensure that standards are maintained.

Limitations of the Ombudsman Concept

The most common criticism of the ombudsman system is that the function is not well understood. Few citizens are aware of the different ombudsman schemes, how to reach them, or how to process a grievance. Inaccessibility is the chief reason why ombudsman offices tend to be under-utilised, especially by the most disadvantaged. The ombudsman office is also criticised for the fact that its effectiveness can depend upon the character or personality of the ombudsmen themselves, rather than on the system as a whole. They are a highly personalised institution and success demands an individual or team who are perceived as independent and impartial, have relevant qualifications and in-depth knowledge of the sector, and can command respect and trust from all parties.

Participation and compliance with ombudsman decisions can be reluctant, as there are few incentives to participation by organisations in the scheme, beyond simple good will or implied obligations.⁴ Perhaps as a consequence of this criticism, ombudsmen are rarely

Destroyed agricultural school, Angola 1996. Photo: Ian Christophos



given the necessary authority to act forcefully in a given circumstance, nor are they provided with sufficient resources to undertake in-depth mediations or investigations.

Finally, since the ombudsman's powers are usually exercised in recommendation, there is a genuine concern that the ombudsman may lack 'teeth'. For instance, the annual report (for many ombudsmen, the only document issued) is often considered an inadequate instrument for influencing administration procedures and practice, informing mass media and educating the public.

Strengths of the Ombudsman Model

While there are some weaknesses to the ombudsman, the merits of the concept are considerable. The primary advantage of an ombudsman is the role of the office as a direct means of participation by members of the public. In particular, where there is no option simply to have the service provided by an alternative body - the humanitarian sector is case in point - an ombudsman gives people an active voice in a system that otherwise would leave them powerless.

Overall, the model has proved an effective means of protecting the citizen's interest, or right, to fair administration and good practice. The function helps to redress the balance in accountability and works well as a way of enhancing relationships between two parties and closing the gap between administrators and the administered.

The ombudsman also plays a crucial role in improving the transparency of organisations by opening up operations to the public gaze. The nature of an ombudsman as an independent body fur-

ther strengthens its accountability function, as internal mechanisms are not open to full scrutiny. Of course, an ombudsman can only work if its remit provides open access to its member organisations.

The value of the system lies not only in obtaining redress for individual citizens, but also, for citizens at large, in encouraging administrative reform and improvement. Although it examines particular situations, in doing so it can often determine gaps or failures in the system as a whole and recommend improvements. Thus an effective and accessible redress mechanism can satisfy the dual function of rectifying a single problem while creating the conditions for improved practice in the future. By publishing information on its activities, an ombudsman can extend these lessons to a wider community.

In summary, ombudsmen have been found to enhance relationships between the administrator and the administered and can serve to effectively increase transparency, while facilitating reform of the system. At the same time, the general criticisms should not be overlooked when seeking to apply the model to the humanitarian sector.

What are the Challenges?

The challenges faced by a Humanitarian Ombudsman can be categorised broadly as institutional and methodological. Institutional challenges are those that impact on the organisational framework and design of the Humanitarian Ombudsman's Office, while methodological challenges are concerned with exactly how an ombudsman engages with the various actors in humanitarian assistance.

Institutional Arrangements

i. Membership and Internationalisation

The 'Ombudsman Project' has been led primarily by UK-based agencies, however, it is recognised that the Ombudsman can only work as an international body, including membership from non-UK NGOs. However, to set up an ombudsman within the context of an international system would require tremendous commitment, time and negotiation with a much larger set of actors beyond the UK. A Humanitarian Ombudsman would require legitimacy amongst the international humanitarian system, which includes host governments, local organisations and the UN. While a pilot phase need not exclude international NGOs, jurisdictional implications would require further investigation beyond the scope of this report.

ii. Finding a niche vis-à-vis host governments and existing regulatory and legal frameworks

Recent complex emergencies have shown that there are many issues where a 'gap filling' structure, such as an ombudsman, can provide an important service where States are too weak, or (owing to internal conflict or disinterest) lack structures in a given area for exercising jurisdiction. An ombudsman may be able to play an important role within this context if the complaint(s) was within a clearly defined remit.

Out of respect for the sovereignty of the host government, and in order not to take on tasks for which other agencies were better suited, an ombudsman may need to 'pass' in many cases. Nevertheless, an ombudsman would need to act cautiously and with tact in defin-

Table 1. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Ombudsman Model

strengths

- 1 accountable to beneficiaries
- 2 accessible and open
- 3 neutral, independent body
- 4 reporting best practice lessons brought forward
- 5 can highlight problems objectively
- 6 encourages administrative reform
- 7 improves transparency of organisations
- 8 method of holding espoused standards to account
- 9 can identify good practise as well as bad

weaknesses

- 1 last port of call/reactive
- 2 effectiveness often depends on the individual
- 3 remit too narrowly defined
- 4 timescale/delay
- 5 power of recommendation
- 6 lack of accessibilty
- 7 under resourced
- 8 nobody likes to be investigated

ing operational boundaries in the grey areas between formal regulatory structures and the unmet needs of humanitarian accountability.

iii. Legitimacy and authority: who is the Ombudsman and who is the office accountable to?

The legitimacy of the office of the Ombudsman, as an institution safeguarding accountability, is ultimately dependent on two key issues: who the person is, and to whom the Ombudsman is in turn responsible. At this stage it is not clear whether there is one person who would command universal authority and legitimacy to elicit the necessary level of co-operation. A governance structure has been suggested but it would take time for this structure to wield a legitimate authority which has a universal basis.

iv. Financing

The sustainability of an ombudsman's office would require an ongoing guarantee of funds from within the sector. Private schemes surveyed in the study were funded predominantly by the sectors themselves with occasional grants provided by sources outside the scheme. Funding the Ombudsman scheme solely from institutional donors would have to be weighted against the perception that accepting those funds might compromise the independence of the Ombudsman.

Methodological Challenges

i. Difficulties and dangers in the beneficiary focus

It is not yet known whether beneficiaries will have the freedom and knowledge to be able to register their views on the management of the disaster which is affecting them. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that powerful stakeholders can 'represent' the beneficiaries in such a way as to further their own, not necessarily legitimate or humanitarian, aims. There is no simple rule or method for dealing with this danger. Diplomatic skills, awareness and understanding of the political economy of aid and conflict, and a flexible operating style will be essential qualities enabling an ombudsman to overcome these challenges.

Table 2. What is an Ombudsman?

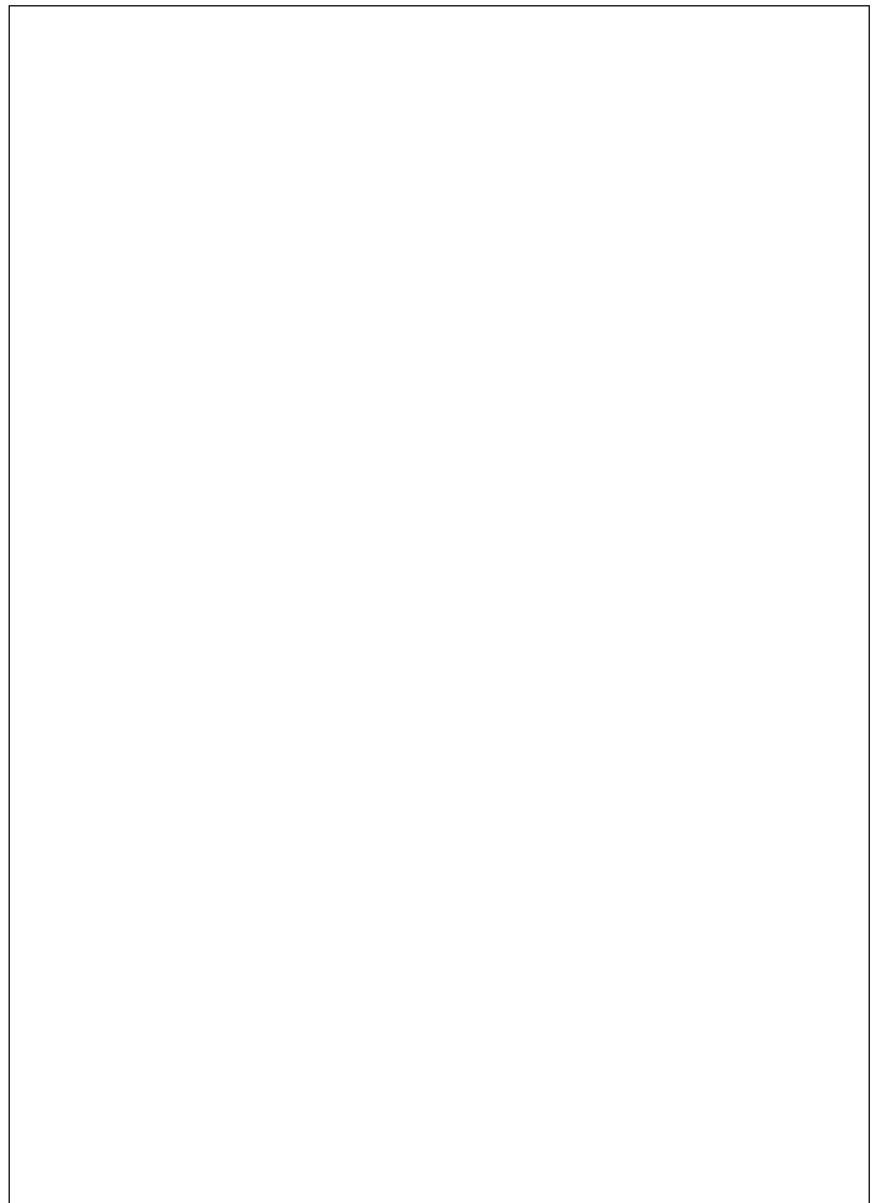
what? An ombudsman is an independent office or individual that responds to complaints regarding the service they are receiving. The ombudsman may also initiate investigations without receiving a complaint, if they foresee a problem.

how does it work? Upon receiving a complaint or investigating a situation, the office or person attempts to determine whether or not the actions in the circumstances were valid. If the ombudsman determines that malpractice has in fact occurred, it seeks to negotiate with both the providers and the recipients of a service, and come to an appropriate means of redress that might satisfy both parties.

what manner? Ombudsmen tend not to be 'policing' bodies but rather are considered to be mediators or negotiators.

how do they ensure compliance? Recommendations are made to alter the practice of the organisation providing the service, and as such, it has the ability to improve service delivery over the longer term.

Children playing in the ruins. Kuito, Angola. Photo: Ian Christoplos



ii. Agreed codes and standards of practice.

A Humanitarian Ombudsman will need a clear basis from which to make judgments about humanitarian action. Only the Red Cross/Red Crescent NGO Code of Conduct and Sphere Minimum Standards aim to provide universal codes of best practice and standards for humanitarian assistance, but both of these are largely untested, at present. However, an ombudsman may be able to strengthen the applicability of both the Code and Standards, by testing them in the field.

In summary, the challenges demonstrate that there are a number of critical areas that need thorough testing: a Humanitarian Ombudsman needs to establish universal legitimate authority; it needs to establish exactly how codes and standards could be applied in different contexts; it would need to develop effective ways of acting within the complex web of international stakeholders; and perhaps most importantly, it needs to truly understand the realities of interacting with claimants at the field level.

How would a Humanitarian Ombudsman Operate?

The Working Vision & Role of the Ombudsman

The strengths of ombudsmen lie primarily in their ability to provide people with a voice in the delivery and receipt of a service. The primary aims of a Humanitarian Ombudsman would be to provide beneficiaries with a voice, while at the same time advising and facilitating agency efforts to find ways to improve practice. Thus:

♦ The **vision** is for a Humanitarian Ombudsman to act as an impartial and independent voice for those people affected by disaster and conflict.

♦ The **role** of the Ombudsman would be to provide a mechanism by which the concerns of people affected by disaster and conflict can be raised and addressed within the humanitarian community.

The Triggers: What would enable the Ombudsman to intervene?

As discussed earlier, beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance would inevitably encounter difficulty in lodging a complaint directly or having ready access to

the Ombudsman's office. Consequently, it seems wise to create several triggers that would activate the involvement of the Ombudsman. A potential set of triggers are as follows:

i. Complaints from people eligible to receive humanitarian assistance or a person they have requested to lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman on their behalf.

The Ombudsman would endeavour to find channels through which to inform beneficiaries of the possibility of lodging complaints or concerns. In order to do this, participating agencies would be encouraged to provide information on the Ombudsman and its role, and to ensure that people are made aware of the mechanisms by which one can complain.

ii. A request from one or more member agencies operational in the field.

Many requests for intervention by the Ombudsman would inevitably come from within the humanitarian community. The Ombudsman would establish and publicise channels through which agencies and individual field staff could raise issues of concern.

iii. A proactive decision by an ombudsman that the monitoring of a particular response was wise given the circumstances of the crisis.

One of the tasks of the office would be to monitor existing information regarding current humanitarian emergencies so as to anticipate how agencies were adhering to the principles and standards of good practice. A proactive ombudsman would have the freedom to initiate involvement of the office at his or her own volition.

Values and Approaches

An ombudsman is traditionally an analyst who judges whether or not actors are complying with a relatively clear set of legal principles. Humanitarian emergencies, however, do not lend themselves to clear, explicit rules and set-piece enforcement procedures. Therefore, the Ombudsman would act essentially as a policy analyst providing counsel to different actors engaged in considering the implications of their actions both in the light of their own organ-

isational values, strengths and weaknesses, and also from the perspective of the beneficiaries whom they serve. Most importantly, the Ombudsman would actively use the approaches found in participatory methods and engage in considerable levels of dialogue both in groups and on an individual basis, and attempt to facilitate resolutions with the actors involved. Values that an ombudsman should strive toward include:

Transparency. A core assumption behind the work of the Ombudsman is that improved NGO accountability can be achieved best through increased transparency and flow of information. The work of the Ombudsman must therefore be conducted with maximal transparency through open discussion of complaints, problems and potential solutions among all stakeholders.

Impartiality. The perceived impartiality of the Ombudsman is central to the legitimacy of the office. Although the Ombudsman acts on behalf of people receiving humanitarian assistance, agencies and beneficiaries alike must be convinced that the Ombudsman would act impartially. Since the Ombudsman would represent the interests of beneficiaries, effectively the office would act to 'level the playing field' in the currently uneven power relationship between agency and receiving community.

Independence. In order to act in an impartial manner, the Ombudsman would need to act independently of pressure from stakeholders with vested interests not directly related to the question at hand. The independence of the Ombudsman would be strengthened by its governance structure and would depend heavily upon the skill and tact of the Ombudsman.

Remedies: Incentives Before Sanctions

The consultations clearly established that agencies prefer an ombudsman to provide advice and incentives advancing compliance with the principles of the agreed codes and standards, as opposed to policing non-compliance.

In most of the schemes surveyed, it is apparent that the Ombudsman also endeavours to resolve complaints and concerns through dialogue. At the same

time, intended outcomes must balance the need of the Ombudsman to have 'teeth'. Some of the potential remedies available to the Ombudsman are summarised below.

i. Recommendation for improving practice and procedures

This could apply at the level of the individual member agency or sector wide. It might also meet a unique challenge in a specific context (e.g. water and sanitation standards in refugee camps). Similarly, through bringing to light the problems associated with adherence to principles and standards, the Ombudsman could assist agencies to consider the adoption of specific procedures within the organisation designed to promote adherence.

ii. Response to beneficiaries

In the interest of increasing the transparency of the humanitarian system and improving accountability to beneficiaries, the Ombudsman might request that an agency provide an explanation to the complainant. Similarly, the Ombudsman might recommend that a given agency apologise to particular recipients of humanitarian assistance.

iii. Corrective Action

Where appropriate, the Ombudsman could ask an agency to take corrective action, not only internally, but by rectifying the damage or harm to beneficiaries resulting from its action.

iv. Publish a summary of findings

The Ombudsman might decide that the circumstances warrant the publication of the Ombudsman's findings on a specific complaint, in addition to the normal procedure of publishing a general annual report. This step, in some quarters referred to as 'name and shame', would be reserved as a remedy of last resort.

v. Dismissal

Also as a last resort, the Ombudsman might reserve the right to dismiss any agency from participation in the scheme for persistent non-adherence to the Codes and Standards.

Governance

The question of to whom an ombudsman is accountable to is a fundamental concern. A temporary system of trans-

parent operational procedures and Memoranda of Understanding would be used to define the role vis-à-vis participating agencies and host governments. It is assumed that the Ombudsman would eventually establish a more formal governance structure with trustees drawn from key institutions.

In response to the question, 'can an ombudsman be adapted for use in the humanitarian sector?' this study has sought to put forward a general method and organisational design that could be utilised during a trial period. The elements have been designed to respond to the challenges raised by people consulted, outlined earlier in the report. The model is by no means concrete and how a Humanitarian Ombudsman might work in practice remains to be seen. A critical issue, therefore, will be to determine how best to take the research process forward and whether or not to test this model out in the field.

Conclusions & Recommendation

The challenge of addressing the accountability needs of the humanitarian sector is of immense concern to those wishing to improve the delivery and receipt of humanitarian assistance. Embarking on the development of any new body risks being seen as creating yet another organisation to further complicate and distract from the task of delivering assistance to those most in need. At the same time, the desire to empower the beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance to actively participate and hold agencies to account is seen as a primary aim by NGOs across the sector. This is the reason why an ombudsman was foreseen by participants in the 1997 World Disasters Forum as a possible way forward for the accountability agenda. Subsequent research into creating an ombudsman has found that, while the challenges remain considerable there is evidence that such a body can be made to work within the unique context of humanitarian assistance.

It is therefore recommended that the Ombudsman be thoroughly tested in a pilot phase. This would help to establish the legitimacy of an ombudsman among the key actors in the international humanitarian system, such as host governments, local organisations and the

UN. A pilot project would further help to develop a clearer understanding of the methodological realities outlined in the report and help to establish a realistic modus operandi for a Humanitarian Ombudsman.

Notes

(1) extracted from the full report: 'An Ombudsman for Humanitarian Assistance? A Report on the Findings from a Feasibility Study, Ombudsman Project Working Group. Presented to World Disasters Forum, London. June 1998.

(2) The term 'ombudsman' does not denote any specific gender. The term 'beneficiary' is used in this paper to represent all potential claimants of humanitarian assistance.

(3) The Steering committee included representation from Action Aid, the British Red Cross, CAFOD, CARE-UK, DFID, Merlin, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Oxfam GB, RedR, Save the Children (UK), and World Vision UK.

(4) In spite of this general criticism, 99 per cent of decisions by ombudsmen within the UK are complied with (Interview with Consumers Association).

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Website: see below.**

*Adapted from the Ombudsman Project, Oneworld website
<http://www.oneworld.org/ombudsman>.*

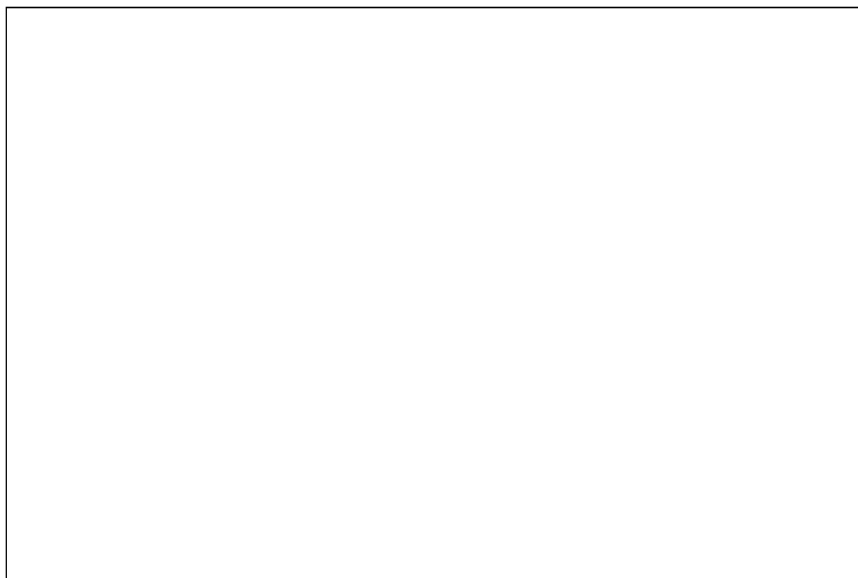
The Full Economic Impact of Natural Disasters

by Charlotte Benson and Edward J. Clay

Estimates of yearly losses from natural disasters over the first eight years of this decade averaged US\$75.9 billion (in real 1998 prices). Moreover, there is clear evidence that the costs of disasters are increasing. Real annual economic losses averaged \$4.9 billion in the 1960s, \$9.5 billion in the 1970s and \$15.1 billion in the 1980s. Record losses of \$191 billion were experienced in 1995, the year of the Kobe earthquake. The second-highest-ever losses occurred in 1998, with a series of disasters around the world causing estimated economic damage of \$90 billion.

Dramatic as those figures are, the full economic cost of disasters is probably even higher. Estimated figures are largely based on direct physical impacts, or losses of fixed capital and inventory. Many indirect and secondary, or flow, effects on economic activity—such as changes in fiscal policies or the long-term consequences of the reallocation of investment resources—go unrecorded. This partly reflects difficulties in isolating the impact of natural disasters from other factors on economic performance. Those assessing the costs of a disaster are also typically concerned most with meeting the short-term humanitarian needs of affected communities and funding reconstruction, and thus concentrate on physical damage.

The emphasis on direct, physical losses has also engendered a widespread perception that the absolute cost of disasters increases, and their relative cost as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) declines, as a country develops and, thus, as the value of capital assets rises. However, recent analysis of the relationship between the structure and stage of development of an economy and its hazard vulnerability suggests a far more complex picture. Disasters pose particular problems for low- and middle-income countries. However, it is clear that there is considerable scope, both at a macro and household levels, to influence the extent and nature of hazard vulnerability.



House destroyed in landslide after Hurricane Mitch. Photo: Ian Christophos

risk from volcano damage at the sites of public buildings. There had not been a major eruption for over four centuries. The subsequent eruption, which began in 1995, has since devastated the island's capital, located only four kilometers from the volcano. Much of the infrastructure repaired or replaced after Hugo was destroyed.

The proportion of a country and region affected by a disaster also has obvious implications. At one extreme, natural disasters can have severe economic impacts in the case of small island economies. In the microstate of Niue in the South Pacific the cost of repairing damage to government-owned buildings as a consequence of Cyclone Ofa, which struck the island in 1990, was estimated at \$4 million, equivalent to a massive 40 percent of GDP. Except in the case of widespread drought, recent natural disasters have not had measurable impacts on national economic aggregates—such as levels of GDP, the balance of payments or the rate of investment—in geographically larger countries. Instead, their effects are perhaps best conceived of in terms of development opportunities foregone at a national level, even though they can cause serious local economic disturbances. In the Philippines, for example, modest achievements in improving the country's transportation systems, and the increased difficulties in meeting the social infrastructure needs of a growing population can be attributed to the fact that a large proportion of public resources that were earmarked for those programs has been re-directed to disaster response. Relative hazard risks can also influence choices of investments, whether within or, in the case of multinational corporations, among countries. In Viet Nam, for example, this is contributing to widening regional disparities. Some of the more hazard-prone regions have received disproportionately small shares of both private and public investment, as well as external assistance.

Mined bridge destroyed by Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua 1999. Photo: Ian Christophlos

Determinants of economic vulnerability

The scale and nature of the economic impacts of a disaster depend on a range of factors, including:

- ♦ The type of hazard
- ♦ Its geographical scale of impact
- ♦ The size and structure of an economy
- ♦ Prevailing economic conditions.

Most obviously, different types of hazard cause varying levels of physical damage to infrastructure and agriculture, with implications for their indirect and secondary impacts. For example, droughts can result in heavy crop and livestock losses, while infrastructure and productive capacity are typically largely unaffected. Earthquakes have little impact on standing crops, excluding localized losses occurring as a consequence of landslides, but can cause widespread destruction of infrastructure and other productive capacity. Floods can also cause extensive physical damage to both infrastructure and agriculture, depending on their timing relative to the agricultural cycle. However, as compared to earthquakes, a much larger share of the damage may be readily repairable.

The relative frequency of various hazards in particular regions of the world also plays an important role. It can determine the scale and nature of disaster mitigation and preparedness measures, and thus subsequent financial and economic losses. Even strictly scientific, objective information on the probability of occurrence of particular hazards at varying levels of severity over specified periods may be largely lacking. Moreover, where information does exist, it may not be widely disseminated. Perceptions of risk therefore play an important role in determining behavior. Those perceptions are strongly influenced by the intervals between events, since experience with the disaster will thus vary within communities at risk and among policy-makers and the donor community. For example, the Caribbean island of Montserrat was severely damaged by Hurricane Hugo in 1989, with an estimated 98 percent of the island's housing stock, as well as the main jetty, being damaged or destroyed. Total damage was some \$240 million. Hurricane-proofing features were introduced into the design of houses and other buildings during reconstruction. However, little regard was paid to maps showing

lent to a massive 40 percent of GDP. Except in the case of widespread drought, recent natural disasters have not had measurable impacts on national economic aggregates—such as levels of GDP, the balance of payments or the rate of investment—in geographically larger countries. Instead, their effects are perhaps best conceived of in terms of development opportunities foregone at a national level, even though they can cause serious local economic disturbances. In the Philippines, for example, modest achievements in improving the country's transportation systems, and the increased difficulties in meeting the social infrastructure needs of a growing population can be attributed to the fact that a large proportion of public resources that were earmarked for those programs has been re-directed to disaster response. Relative hazard risks can also influence choices of investments, whether within or, in the case of multinational corporations, among countries. In Viet Nam, for example, this is contributing to widening regional disparities. Some of the more hazard-prone regions have received disproportionately small shares of both private and public investment, as well as external assistance.

As regards economic structure, factors such as the choice of crops grown and the composition of the manufacturing and service sectors play an important role in determining the extent of hazard vulnerability. For example, many traditional root crops and coarse grains are more drought-tolerant than newer crop varieties. Hybrid coconut trees can be more vulnerable to typhoons than more traditional varieties, which typically have longer rooting systems. Indeed, the development process itself can exacerbate hazard vulnerability. For example, in the case of drought, as an economy begins to develop, the effects of drought are diffused more widely through the economy, rather than focusing specifically on the agricultural sector. This reflects greater overall integration and stronger intersectoral linkages between the agricultural and burgeoning manufacturing sectors, which in earlier stages of development are often orientated around agro-processing and the production of agricultural supplies. Increasingly, economy-wide financial systems for flow of funds, including small-scale private savings and transfers, also play a role in diffusing the impact of drought more widely, including into urban areas. Recovery from drought may then be more delayed, as the manufacturing sector continues to face input shortages and there is a lagged pick-up in consumer demand. Public finance implications may also be more severe, as the government is likely to meet a larger share of the costs of the relief efforts itself rather than relying heavily on international assistance.

Finally, a myriad of factors, both coincidental and deliberate, act to offset or amplify the economic impacts of disasters, whether explicitly or implicitly. In terms of the balance of payments, for example, a number of developing countries rely on a handful of commodities for a significant part of their export earnings. Contemporaneous fluctuations in the prices of such commodities, as well as in major imports such as oil, can exacerbate or minimize the impacts of natural disasters, usually by chance timing. For example, in 1984 high coffee and tea prices helped Kenya sustain its export earnings at a time of severe drought. In some cases, world market dominance also

plays a role. For example, the Philippines has effectively benefited as a major coconut product exporter, with temporary disaster-related declines in production offset by higher international prices. Commodity reserves have also been successfully used to maintain export earnings and prevent loss of export markets in the aftermath of natural disasters, as illustrated by Fiji's use of its sugar reserves. On occasion, disaster-related reinsurance inflows have further boosted a country's balance of payments.

Countries already experiencing other adverse economic shocks of one form or another are also typically more vulnerable to natural hazards. For example, Ghana faced almost continual economic decline from the early 1960s to early 1980s, with per capita incomes a third lower in 1980 than in 1970. A subsequent drought was one of several factors forcing the economy to a crisis point and finally resulting in the adoption of a succession of structural adjustment programs. Meanwhile, in both Ethiopia and Mozambique, the effects of droughts in the late 1980s and early 1990s were amplified by on-going internal conflicts.

There are thus a number of factors that determine a country's vulnerability to hazards. Although the scale of direct, physical damage typically increases along the spectrum from least to most developed countries, this does not imply that developed countries are most vulnerable. Instead, a high vulnerability to hazards may itself be an obstacle to development.

Government and aid policies
On the positive side, high levels of vulnerability to hazards are not inevitable. There is considerable scope for reducing risk through the application of appropriately designed disaster mitigation, preparedness, relief and rehabilitation efforts. Such measures should not be viewed as discrete activities, undertaken by specialist government agencies, but rather as incorporated into development projects, as well as economic activities and government planning exercises more generally.

Current practices in many areas of economic activity could be adapted to reduce vulnerability. For example, extension workers could do much to promote techniques that reduce hazard-related agricultural losses, such as encouraging inter-cropping of taller and shorter field crops to provide some protection to the latter during typhoons. Similarly, building codes could promote the incorporation of hazard-proofing features in earthquake- and hurricane-prone areas.

Broader government and donor policy and planning documents could also take greater account of natural disasters. Rather than ignoring hazards, as is currently largely the case, they should recognize the potential threats that hazards pose to sustainable, equitable development, and they should attempt to reduce overall economic hazard vulnerability. Indeed, even governments with relatively limited financial resources can do much to reduce vulnerability, and the degree of commitment by the public sector and donors to such issues should not be measured in financial terms alone.

In addressing both hazard vulnerability and post-disaster response, more attention needs to be paid to economic activities, rather than focusing primarily on economic assets. This shift in focus would contribute to improved contingency planning and a more effective and considered response.

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Charity or a right?

An update on recent work towards a rights-based approach to food and nutrition security

by Britta Ogle

*Freedom from hunger is a human right. It is now more than 50 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including Article 25 that specifies food as a human right, was adopted by the United Nations. It is more than 30 years since state parties to the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 1966 placed further emphasis on the importance of freedom from hunger as a fundamental human right. Still, some 790 million people continue to be chronically malnourished, and even greater numbers of people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies such as iodine deficiency or iron deficiency. Repeatedly we hear statements that no other human right has been so persistently and repeatedly violated at such scale as the human right to freedom from hunger. Many are asking **why** and **how** a rights-based approach to food and nutrition security should make a difference now.*

Renewed calls for increased attention to food as a human right

A number of events in the last ten years can be seen as milestones in the increasing international demand and renewed commitment to adequate food as a human right (Box 1). Three of these have become especially strong forces in the development of the human rights movement. First, good nutrition was explicitly stated as a right in several articles in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989, Article 24.2; 27.3). This has been a driving force for UNICEF in taking a strong lead in the change towards a

Box 1. Recent Milestones for Food as a Human Right

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1989 | Convention on the Rights of the Child |
| 1990 | World Declaration on Nutrition |
| 1991 | UN ACC/SCN establishes a Working Group on Nutrition, Ethics and Human Rights (based on work from 1989 of a smaller group working on nutrition and ethics) |
| 1992 | World Food Summit Plan of Action |
| 1993 | UN Secretary General Reform Programme emphasises Human Rights |
| 1994 | ACC/SCN organises a Symposium on "The substance and politics of a symposium on "Human Rights approach to food and nutrition policies and programmes" hosted by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (April) |
| 1999 | Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Right adopts the General Comment 12 on the Right to Food (June) |

(adapted from ACC/SCN News, Nr 18 July 1999)

rights-based approach in their policies and programmes. Second, the 1996 World Food Summit strongly reaffirmed the right to food and adequate nutrition as a human right (Plan of Action, Commitment 7.4), and requested the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in collaboration with relevant bodies specifically “to better define the rights related to foods in Article 11 of the Covenant and to propose ways to implement and realise these rights.” A commitment was signed to implement, monitor and follow-up the Plan of Action in co-operation with the international community.

In May 1999, the Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural rights adopted Comment 12 on the right to adequate food, a specification in 41 points, of the meaning of and obligations for involved parties of the human right to adequate food. There are thus in place much stronger and clearer international instruments to implement the right than ever before. What is the impact?

Can a rights-based approach provide added value to public nutrition?

In the international community involved in public nutrition, many are hoping that a rights-based approach will re-vitalise and re-focus development policy and actions. Nutrition has long been domi-

nated by the basic needs approach and while considerable improvements can be identified in many areas, the process has been slow and we are still far from the goals sets by several of these recent international meetings. With increased life spans and rapid urbanisation, new nutrition problems are also emerging. Rapid globalisation places new pressures on weak and marginal groups. There is a compelling need for re-thinking public nutrition.

The World Alliance for Nutrition and Human Rights (WANHR) views human rights as relationships between claim holders and duty bearers (WANHR 1998). Wherever an individual has a valid claim, someone will have the duty to respect, protect, facilitate or fulfil these rights. Duty bearers can be identified at many levels from the household, community, civil society, state or international levels. Duties have often been conceptualised in different ways.

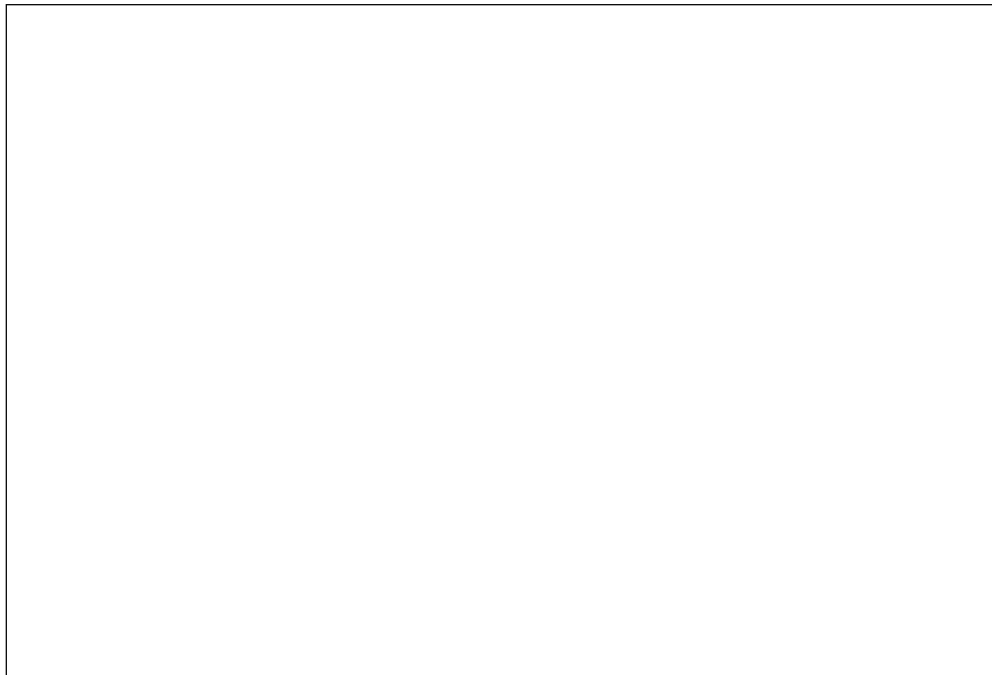
- ♦ charity vs. entitlement
- ♦ beneficiary vs. claim holder
- ♦ claim holder vs. duty-bearer
- ♦ right vs. obligation
- ♦ neglect vs. accountability
- ♦ entitlement vs. commitment

Understanding and applying the human rights-based approaches will require considerable change in thinking and attitudes of all actors involved in

development work. In a human rights approach, provision of food and adequate nutrition cannot be viewed as an act of charity but constitutes a rightful claim. Claims imply that someone has corresponding obligations and that actions can be taken to respect, protect, facilitate or fulfil the entitlements. In the food and nutrition context examples of “respect” may be to make it possible for people to gain access, in a sustainable manner, to sufficient and culturally acceptable food through their own efforts and with dignity. Respect may mean not hindering access to land or other resources needed for produce food. The persistent work by many organisations to protect breastfeeding rights of women provide excellent examples on what human rights actions vis-à-vis “protection” of rights can involve. Examples of “facilitating” may be observed in accessing services or information on rights or of services to all groups. Only at the ultimate level of obligations, when other actions fail, comes the level to “provide”, yet this is often the one level that comes to mind when discussing human rights.

Using a human rights approach will require considerable training efforts and competence building at many levels. It opens opportunities not only for institutions and organisations, including many civil society groups, to learn and the rethink their roles but also to strengthen the participation of claim holders themselves in the development. A starting point for many institutions and organisations will be to apply these new concepts by reviewing ongoing programmes and activities from such a perspective and to complement existing causal analyses with a role/responsibility analysis of obstacles to the realisation of rights at various levels. It is perhaps in this opportunity to rethink and redirect public nutrition actions where the greatest strength in a human rights approach lies.

Vegetable garden, Kuito, Angola 1996. Photo: Ian Christophos



Rights imply accountability. The change to a rights approach places more emphasis on accountability for actions and performance and thus gives opportunities to involve new partners, new institutions and organisations in food and nutrition related work. Examples include a wide range of groups from legal offices to consumer groups. It also opens the door to publicity regarding violations, an efficient and long used tool in the context of other forms of human rights than food and nutrition. Advocacy becomes integrated in analyses of what were formerly often viewed as technical issues.

A check list to help focusing performance

WANHR has suggested a check list of questions to help focus an analysis of programmes on human rights systems and performance by countries. It can also be a useful starting point for research on human rights approaches. It is available in a web based tutorial provided at www2.hawaii.edu/~kent/tut/.

The approach includes basic questions such as:

- ♦ What international human rights agreements relating to food and nutrition has the country ratified ?
- ♦ What articulated policy documents does a country have vis-à-vis human rights to food and nutrition?
- ♦ Are there any clear commitments with regard to food and nutrition (at different levels, e.g., to respect/ protect/ facilitate or fulfil)
- ♦ What agencies in the country have specific responsibilities to carry out the articulated obligations?
- ♦ What mechanisms are in place to assure that government carries out its obligations?
- ♦ What roles could or should non-governmental organisations or civil society institutions play in monitoring what goes on in the country?

Making rights a reality

Many UN organisations are now working toward a more human rights-based approach and internally reviewing how they can best change their food and nutrition activities. One of the organisations taking a lead in working with gov-

ernments and programmes, has been UNICEF. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was ratified by more governments than any other human rights instrument. This has given UNICEF a strong platform to work from. Governments have also put in place legislation and protective mechanisms vis-à-vis rights to health care and nutrition of children that provide a basis for efforts to realise rights-based approaches. CRC activities in UNICEF are naturally combined with those specified in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

For UNICEF, the use of the human rights framework has included major efforts in internal staff training to help them understand put into practice a rights-based approach. They are changing their programmes and strategies to strengthen their participatory work, to monitor what rights various countries have ratified and to act as watchdogs, publicising the violations that are taking place. This constitutes a radical stance for a UN agency. Their ongoing work can be followed on their homepage (see point 11 below).

"Human rights begins at home"

(Gro Harlem Brundtland,
at the 1999 ACC/SCN symposium)

UNICEF was instrumental in initiating a Nutrition and Ethics working group in the UN sub committee on Nutrition, ACC/SCN already in 1989. This group has specifically examined differences between needs based and rights-based approaches, shared information with aid-agencies and nutrition professionals involved in global nutrition work, argued for changes towards a rights-based approach in international nutrition and systematically publicised information. Their efforts led to the 1999 SCN- Symposium on "The substance and politics of a Human Rights approach to food and nutrition policies and programmes" that was hosted by the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, and which provided an important forum for discussion among UN-agencies, bilateral and non-governmental organisations involved in nutrition work.

There is now in place a combination of stronger and more articulated international legal instruments, renewed commitment by international organisations and a growing number of practical examples of initiatives applying a human rights approach to food and nutrition improvement. They are useful tools for institutions to review their strategies and activities in the area of global food and nutrition work, and will also hopefully activate and interest a wider group of people in securing human rights.

Searching for more information ?

1. <http://www.unhcr.ch/> web site for UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Committee on Economic, Social and cultural rights has a presentation of substantive issues arising in the implementation of the international covenant on economic, social and cultural rights; general comment 12 (Twentieth session 1999 = the right to adequate food (art 11)
2. www2.hawaii.edu/~kent/tut - A tutorial around Human Rights to Food and Nutrition by George Kent on behalf of WANHR
3. www.unsystem.org/acscn/ - UN coordinating group for nutrition. The latest newsletter has a full report on the Symposium on Nutrition and Human Rights, April 1999
4. Food policy 1994, 19(6)491-516—Oshaug, A., et al, Human rights: a normative basis for food and nutrition - relevant policies
5. Food policy 1996, 21(1) Special issue on Nutrition and Human Rights
6. Food policy 1998 23(5) p329-347 Haddad & Oshaug, How does the human rights perspective help to shape the food and nutrition policy agenda
7. Food policy 1998 23 (3-4) pp 215-230 Maxwell, S., Saucy with the Gods: nutrition and food security speak to poverty
8. Eide, A., 1984 Food as a Human Right, UN University
9. FIAN, a non governmental organisation working with human rights to food publishes "Hungry for what is right." A magazine for the human right to feed oneself, nr 15 Juni 1999
10. Toebes, B., 1999 The right to health as a human right in international law. School of Human Rights Research. Intersentia Antwerpen
11. www.UNICEF.org has a special site for human rights including a paper on Human Rights for Women and Children: How UNICEF helps make them a reality.

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Developmental Humanitarian Assistance¹

Developmental humanitarian assistance is a form of assistance which, in an acute situation, helps to provide long-term solutions of the acute problems and needs of those affected – solutions which are accepted and supported locally. It sees the acute needs as a part of the whole life situation of those affected. This is also the case when humanitarian assistance is given during phases of early reconstruction or during protracted crises. Developmental humanitarian assistance is based on both an immediate needs assessment of those affected, and an analysis of the entire life situation of those affected. This assistance covers basic physical needs and rights such as food and clothing, social needs such as safety and security and those needs provided for in international law, for example in the UN convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a form of assistance which sees the long-term needs in the short-term interventions, not the short-term needs in the long-term interventions. Humanitarian law and the humanitarian imperative to assist the suffering constitute the cornerstones of this form of assistance.

Background

The concept 'developmental humanitarian assistance' has its origins in the debate of the 1980s when, due to the drought in Africa, disaster relief projects were placed in relation to long-term development projects. The focus on the relationship between cause and effect was often based on disasters created by nature. Internationally concepts such as 'Linking Relief and Development' (LRD), Developmental Relief, etc. have been coined. In connection with the end of the cold war the concept has received renewed interest but with other overtones and in another context. The earlier, more common description of natural disasters, limited in time and with various degrees of social causes, has been


changed in many cases to a description of disasters in a context predominated by conflicts of varying intensity and with different structures.

The earlier term 'disaster relief' has been changed to humanitarian assistance as a result of this change, among other things. This is the case both at Sida and internationally. Today international humanitarian principles have been given greater prominence in this form of assistance. The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs has drawn up a humanitarian policy strategy which gives humanitarian assistance a specific framework.

Organisationally there is a tradition which influences both theory and practice in this area. For a long time disaster

relief projects and development projects have been two separate instruments which have had their own organisational structure and even their own separate methods. This has been the case both in governmental assistance and in the assistance provided by non-governmental organisations.

As the interaction between acute intervention, chiefly in conflict situations, and long-term stability and development has attracted great focus, this organisational division must be overcome in various ways. This area which is now in focus could be called an organisational and methodological grey zone. At the same time humanitarian assistance has its specific mandate linked to a humanitarian imperative and humanitarian law



Internally displaced, Angola 1996. Photo: Ian Christoplos

which necessitates organisational clarity.

The concept 'developmental humanitarian assistance' is naturally relevant both in cases of conflicts and in natural disasters since its effects are dependent on the social and economic structure of the community involved.

Discussion

The international debate and research in the area is lively. This provides an opportunity and the momentum for new thinking in an important area which can reasonably be said to concern all international development cooperation. The discussion on developmental humanitarian assistance thereby involves the possibility of discovering new perspectives which can also be of importance for development cooperation in its entirety. In the interaction between development projects and emergency projects new questions and answers come to the fore which influence the planning of both types of projects. For example, mention can be made of the need of making conflict analyses even as a basis for long-term development projects.

The term developmental assistance emanates, as mentioned above, from the situation which prevailed during the mid

1980s. Therefore there are in-built theories (for example in the form of established concepts) which were created in this situation. An example of this is the division of a crisis into distinct periods of time in the form of 'before-during-after' and return to normal. There can occasionally be a need to use these concepts even in the humanitarian crises of today. However since humanitarian assistance moves in a different environment today, the use of this time approach can easily lead to one-track thinking and the concept is thus of only limited value. Usually there is no simple 'before-during-after' perspective in internal conflicts and disintegrating states. Instead issues relating to methods are being given higher priority. This means that there are approaches and methods which can be used throughout a humanitarian crisis regardless of the position of the crisis in a planned time cycle. One example of an available method can be to strengthen local capacity and thereby decrease the intensity of the conflict in the area in question, another can be to work to strengthen the principles of international law.

However, this does not mean of course that the time aspect is totally immaterial for developmental humanitarian

assistance. For example a peace agreement between warring factions can stipulate clear borders for a 'before and after' situation which affects the conditions for this assistance.

OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) writes in a document²: "Contrary to many past assumptions, we have found that a sharp distinction between short-term emergency relief and longer-term development aid is rarely useful in planning support for countries in open conflict." "For the purpose of analysis, the transition from emergency crisis to long-term development has often been described as a 'continuum'. This does not, however, conform to actual situations which follow no set pattern, chronology or order. Emergency relief, rehabilitation work and development assistance all co-exist in time of conflict and crisis, and they interact in innumerable ways. The challenge is to overcome the functional disfunctions of the various agencies involved and to integrate, rather than merely co-ordinate, relief, rehabilitation and development objectives within the framework of a long-term strategy."

The concept 'developmental humanitarian assistance' is an approach and a method. Within its framework issues re-

lating to the environment, equality and conflict management etc can be integrated. It could be said that the developmental perspective is the sum of all the parts, while the environment, equality and conflict management etc are parts of different sizes in this sum. Consequently developmental humanitarian assistance is not a separate activity, additional to other forms of humanitarian assistance. On the contrary, the concept implies that all humanitarian assistance shall have a developmental objective.

Despite the close methodological link between long-term development assistance and humanitarian assistance, there are certain clear differences. For example it can be mentioned that the starting point of a humanitarian assistance programme is almost always a crisis which is so serious that the community involved cannot cope with it at that specific point in time: for instance the severe consequences of a natural disaster or the sudden spread of an internal or international armed conflict. In situations of armed conflict international conventions also lay down specific conditions for humanitarian assistance. One consequence of this is that the group of countries receiving humanitarian assistance is much wider and sometimes different in such situations than in programmes of long-term development assistance.

The concept has been criticised in some respects. For example it is said to be based on the concept of social engineering which makes it possible to change the social behaviour of people with the aid of strategic plans and thus reduce the degree of conflict. This criticism concerns two issues which are independent of each other, partly social engineering as such and partly focusing assistance on internal behaviour and attitudes in each country without giving more consideration to major geopolitical and global economic issues. It has even been stressed that "the merging of relief and development has tended to fold humanitarian aid into the framework of development conditionality." (Mark Duffield³) This means that developmental humanitarian assistance could obscure the focus on 'pure' humanitarian needs as the decisive factor for the implementation of a project.

As a further example of the debate on these issues, mention can be made of the tension between the humanitarian imperative – to give assistance to those in need wherever they may be – and the intention to give assistance which is strategic in a long-term perspective. In one report⁴ this is formulated in the following way: "The dangers of allowing a conflict resolution strategy to jeopardise the impartiality of humanitarian assistance was set against the argument that root causes can no longer be ignored."

Even if much of the international debate on developmental humanitarian assistance concerns areas in which armed conflicts are taking place, the concept is also relevant for natural disasters. The effects of natural disasters are always dependent on social and economic factors. Therefore in natural disasters humanitarian assistance must also take social and economic factors into consideration and have a long-term perspective.

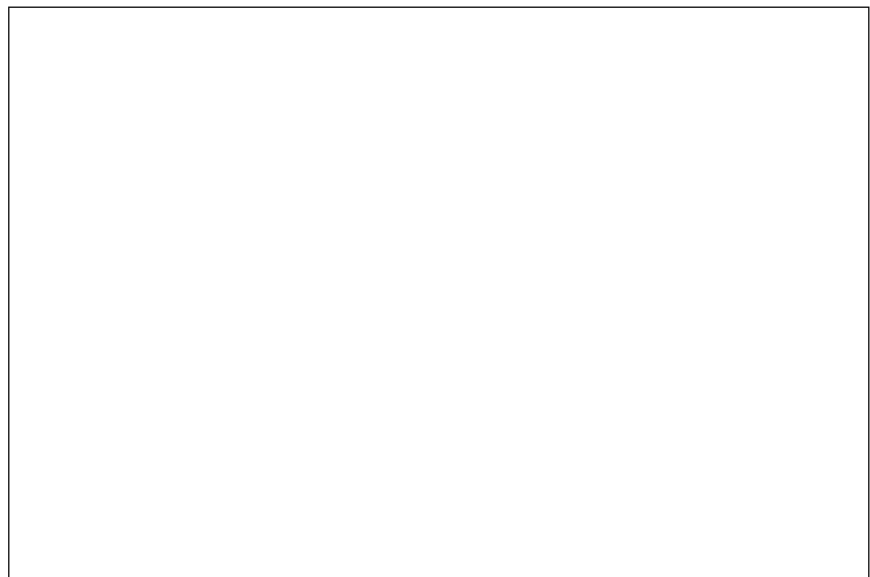
It is necessary to make a critical examination of the concepts developed within all activities, including those in humanitarian assistance. Where the issues of social engineering and consideration of the major geopolitical and global economic issues are concerned, they are relevant to most international assistance, and not merely humanitarian assistance. They are therefore part of a wider discussion. However, the need to focus on direct humanitarian needs can

easily result in a simplified form of helpfulness which does not take the circumstances into consideration. Experience has shown that this is very risky and has sometimes been the cause of severe, negative side-effects. An important outcome of this debate is the realisation that it is only through a good understanding of the implications, potential and weaknesses of the concepts that they can be a good instrument for the activity they serve. In addition good interaction between the parties involved in development cooperation and diplomatic initiative should focus on 'both' and not 'either or'.

Summary

Developmental humanitarian assistance is a form of assistance which, in an acute situation, helps to provide long-term solutions of the acute problems and needs of those affected – solutions which are accepted and supported locally. It sees the acute needs as a part of the whole life situation of those affected. This also applies when humanitarian assistance is given during phases of early reconstruction or during protracted crises. Developmental humanitarian assistance is based on both an immediate needs assessment of those affected and on an analysis of the entire life situation of those affected. This assistance covers basic physical needs and rights such as food and clothing, social needs such as safety and security and those needs

Mined and abandoned Mission Station. Angola, 1996. Photo: Ian Christophos



provided for in international law, for example in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a form of assistance which sees the long-term needs in the short-term interventions, not the short-term needs in the long-term interventions. Humanitarian law and the humanitarian imperative to assist the suffering constitute the cornerstones of this form of assistance.

This means, inter alia

- ♦ that developmental humanitarian assistance is a question of focusing on problems which require special support and methods rather than on periods of time and time schedules. The breakdown of a time schedule into concepts such as post-conflict resolution, rehabilitation etc, limits the perspective – with the consequence that it does not include the contexts which should be in focus. The difference between development cooperation and developmental humanitarian assistance is not always evident. Here it is a question of formulating a strategy, based on an assessment of the needs of people and the socio-economic context, which is as consistent and relevant as possible and which has a long-term bearing on the situation. Since planning and preparations often have to be made rapidly in this type of assistance, a policy and an approach, which have been considered in depth in advance, are of great importance. Follow-up and evaluation are important for the development of this policy and approach.

- ♦ that developmental humanitarian assistance has a legal perspective. To uphold the rights of people in acute and conflictive situations in accordance with international law, for example the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is an important aspects of developmental humanitarian assistance. In concrete situations support to ensure greater observance of an existing constitution can be of vital importance to enable an area or an entire country to cope with, for example, an acute regional drought. Corruption, hidden political agendas and illegal economic interests often exert a substantial influence on the possibility of a country or region to overcome acute situations.

- ♦ that developmental humanitarian assistance is based on knowledge of local situations linked to an external analysis, or critical distance. Many international contacts in, for example, churches or Red Cross societies, have been built up within organisations which have cooperated with each other over a long period of time. This cooperation creates a profound knowledge in certain parts of the organisations which is of immense value in acute situations. But since these organisations on which the work of cooperation rests are also a part of the community they live in, the organisations can also be a part of the problem. A challenge in this situations is to find possible combinations, and even a division of work, between living

close to the problem, possessing profound knowledge of the situation, and having well established contacts, and at the same time having a high profile in the fora where important decisions are taken, for example in international conflict resolution circles as well as political and diplomatic circles. This combination of closeness and knowledge and the international political agenda is a clear challenge in the field of developmental humanitarian assistance.

- ♦ that developmental humanitarian assistance is a form of assistance which in a contradictor world takes into consideration the long-term effects of the short-term interventions as far as this is possible. The influence of different political agendas and major economic interests are often difficult to distinguish clearly in a turbulent situation. It is therefore of value to ensure that it is not merely, in the first place, the parties involved in programmes of humanitarian assistance which have to safeguard the principles of humanity, but it is a challenge for all the different sectors in international society.

Footnotes

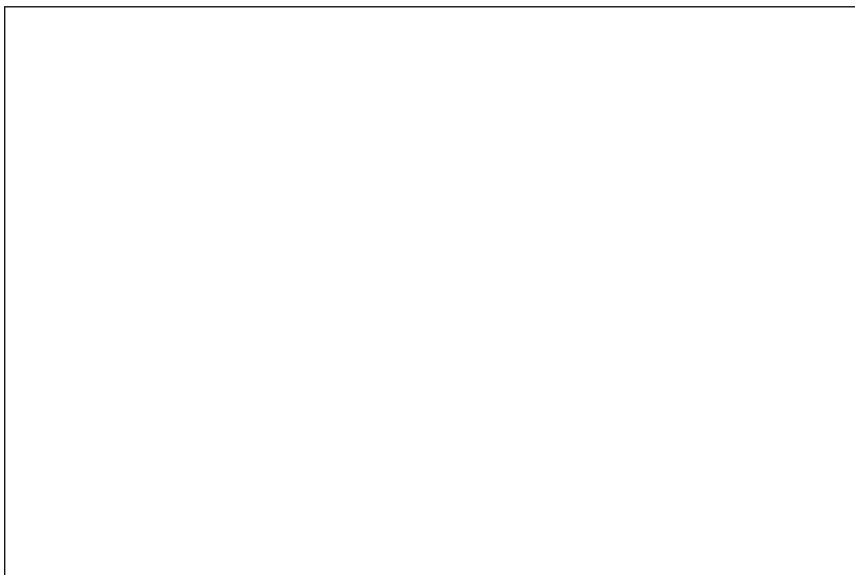
1) This is a brief version of a document (in Swedish) on developmental humanitarian assistance produced by Sida, Department for Cooperation with NGOs and Humanitarian Assistance, in 1998.

2) Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation on the Threshold of the 21st Century, OECD, DAC, 1998 (pp 8, 17 and 48).

3) M Duffield, "Post-Modern Conflict: Aid Policy and Humanitarian Conditionality", July 1997.

4) Principled Aid in an Unprincipled World: Relief, War and Humanitarian Principles, ECHO/ODI Conference Report (p 3), April 7, 1998, London.

Famine camp in Ethiopia from mid-eighties - ready for using again if needed. Photo: Ian Christophos



From a concept paper on Developmental Humanitarian Assistance, Sida, January 1999.

NGO's in Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch: Gaps and Opportunities in Disaster Mitigation and Preparedness

by Ian Christoplos and José Luis Rocha

Over the past decade, the international community has focused attention on so-called complex political emergencies, that is to say disasters caused by conflict, war and state collapse. Natural disasters have fallen into the background. There are some signs that this is beginning to change.

The massive humanitarian suffering caused in recent years by flooding in China and Bangladesh and earthquakes in Turkey have dwarfed the impacts of many more highly publicised conflicts. Hurricane Mitch has particularly galvanised attention on the impacts of natural hazards. Furthermore, Mitch affected areas that had already experienced major armed conflict, thereby raising questions regarding the simple dichotomy between natural disasters and complex political emergencies. Polarised relations between different institutional actors have meant that Mitch is undoubtedly one of the most complex and political natural disasters of the century. It is therefore an obvious place to start reassessing where we stand regarding natural disasters. There is a need to go back to the nearly forgotten natural disaster discourse to re-systematise what concepts such as mitigation and preparedness mean in today's world, and in so doing to develop a greater level of awareness of the potential for dealing

with the new complexities of natural disasters.

The British Red Cross, with the support of the British Government's Department for International Development, is implementing a two-year research project analysing what disaster mitigation and preparedness mean today for NGO's. Case studies are being conducted in four countries: Bangladesh, the Philippines, Zimbabwe and Nicaragua.

This study on Nicaragua was carried out in July-August 1999. The objective was to examine NGO participation in preparedness and mitigation of natural disasters in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. The study, upon which this article is based, looked at how this catastrophic event impacted on NGO roles, priorities and practice. The results were surprising.

Bridge destroyed in Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua 1999. Photo: Ian Christoplos

A permanent state of emergency

Nicaragua has been described as a country in a permanent state of emergency. Between 1972 and 1996 alone it suffered eleven disasters that seriously affected its socio-economic development. Of these, nine were caused by natural phenomena: the Managua earthquake in December 1972, intense rains followed by a drought in 1982, Hurricane Joan in October 1988, the Cerro Negro volcanic eruptions in April 1992 and November-December 1995, the tsunami that hit the Pacific coast in September 1992, tropical storms Brett in August 1993 and Gert in September 1993, and Hurricane Caesar in July 1996.

These eleven disasters—prior to Mitch—left a total of:

107,118 dead
123,071 hurt and injured
6,533 disappeared
656,011 evacuated
571,600 displaced
1,861,002 homeless

They directly or indirectly affected 3,201,734 people, the equivalent of over 77% of the country's current population.

Nicaragua is a country with particularly limited capacity to handle these recurrent crises. It is one of the most heavily indebted nations in the world, and is undergoing a drastic structural adjustment programme in an effort to meet conditions for entry into the IMF classification of Highly Indebted Poor Countries (in order to qualify for receiving a modicum of debt relief). With the state hobbled, one would expect that the NGO's would be rushing to fill the gap, particularly as there is relatively easy access to donor funding after Mitch. Surprisingly disaster mitigation and preparedness does not appear to be a major priority for the NGO's. Before Mitch, disaster mitigation and preparedness efforts were extremely rare. Some NGO's in Nicaragua are now gradually getting more involved in disaster prevention and mitigation activities in the wake of Mitch, and have started to become engaged in reflection on the issue. Although other activities overwhelmingly dominate efforts to 'transform' Nicaragua after Mitch, a modest change of direction is nonetheless discernible.

Mitigation through environmental action

Mitigation is the most notable new focus, particularly as related to increased efforts to protect the environment. The underlying hypothesis is that the impact of events like Hurricane Mitch can be best mitigated by more appropriate agricultural practices and soil conservation measures. Many organisations that promote agro-ecological practices are now presenting their efforts as being oriented towards disaster mitigation. Most of these agencies were already emphasising the promotion of agro-ecological practices within agricultural development.

The drought in recent years caused by El Niño and the landslides, erosion and crop losses brought by Mitch's floodwaters have added urgency to the work of NGO's which have long promoted these practices. During various forums and seminars organised to reflect on Mitch, the environment – disaster linkage has been highlighted. An assortment of environmental projects have been presented, justified on the assumption that they will mitigate natural disasters. The priorities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry have also shifted to give more emphasis to environmental concerns.

Such reflections and policy changes are well justified. The months before Mitch struck were the worst ever in terms of forest fires. The liquidation of woodland caused by extensive cattle ranching has received the blame for much of the impact of Mitch, with the NGO's therefore reinforcing their calls to promote a socially equitable and ecologically sustainable development model.

According to the organisation World Neighbours, conventional extensive commercial agriculture aggravated Mitch's catastrophic effects (Holt 1999). A study was carried out to test this theory. Following the hurricane, 45 research teams from 19 institutions did "equivalent observations" of 440 plots of land with and without agro-ecological practices (primarily consisting of the use of green manures and other forms of inter-cropping, combined with physical and biological soil conservation efforts). Each team consisted of one technician, two village promoters and the two own-

ers of the plots being studied. The teams worked in 181 Nicaraguan communities located in 30 municipalities of 9 departments and 7 regions, observing areas ranging from the island of Ometepe, which only recorded 250 mm of rainfall during Mitch, to Somotillo, which recorded 1,780 mm. The study was designed to ascertain whether the agro-ecological or the conventional plots of land resisted the hurricane better, and which combinations of agro-ecological practices were most effective in reducing the damage. The study found that the peasant plots with sustainable agriculture practices appeared to have suffered less damage than neighbouring plots with conventional practices. According to the data gathered, superficial erosion was three times higher in the conventional plots.

The Swiss supported Central American Programme for Sustainable Sloping Agriculture (PASOLAC) has stressed the mitigating effect that agro-ecological practices have on disasters. PASOLAC's extensive network of NGO's and farmer associations enables it to widely disseminate agro-ecological techniques, although the explicit linking of these activities to natural disaster mitigation depends on each particular institution's specific focus. The Alejandro von Humboldt Centre has led the way in promoting environmental measures through lobbying and through its work with indigenous communities. It has recently begun to link these measures to natural disaster mitigation in its field projects and advocacy efforts.

In normal circumstances, agro-ecological practices do play an important role in reducing erosion, but the actual impact that each specific practice has on phenomena the magnitude of Mitch is still not known. One study carried out for Sida proposed that future research aim to determine the real effectiveness of these practices in intense rains (Christoplos & Barrios 1999). The causal assumptions behind the NGO's new found interest in disaster mitigation through environmental action is not self-evident. Were the landslides and drastic increases in river levels caused by Mitch the result of deforestation and the absence of soil conservation works?

The answer is still not clear. Mitch-style precipitation levels inevitably cause damage, as demonstrated by the fact that many landslides occurred in areas with abundant tree cover. The few conservation works constructed in the mountains of the dry zones proved effective in areas with more gentle slopes but could not resist the force of the currents in areas with more pronounced slopes.

A statistical analysis done by the Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies (INETER) concluded that the precipitation levels Mitch brought will recur about every 150 years (Oxfam America, et al, 1999). Agro-ecological practices may be effective mitigation strategies during 'normal' disasters, whereas the erosion caused by extremely heavy rainfall and the landslides caused by Mitch, are very different phenomena and are perhaps not mitigated to the same degree by such practices.

Agro-ecological practices are quite varied and some may actually aggravate erosion and landslides. One of the most widely used practices in Nicaragua and Central America is the cultivation of the "fodder bean" (*mucuna pruriens*), a variety of nitrogen-fixing legume whose rotation with maize is highly recommended. This bean is very competitive and eliminates weeds, thus also acting as a kind of natural herbicide. But clearing the soil of low-lying vegetation cover and aeration of soils also may leave the ground more susceptible to landslides, as has been demonstrated. This is obviously a complex issue and it would be wrong to presume that all agro-ecological techniques reduce all forms of vulnerability.

It is not clear whether Mitch has actually spawned many new initiatives or fresh analyses of the link between environmental protection and disaster mitigation. Many pre-existing agricultural and environmental development plans have been re-launched in the name of disaster mitigation, with little additional attention to the relationship between earlier priorities (when they were "development" rather than "mitigation" projects) and the new additional objective. Mitigation through environmental protection may therefore consist of a fund-raising approach rather than a well considered strategy.

Seed and tool distribution after Hurricane Mitch. Nicaragua 1999. Photo: Ian Christoph

Disaster Preparedness

Disaster preparedness in Nicaragua primarily consists of two different areas of work, planning and institutional development. On the planning side are efforts concentrated on the design of local plans, the mapping of risks, capacities and vulnerabilities, and territorial planning (Ordóñez, et al, 1999). Oxfam GB and the Nicaraguan Institute for Municipal Promotion (INIFOM) have per-

formed a series of ambitious studies on the national level, while on the local level certain municipalities are preparing their own risk mapping with the help of various NGO's. In both cases, the at-risk areas have been identified and the degree of danger established.

A major problem in acting on the findings of risk mapping initiatives is the challenges in relocating those inhabiting very high risk locations. There is a

Landslide, Nicaragua 1999. Photo: Ian Christoplos

shortage of land (and funds) for such relocations. As a result of the different regimes' approaches to land reform over the past two decades, legal titling is chaotic, resulting in massive obstacles to any effort to address the problem directly. Many properties have not been legally registered for many years now. Currently, there is a re-concentration of agrarian property due to economic and political changes. These factors serve to reinforce an already almost insoluble situation. When the idea was raised of relocating survivors of the mudslide from the Casitas volcano in Posoltega, which caused over 2,000 fatalities, local landowners saw this tragedy as a unique supply-and-demand opportunity to sell their land at a tremendous profit. Their going price was around US\$3,000 per hectare, ten times more than its registered tax value. The resulting impasse is perhaps one of the reasons why the emphasis of many agencies' disaster preparedness work has shifted to institutional development.

NGO's have concentrated most of their disaster preparedness efforts on community organisation, and have achieved their greatest successes in this area. Given the vast diversity of hazards facing Nicaragua (floods, volcanoes, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, etc.) and the lim-

ited capacity of small individual NGO's in the face of these threats, improving community capacity to deal with crisis in general terms may be a more effective use of limited resources than struggling to confront the myriad of overwhelming specific technical challenges. Several organisations that have been working in disaster-affected areas for many years now have created their own networks of promoters to help them channel aid more quickly and effectively, thus having a positive influence on the local organisational capacity. Other NGO's have attempted to build their specific disaster training on top of already existing local organisational structures. Such is the case with the introduction of disaster preparedness work to the efforts of Community Committees, also known as Rural Community Committees or Rural Community Development Committees, depending on the NGO concerned. When these committees act to manage natural disasters, they assume the title of Emergency Committees.

During Mitch, these committees proved to be very effective in evacuating the population and distributing aid. Many of the committees emerged in the 1980's to support the municipalities, and in many places their leaders are considered to be representatives of the public municipal authorities, although in real-

ity collaboration between formal municipal structures and the committees varies according to political affinities. As the committees are generally made up of the most active people in the communities, the NGO's seek those involved as collaborators, liaisons and promoters either individually or in their capacity as committee members.

There is a consensus among NGO's that investing in institutional development has proven to be an important priority in disaster preparedness. This investment becomes strategic during different types of disasters. Local capacity is essential, since destruction of the road network and the lack of transport leave many communities isolated. In certain zones, particularly those most affected by the armed conflict of the 1980's, there is already an installed and consolidated organisational capacity that enables the local population to rapidly establish collaboration to successfully tackle different problems. In a crisis, pragmatism takes precedence over the political divisions that usually hinder community development efforts. The extent of these capacities was demonstrated during Hurricane Mitch in the conflict affected municipalities of Wiwilí and Jalapa, for example, where evacuation was done rapidly and the mobilisation of provisions and organisation of emergency shelters was very effective. This openly contradicts the common assumption that civil society is at its weakest in war-torn areas.

NGO training for institutional development related to disaster preparedness is managed both by community development experts and by others coming from a relief and/or civil defence background. The methodology employed is often a peculiar combination of participatory methods, based on the popular education model developed by Paulo Freire, together with hierarchical and mechanical Civil Defence-style approaches. Though this may appear to be an illogical mix, harmonisation may be possible. The blend of local ownership and awareness combined with relief skills and predetermined chains of command may be quite effective in practice. Actual operations carried out during emergencies have been characterised by Civil Defence style ap-

proaches, with former military personnel often taking the lead.

Where disaster preparedness functions well, it has relied on problems being resolved at municipal and community levels where there is strong and respected governmental leadership. Disaster response is not just a technical and organisational process. It is obvious that problems tend to get resolved better where there is a local, charismatic political figure, particularly in light of the Nicaraguan tradition of gathering behind strong local chiefs and emotionally following charismatic leaders (for better or for worse). Such local leaders are often the ones who have created the necessary consensus to co-ordinate efforts to tackle and react to disasters. Where disaster response has functioned well, one can observe that these leaders have the savvy to deal with prevailing politicisation and polarisation at the local level. In addition, local leaders have the power to informally make up for the lack of a formal judicial framework to define, regulate and distribute functions during emergencies.

Despite the embryonic state of the NGOs' disaster preparedness work, real possibilities have opened for them due to the seemingly negative consequences of the shrinkage capacity of the state apparatus to provide an effective response to disasters. Whilst this cutting back has deprived the state of key staff with specialisation in some of the tasks required during a disaster, some of these people have become NGO officials, which has enabled these NGOs to provide qualified services during a disaster. Most of the NGO staff who are engaged in promoting disaster mitigation and preparedness do so drawing on their earlier experience as civil servants under the Sandinista regime. They also have an understanding of internal political processes and bureaucratic procedures that is otherwise often lacking among NGO staff.

Development as the solution?

It would seem logical that both NGOs and the government would prioritise disaster mitigation and preparedness following Hurricane Mitch, particularly in light of the glaring evidence of the failures and insufficiencies of disaster pre-

vention and mitigation before the disaster. This has not happened. Disaster prevention and mitigation has by and large been overshadowed by the national debate over different development models. The vast majority of plans and polemics regarding the 'transformation' of Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch focus on the debate over the effectiveness of and alternatives to neo-liberal development models in achieving economic growth, poverty alleviation and inclusive development. Shockingly, many reports and recommendations on the requirements for rehabilitation and future development in post-Mitch Nicaragua totally ignore the impact of natural disasters on these alternative development scenarios, and on the impacts of these development scenarios on the ability of vulnerable populations to withstand the impact of shocks to their livelihoods. The heated development debate has displaced concern for disasters. The media attention and struggle for accessing donor assistance has meant that Mitch has paradoxically become a platform for yet again ignoring natural hazards.

Why has this happened? One reason is the common hypothesis that the devastating effects of natural disasters are simply a sign of underdevelopment, and that only the poor suffer during disasters due to their levels of underdevelopment. This cliché is widely employed in Nicaragua to justify the lack of specific disaster prevention activities and to suggest that "development" is "the only solution" to disaster risks. This cliché can even be heard from experienced NGO field staff and researchers, who should know better.

The Nicaraguan experience of natural disasters gives the lie to that cliché. In Mitch, the poor were the most affected in some areas because they had built their houses on land exposed to risk, which was the only land available to them. But this was not the case everywhere. In Jinotega and Matagalpa the best-irrigated lands in the valleys, belonging to relatively wealthy farmers, were destroyed. The low-quality sloping land, cultivated by the poor, was less affected. The impact of such flooding on the poor is related to their role in the local economy and their socio-economic

relationships with their wealthier neighbours. This context is far more complex than "disasters are an indication of underdevelopment" cliché would imply. Furthermore, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes have not only affected the poor population. In other words, whatever the model adopted, development does not eliminate risk.

The controversy over development models has dominated post-Mitch discussions and various groups use Mitch to reinforce their positions. Both sides in the debate mention economic development more than human development, the latter being tainted as being "welfare oriented". By ignoring human development they also miss the dimensions of human suffering caused by disasters. Both the government and many NGOs ignore the tragedy experienced by individuals in the quantitative studies that have emerged after Mitch of the economic impacts and ways to recover from these capital losses. The humanitarian imperative is forgotten or shunned in fear of "creating dependency". The victims' viewpoints and priorities have been generally ignored in official reports and surveys. This absence has made it easier for many observers and planners to jump to the conclusion that there is no better answer to disasters than economic development.

This is not to say that dependency is not a serious problem. Many of the areas affected by Mitch are clearly gravely dependent on aid flows. Community initiative and self-reliance have been seriously affected as a result. The problem is that the baby - the need to prepare for situations where community capacities are actually overwhelmed - has been thrown out with the dependency bathwater.

The Gap Between NGOs and Civil Society

In Latin America more than the rest of the world, and in Nicaragua more than the rest of Latin America, the role of NGOs is being strongly questioned (see Bebbington 1997). NGOs are viewed with great suspicion and are struggling to redefine their niche in a changing world. It is generally acknowledged that they have not always lived up to their own rhetorical aims. There is a re-

cognised lack of congruence, in many cases, between their actions and the ideals they claim to represent. The NGOs' are increasingly competing with private sector companies in efforts to secure contracts to provide public services. This creates an ambiguous situation for NGOs' trying to preserve their identity as institutions driven by values rather than economic gain (Christoplos 1999).

NGOs' are also aware that their capacities are limited and that they cannot assume responsibility for all of the public services that the government is abandoning. As one NGO official put it, "For every nurse that we place, the Ministry of Health lays off another five." This makes NGOs' wary that getting involved in disaster management could saddle them with massive responsibilities when another disaster strikes.

Individual NGOs' are aware that disaster management, while necessary, is too big a package for them to handle alone. They must join together. But broad and practical co-ordination with other NGOs' has been limited due to traditional rivalries and the competition for funding needed to work and survive. The Civic Coalition for Emergency and Reconstruction, which was established in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, succeeded in bringing together over 320 non-governmental and social organisations and networks to present a joint alternative vision regarding the 'transformation' of post-Mitch Nicaragua. It is thus a very interesting initiative. Among its achievements has been a Social Audit aimed at monitoring, auditing and evaluating the effectiveness of local participation in and finances used for rehabilitation activities.

Will this effort last? Similar initiatives in the past have not proven sustainable. An attempt was made in the early 1990's, following two eruptions from Cerro Negro and a tsunami, to create an NGO co-ordinating body that would work specifically during emergency situations. That institution, known as CONADES, even managed to obtain legal status but it took little more than a period of emergency-free calm to dampen the original enthusiasm. Furthermore, several institutions with some experience working in emergencies were never even informed that the project existed. Con-

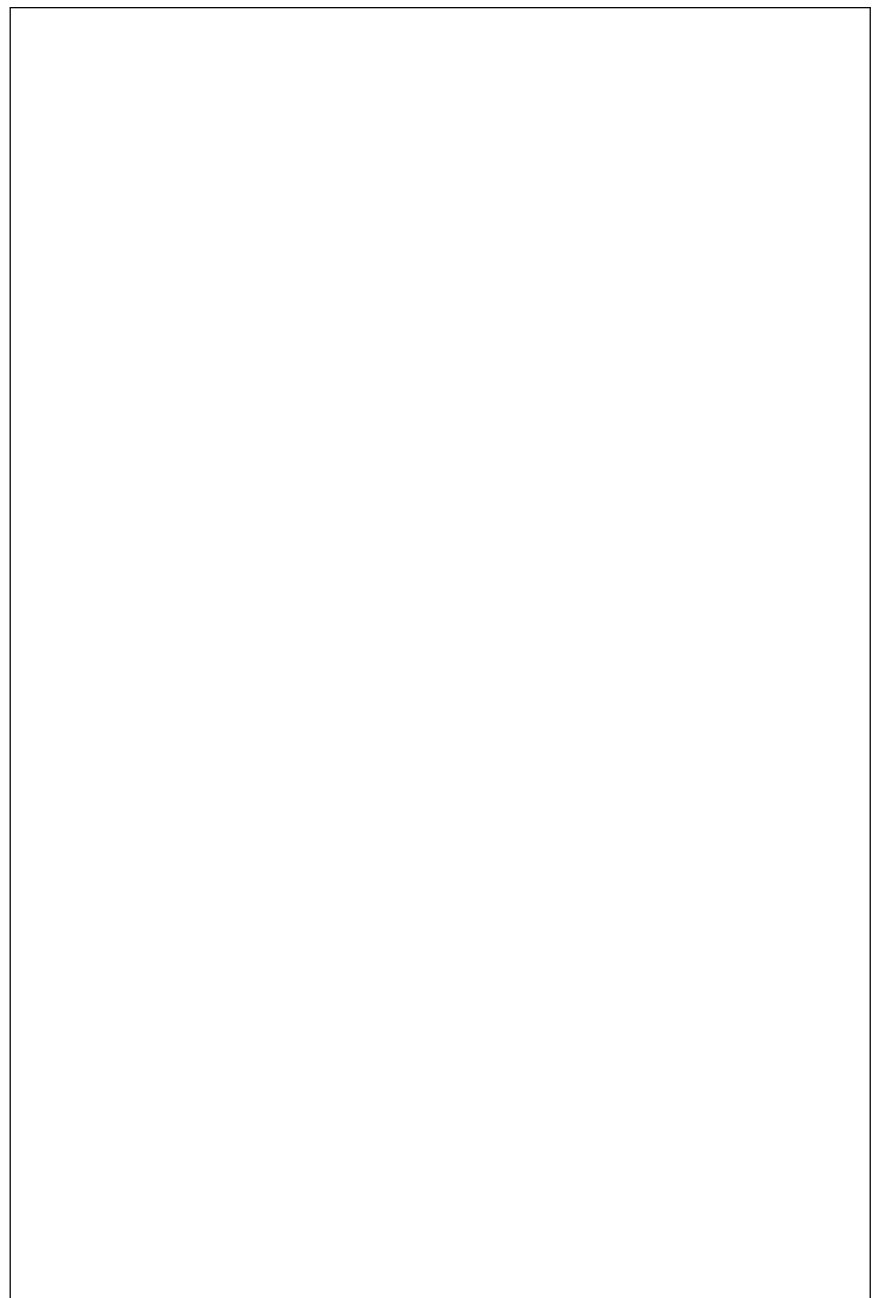
sequently, the new post-Mitch co-ordination initiatives had to start again from scratch.

At other times, the formation of such bodies have been orchestrated by a strong donor, and motivated by a desire to access financing earmarked for co-ordination. The main danger with the current initiative is that it is apparently driven by the desire to confront the government, rather than for joint action in the field. As mentioned above, such confrontation has been dominated by economic development polemics rather than the problem at hand of avoiding

that the next major disaster is managed as ineptly as Hurricane Mitch.

These problems with co-ordination are partially rooted in the fact that many NGOs' do not represent anybody other than themselves. This contributes to the ambiguity of their own identity. In Nicaragua, many people are starting to openly recognise that NGOs' are not part of "civil society," but are rather an intellectual elite of middle-class citizens that develop activities for the people, aim to defend the interests of the people and therefore seek to represent the people. Their staff are often skilled public ser-

Landslide on a deforested hillside, Nicaragua 1999. Photo: Ian Christoplos



vice contractors and managers of donor-financed projects, paradoxically drawing on their past experience within the public sector during the Sandinista regime. The lack of any real foundation in civil society explains why they have not managed to create sustainable mechanisms that would enable them to act in a common direction, despite having an impressive capacity to confront government policies. It may also explain why they have so easily slipped into a tendency to focus on the economic debate, at the cost of ignoring the humanitarian crisis facing their erstwhile constituencies.

The NGO's are aware that many of their efforts —particularly in response to disasters— require a practical *modus operandi* with the government. Disaster response is not something they can or will handle alone. The NGO's, however, stress the difficulties they have in co-ordinating with the government, emphasising the institutional aspects in which political polarisation represents a fundamental obstacle. According to the NGO's, the government has displayed as little willingness to communicate and collaborate with them in the face of natural disasters as it has in other areas. Furthermore, the fact that the state institutions are suspicious of NGO's because so many of their current officials were linked to the Sandinista administration of the 1980's has led to confrontations and a lack of collaboration between NGO's and the Liberal government. Mutual accusations of corruption and inept administration have been more common than discussions of practical mechanisms for determining who could and should do what in disaster preparedness, mitigation and response.

This politicisation also affects the creation of new NGO's. According to Nicaraguan law, the petition to establish a new non-profit association, the legal classification under which NGO's are registered, must be approved by the National Assembly, which is currently controlled by the ruling Liberal Constitutionalist Party. The government has tried several times to control the funds coming in to NGO's through the Ministry of Foreign Co-operation and to get the General Tax Division to apply discretionary taxes on goods imported by

certain NGO's, in violation of a law exempting them from taxation.

Disaster Preparedness in a Neo-Liberal State

The government's role and responsibilities to its citizenry is ambiguous in many areas in neo-liberal regimes such as Nicaragua, and disaster management is no exception. One of the problems which arose with Hurricane Mitch was that there was no legal framework stating the roles of each institution at either national or local level, their different responsibilities and chains of command for assigning different functions during emergencies. As the threat from future natural hazards has faded from the public debate, so has any sense of urgency in sorting out these matters for the future. Nicaragua's political and economic agenda is overloaded and littered with 'normal' crises. Once the actual moment of emergency has past, concern over natural disasters gets pushed back down the list of priorities. There are no indications that a new law will be passed soon which will better define roles and responsibilities in times of disaster. This is a central obstacle for NGO's attempting to situate their small-scale initiatives within the broader context of national and multi-sectoral disaster preparedness.

There may be other reasons that this seemingly glaring issue has not been addressed. The predominant neo-liberal ideology does not accept that the state has basic responsibility for public welfare. Defining responsibilities and attributing roles for disaster management would represent implicit acceptance that the state has the greatest responsibility to attend to the most basic survival needs of its population during a crisis. To side-step admitting this, the Nicaraguan government has apparently opted for the chaos that comes with changing command structures with each new disaster. When Cerro Negro erupted in 1992, the presidential offices co-ordinated efforts, a job left to the Ministry of Transport during the tidal wave, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry during the drought caused by El Niño and the Vice President of the Republic during Mitch. It is not without reason that some define underdevelopment as

nothing more than the incapacity to accumulate experience.

The government never declared a state of emergency during Mitch, arguing that doing so would involve suspending constitutional guarantees. Although experts in constitutional law stated that it was possible to make a selective suspension of guarantees to ensure that Nicaraguan citizens did not lose their rights, the government did not change its decision, preferring instead to declare a "state of disaster," a term with no legal significance whatsoever.

What was the reason for this absurd decision? It was possibly because recognising the magnitude of the disaster would have had two consequences that the government wanted to avoid. First, the government would have been forced to allocate massive resources for emergency assistance, thus increasing public spending and violating the conditions imposed by the structural adjustment programme. Second, accepting the need to mobilise large-scale human resources for the relief effort would have exposed the extremely limited capacity to respond to such situations by the scaled-down civil service, which has been further aggravated by the structural adjustment. Therefore, the problem of how to deal with disasters and ensure that future strategies are effective in a neo-liberal state continues to be a point calling for serious reflection.

Pragmatism at the frontline: Surprising alliances between NGO's and municipalities

The post-Mitch period has been characterised by centralised decision-making and a weakening of the incomplete process, underway before the disaster, of devolving authority to municipal governments. Central government strategy has aimed at retaining control over relief and rehabilitation resources that should have been handed over to municipal administrations. The municipalities are more financially stretched than ever. They cannot even cover their ordinary costs with their own resources, let alone the costs generated by an emergency. Creative and surprising alliances have appeared to confront this situation. In many cases the disaster was managed through novel collaboration between

NGO's and local governments. Surprising capacities have emerged due to the fact that local political and institutional actors are much closer to the people involved, and therefore understand or even share their needs. The NGO's found that local structures were often less politicised than those involving the central government, making it possible to carry out many actions in conjunction with the municipal authorities.

The leadership assumed by municipal authorities turned out to be an essential factor during the emergency and the post-Mitch rehabilitation. In situations such as these, it becomes apparent to everyone that somebody has to take responsibility for orchestrating efforts. Leaders appear. Many mayors acted decisively, more as an expression of their natural leadership than as the result of any formally established arrangements. This is not to say that leadership is enough. Although local leaders are a basic necessity when it comes to co-ordinating efforts and activities, a law is needed that establishes responsibilities, hierarchies and functions to legally back up these leaders. This would

keep the central government from creating ad hoc bodies and changing those in charge with every new emergency, or, as also happened during Mitch, giving local Catholic priests the leading role just because they are Catholic Church officials, independent of their qualifications to be working on emergencies in a society that is no means exclusively Catholic.

The new collaboration between the municipalities and NGO's born out of Mitch could perhaps help address certain of the NGOs' weaknesses that get in the way of developing co-ordinated efforts in responding to disasters. Closer collaboration between NGO's and the municipalities could prove to be the cornerstone in helping to fill the current vacuum in the Nicaragua discourse on disaster mitigation and preparedness.

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Humanitarian Assistance: post-graduate diploma

Humanitarian Assistance, 40 credits, is a relatively new programme on Masters level based on co-operation between seven European Union universities, located in Spain, Germany, Italy, France, Ireland and Belgium. Uppsala University is the home university for the programme in Sweden.

Within the university, the departments of Anthropology, Law, Peace and Conflict Research, and Public Health and Caring Sciences. The programme is under the administration of the Dept. of Theology, which also gives a seminar series on ethical and other cross-sectional aspects of the themes in the programme.

The purpose of the programme is to provide students, who have a relevant academic background, a wide exposure to different aspects of international humanitarian work, be it in the field during critical emergency situations, or in offices of NGOs, government agencies or international organisations that provide humanitarian assistance. The students are selected through interviews, and many different backgrounds are represented among them.

During the first semester, the programme is similar for all students in the 7 universities. In the second semester, students choose a specialization course given at one of the co-operating univer-

sities. In Uppsala the Department of Peace and Conflict Research gives the course "Conflict, Disaster, and Peace-Building" as a specialization course. The final part of the programme is an internship period in a relevant NGO, government agency or international organisation, such as UNICEF, UNDP or WHO.

More information about the programme can be obtained from Kay Svensson, phone: 018-471 00 00, or e-mail: Kay.Svensson@uadm.uu.se. Admission is only once a year, interviews are made during the late spring semester for the programme which begins each autumn.

Life & Peace Institute

An International and Ecumenical Centre for Peace Research and Action

*The cornerstones of the Life & Peace Institute (LPI) are its **international** makeup, **ecumenical** base, commitment to peace **research** and capacity for **action**. The goal of LPI's work is a world where peace and justice prevail. The way towards this goal is the peaceful transformation of conflict, often through processes of reconciliation.*

A centre for peace research and action

LPI is a centre for peace research and action, headquartered in Uppsala, Sweden. From here, the institute co-operates with a growing network of peace researchers and activists around the world. LPI's work is guided by an *Executive Committee*, comprising representatives of four Nordic countries, and an international *Board*, which meets annually.

History

LPI was founded in 1985 by the Swedish Ecumenical Council, inspired by the results of the 1983 *Christian World Conference on Life & Peace*. The pioneering peace-building efforts of LPI's Horn of Africa programme laid the basis for LPI's conflict transformation work and first regional office in Nairobi in 1995. At the close of the 1990's, LPI's work has taken a number of new directions, with the creation of a *Conflict Transformation Programmes Unit* and the expansion of 'action research' activities.

Co-operation and funding

As a research institute, LPI co-operates with a wide variety of structures ranging from academic institutions and church bodies to NGOs, national and international governmental/official bodies, notably the UN. Core funding is provided mainly by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Church of Sweden, and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). Project and programme related funding is derived from a number of sources including international foundations, trusts and development agencies, notably the European Union, Brot für die Welt, the Rockefeller Foundation and Dan Church Aid.

Staff

Rather than having a large staff based in Uppsala, LPI engages researchers from around the world, particularly from the South, to carry out specific commissioned projects. In Uppsala, LPI's work is supported by four units; *Research, Communications, Finance & Administration, and Conflict Transformation Programmes*, and an *Office of the Executive Director*.

Conflict transformation programmes

Inspired by the grassroots peace-building initiatives developed by its *Horn of Africa Programme*, LPI has increasingly focused on 'action research'. Developed in collaboration with partners working in the field, LPI's action research aims to increase theoretical and conceptual understanding of specific situations in order to inform advocacy work, policy-making and, where appropriate, decision-

making. Conflict transformation programmes in such places as Somalia, Croatia, and the Middle East are based on a 'bottom-up' approach to peace-building and often also include a range of activities from training to advocacy.

Research

Research at LPI is divided into three main programme areas; *Non-violent Conflict Transformation*, *the Role of Religion in Conflict and Peace*, and *Human Rights and Economic Justice*. Findings are published in the Institute's journals, reports, papers, and electronic publications and are made available to a wide audience.

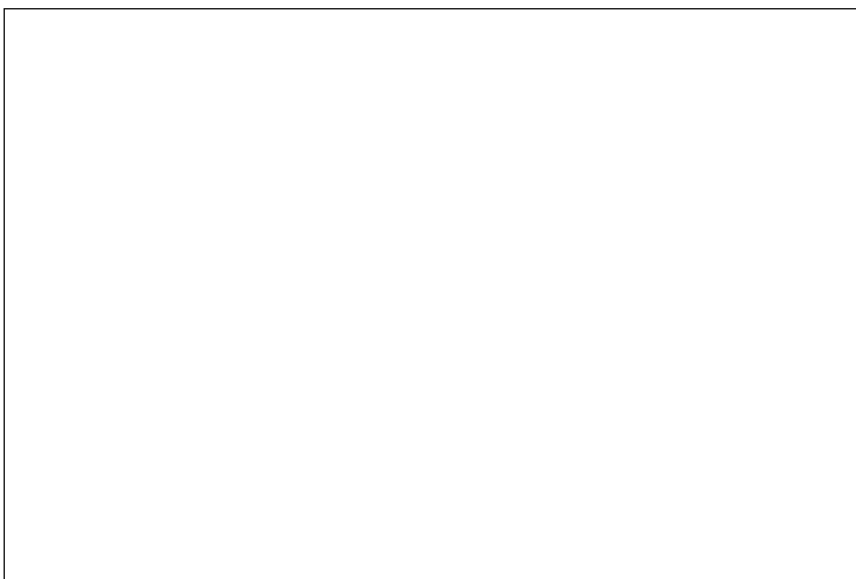
For more information, please contact the Communications Unit in Uppsala, P O Box 1520, SE-751 45 Uppsala, Sweden (Visiting address: Sysslomansgatan 7), Tel. +46 18 16 95 00, Fax +46 18 69 30 59, E-mail: lpi@life-peace.org or visit LPI's web site, www.life-peace.org

Adapted from the Life & Peace Institute brochure.

Experiences from a Minor Field Study in Vietnam

by Ulrika Tjälldén

As an animal husbandry student I find it very important to know how people in other parts of the world look on their animals. What do they value in their domestic breeds? Do they value the same production traits as we do or do they have other preferences? How much do cultural considerations influence their choice of breed? Many questions could be asked. No matter how much I study here, or how much I try to understand, I could never learn the answers to my questions without travelling outside Sweden.



Farmer with his water buffaloes in Bavi area. Photo: Ulrika Tjälldén

Background

Farm animals provide people with food, draught power, manure, fibre, hides and so on. As farmers around the world have different reasons for breeding and rearing certain species, they also have different reasons for choosing different breeds. The reasons may vary: the local breeds may be better adapted to the unique local environment (climate, terrain, disease, management and feed-related factors). For example, in ways of finding feed, how fast they grow, how much fat they put on their bodies compared to the amount of feed they eat, the way the mothers take care of their young, the ability to survive predators, disease resistance, the ability to produce even during extreme conditions e.g. drought or cold, etc. There are also cul-

tural and historical factors that influence the choice of animals.

My study

In rural areas of Vietnam, livestock make an important contribution to cash income. Local breeds are well adapted to the local conditions, but many of them are today endangered. The purpose of my work was to learn about what farmers in Vietnam think about local breeds. Why do they keep local breeds and what do they think are the advantages of local breeds? What do the farmers think about the future of local breeds? Another reason for this MFS was to share experiences with Master of Science students from Vietnam.

I was invited to do my MFS by the National Institute of Animal Husbandry

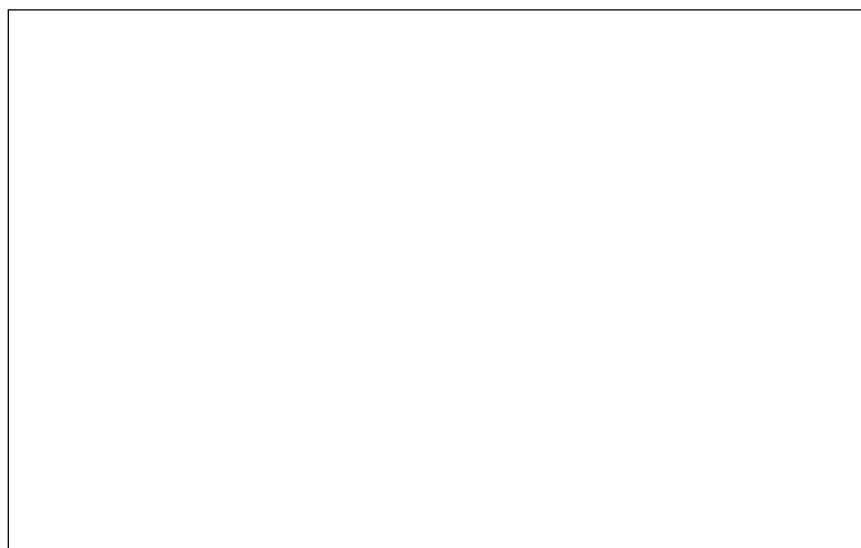
(NIAH), which is a governmental research institute located in the north-western outskirts of Hanoi. The institute does research on livestock production, informs farmers about new technology, trains graduates and post-graduates and establishes international cooperation in animal husbandry research and development.

The study was based on interviews with small-scale farmers in villages close to the northern outskirts of Hanoi and in Bavi area. Bavi is a mountainous area about 45 km north-west of Hanoi. I interviewed each farmer (27 in Hanoi and 32 in Bavi) for about half an hour.

My host in Bavi was the Goat and Rabbit Research Centre (GRRC), which is a research centre of NIAH. It was thrilling to be able to go around there, in the "real" countryside, especially since we were driving around at top speed on a motorbike! The area is really scenic, but unfortunately the scenery alone does not fill any stomachs.

In Hanoi we visited 4-6 farmers per day. We visited a new village every day and interviewed the farmers between 11 and 2 o'clock, when they were in for lunch. This meant that we had to work very fast. I also visited farms with other animals besides local breeds, so that I could see the differences between farms. It was obvious that the farmers had a lot to say and that they wanted to talk, because they kept on talking even after all the questions were asked and the interview was over with.

Interviewing in Hanoi. Photo: Ulrika Tjällidén



At this period it was also very COLD, with record low temperatures. I don't think I have ever frozen so much in my entire life as I did in Vietnam. The temperature dropped down to perhaps +10°C. When I first arrived in Vietnam, I was surprised to read in the newspaper that there was a catastrophe up north where a lot of water buffaloes had frozen to death. I had difficulties in believing that animals would freeze to death when the temperature was above zero, but I soon realised that with the rain and humidity, it was COLD. I wore ALL my clothes at night, and I had to buy myself a pair of long underwear, size XXXXL. What a difference the sunshine made when it eventually showed up!

Coming up to the mountains I experienced a different part of Vietnam. As I mentioned before, it was very scenic and I really enjoyed my stay up there. The farms were not situated in villages, as they were in Hanoi, but were more spread out as single units in the surroundings.

Results

The results I got were mainly as expected. Farmers' opinions about keeping local breeds differed somewhat between the two areas. In Bavi it was important that the animals could be fed on what was available on the farm. In Hanoi the raising of animals was dictated much more by economic considerations. All farmers in Hanoi agreed that the conditions for livestock were better now, with

more knowledge about raising animals and with better conditions in animal health, feeds, breeds, technology, and capital. As a result, productivity is higher now.

The main reasons for keeping indigenous breeds are the same as their advantages; they are easy to keep and raise, do not require good conditions in feeding, housing and technology, provide good quality products and investment costs are low. The main advantage for keeping local breeds is that they are well adapted to the local conditions and more resistant to certain diseases.

The productivity of local breeds is lower than exotics, and even if the quality of the products often is considered to be better, this is not enough to make the farmers choose to keep local breeds. However, it is too difficult to raise pure exotic breeds, so most farmers cross the local breeds with exotic breeds to get higher productivity but still keep the adaptive traits of the local animal. The future of local breeds depends on the farmers' situation, that is, if the farmer has good enough conditions to keep exotic breeds, he will do so. The farmers in Bavi did not see any risks with exotic animals, which was surprising. Maybe the question was misunderstood, as there ought to have been some kind of hesitation towards the new breeds and way of farming. In Hanoi, two thirds of the farmers interviewed thought that the risk of disease was the major concern.

Conclusion

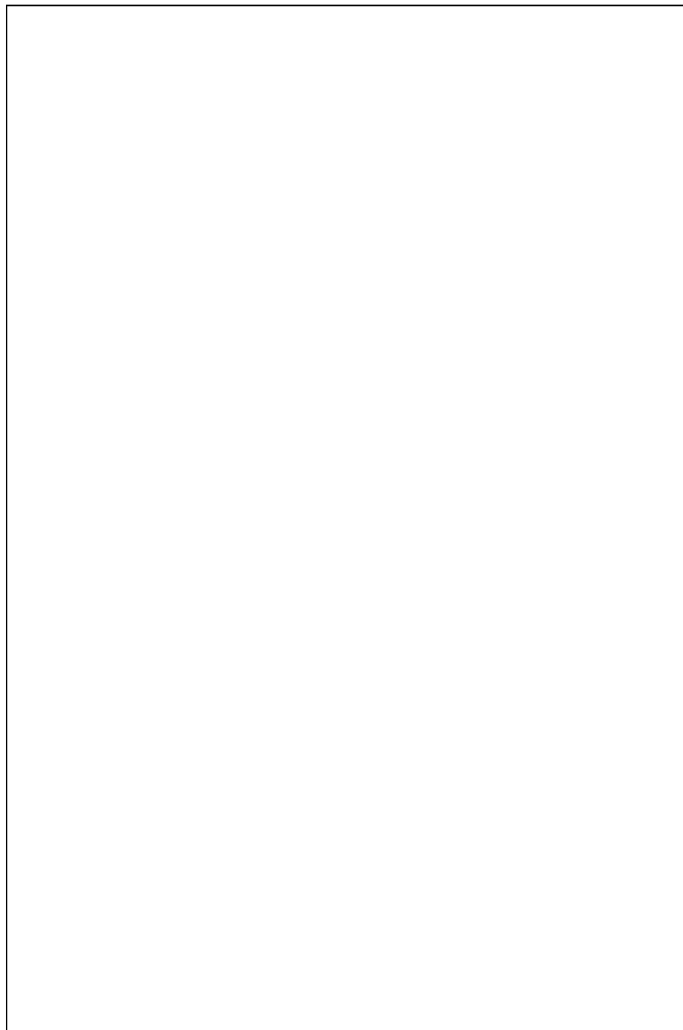
Most farmers cross local breeds with exotic breeds, which I consider to be a dangerous situation. For example, only 20% of the local Mong Cai sows are bred with a Mong Cai boar. This means that the number of Mong Cai pigs is decreasing at an alarming rate. I brought this up at the GRRC and NIAH, but nobody seemed to be worried about the risk that the Mong Cai would disappear. I was told that there are so many Mong Cai pigs out there, and if more Mong Cai sows are needed it is easy to go to the mountains to get pure bred Mong Cais. In my opinion, I doubt it is that easy. The situation is similar for all local breeds. The Ri chicken is the only local breed that is increasing, due to its good quality meat.

People in Vietnam didn't see the risks in losing the local breeds, they only see the positive aspects of high-producing animals. I was a little surprised that there did not seem to be any doubts about investing in high-producing animals, and the ambition was to get money to invest in exotics. The risks and losses are there, I know, but I just could not get through to them, as their main aim was to increase production and productivity. It is obvious that the country is in a building, expanding phase. I got the feeling that this is how the situation must have been in Sweden in the 1950's and 60's. Conservation and sustainability do not seem to be very important. The most important thing is daily cash income, and that, from poor peoples' point of view, I really do understand.

When the need for high production is increasing, the temptation is to focus on the production outcome, i.e. for example to look at the size of the product instead

of looking at the total economic situation - what the farmer has left after income from sales minus inputs. Crossbreeding of course is tempting for the farmer, but who keeps the pure breeds? Will anybody do that? If the genetic variation is kept, the future need for conservation actions will be reduced. It is cheaper and safer to start conservation in big herds, while the population is still very variable, than to wait until the number (especially the effective number) of the population has decreased and with that, genetic variation lost. The most rational and sustainable way to conserve animal genetic resources is to ensure that locally adapted breeds remain a functional part of production systems.

Political decisions could have rapid and dramatic consequences on the economic values of certain traits. The uses of farm animals have changed over time, and we don't know what the future



In Hanoi City. Photo: Ulrika Tjälldén

needs will be. So let us be certain there is a choice in the future, by ensuring that local breeds exist as a stock of traits!

I believe that I have learnt very much about farming in Vietnam and their local breeds, but I think that the most important knowledge I gained in Vietnam was an understanding of how and why frustrating situations arise and how to deal with them. There were many things about the interviewing that were difficult to imagine before I left Sweden. I found it difficult to get accurate answers to my questions, due to cultural, linguistic and personal reasons. There were many questions I would have liked to ask the farmers, but the language was a barrier. My interpreters really tried to please me, but they sometimes could not understand what I wanted to ask (and why I was interested in a certain thing).

It was very interesting to be able to come close to the farmers, and to see

how people lived their lives. I could never have experienced this as a regular tourist, even though I tried that too. The people who assisted me were really nice and helpful, and very well organised. I am forever grateful to everybody there!

I am also very happy that the people from NIAH took very good care of me during my stay in Hanoi. The celebrations for the New Year (Tet) took place during my stay, and I am very happy to have been able to take part in these celebrations.

I always felt safe in Hanoi, even though I was a single female. At first the intense traffic was a shock to me, but soon I learnt that if I kept moving slowly without stopping the traffic would flow around me just like a river. All the Internet Cafés were a blessing, as I could communicate with my friends and relatives there. Actually, I believe that if you are single, you are better

off in Hanoi than in a small country town. Hanoi is such a kind, innocent and fast-developing city, you cannot do anything but love it!

I REALLY recommend people who have the opportunity, to do an MFS. It is an excellent way of learning about a new country, yourself, and what it is like to work under difficult circumstances. Today, I am really happy that I took the chance, and I will never regret it. There are so many things that you learn, things you cannot describe in words. It has to be experienced!

MFS reports completed in 1999

No.

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