



# **CONFLICT PREVENTION AND DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION IN AFRICA: A POLICY WORKSHOP**

## **SESSION 10 POLICY COHERENCE FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION AND PEACEBUILDING**

### **HUMANITARIAN POLICY DILEMMAS**

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I've been asked to talk about the humanitarian dimensions of our discussion here. I'd like to talk briefly about two themes. The first is the relationship between humanitarianism and conflict *prevention*. The second is whether there is a role for humanitarian action in conflict *resolution*. (I'm using the term 'humanitarian' here in its more specialised sense, as in 'international humanitarian law', to refer to the various laws, mechanisms and agencies concerned with protecting and assisting conflict-affected populations.)

Most of our discussion so far has been about the relationship between development and conflict. We've looked at this relationship in both directions: the role of international development efforts, and aid in particular, in averting violent conflict; and conversely the effect of conflict on development. We've talked about poverty, inequality, grievance and so on as drivers of conflict; and about why efforts to tackle these structural factors are essential to conflict prevention.

So where does humanitarian action fit in this picture? Well, one answer is to say that it *doesn't* fit. Traditional humanitarianism is *premised* on the existence of conflict and is neutral about the merits of conflict. The Geneva Conventions explicitly accommodate the military interests of warring parties. Humanitarianism is concerned with the ways in which armed conflict is *waged*, with limiting its worst effects, particularly as it bears on non-combatants; but it is neither concerned with preventing conflict nor with resolving it. (This is one reason why the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine, concerned with prevention of violence as well as response to it, is a political doctrine rather than a humanitarian *per se*). Another way of expressing this is that humanitarian action is concerned with the symptoms and causes of suffering that arises from conflict; but it is not with the causes of conflict itself. In other words, there is a principle of *distinction* or separation here, designed to safeguard the humanitarian agenda from the vagaries of politics.

That's a rather purist view of course, though I think the distinction is crucial. In practice there are important links between the supposedly neutral business of humanitarianism and the *essentially* political business of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. (In fact the proponents of the so-called 'new humanitarianism' championed by Clare Short amongst others would say these are intrinsically linked). I'd like to consider a few of these links and the debates surrounding them.

First of all, neutrality does not mean non-engagement with political actors and political agendas. If it did, the ICRC for one would not get very far. Effective humanitarian action demands an understanding of the motivation and interests of the warring parties as well as an understanding of the laws of war. In negotiating access for relief, say, or a temporary ceasefire to allow children to be vaccinated, humanitarians would be unwise to rely on an appeal to the warring parties' sense of moral or legal obligation, let alone their better nature. Agencies need to consider this not least because their own security may depend on it.

So does calling for a cessation of hostilities, or negotiating the kind of sanctuary that was tried in Sri Lanka with the Open Relief Centres, have a beneficial effect *beyond* the immediately humanitarian goals of assistance and protection? Mary Anderson

amongst others has written about the potential for promoting peace and dialogue between factions through humanitarian action. In fact some would see this as integral to the humanitarian agenda, and would not draw the distinction. Most humanitarian agencies have wider objectives that typically include social justice and development, and may extend to peaceful dispute resolution. I'm sure we can all think of examples where these elements have been more or less successfully combined.

But in fact I think the coherence of these agendas is doubtful. At the more radical end of the spectrum, some would argue that conflict (even violent conflict) may in some contexts be the *only* way to resolve issues of profound social injustice – and that trying to prevent conflict may simply run counter to the political imperatives, the demands of social justice, even humanitarian imperatives. Nobody, for example, would suggest that it would have been a good idea to broker a peaceful settlement between the RPF and the government of Rwanda in 1994. This raises a wider question about the desirability of conflict prevention as a good in itself in all contexts.

The less controversial point is that trying to combine these agendas seems to run counter to the distinction that I just outlined between humanitarian and other agendas. In practice, though, most agencies do not take such a hard-line view on the distinction. In particular, there is wide consensus around the 'Do no harm' principle; interpreted to mean in this context 'what ever else you do, make sure that your interventions do not have the effect of exacerbating conflict'. This seems unarguable, and it is accepted as basic good practice that relief assistance should as far as possible be provided in ways that do not exacerbate tensions within and between communities (even if that means going a bit soft on the principle of strictly impartial, needs-based assistance).

But even with this 'Do no harm' principle there are some big differences of interpretation. To continue with the Rwanda example, some argued that the humanitarian community and their donors in the 1990s by providing relief to the camps housing Hutu refugees in eastern Zaire, as it was then, were culpable both of feeding genocidaires (taken to be a bad thing) and of providing a platform for a resurgent *Interahamwe* to pursue its agenda in exile. The charge stuck, but it was unfair. The humanitarians could not be expected to identify and isolate the ringleaders. As regards assisting the refugee population as a whole... well, a surgeon does not ask of the patient on the operating table whether he is a criminal – or consider whether he may offend again in the future; his role is to act in the best interests of the patient and his health. So it is with humanitarian action. By the way, this points to a tension between the humanitarian and justice/human rights agendas which is important, but maybe a little beyond our scope here.

A more valid charge, I think, is that humanitarian interventions are often blind to their impact on the local political economy. There is little doubt that commodity or cash-based interventions have the potential to be exploited by warring factions, and may over time become part of the war economy, having the effect perhaps of extending the duration of conflict or at least altering its course. This is about neutrality of effect rather than of neutrality of political stance. The arguments here tends to be conjectural, given the problem of demonstrating counterfactuals, but there is plenty of evidence to show that relief assistance features in the calculation of warring parties –

both directly through aid diversion and indirectly by exploiting the context in which relief is provided (such as displaced and refugee camps). What conclusion you draw may depend on your perspective on the relative priority of humanitarian action. But the minimum requirement, surely, is to deliver assistance in full awareness of its potential to be exploited, and to do so in a way that holds least prospect either of putting the affected population in danger or fuelling the conflict.

Beyond the 'do no harm' principle, the role of humanitarian action in conflict prevention is much more doubtful. I remember a time in the 1990s when I was working for Oxfam where it was almost impossible to get a conflict-related proposal past one major donor unless it had some conflict prevention component to it. Humanitarians seemed to be expected to compensate for a lack of political and development engagement with 'failed states'. The result was a great many proposals that made promises they simply couldn't keep. Humanitarian action *may* help to reduce tensions and the prospect of future violence; but this is a contingent effect, and is always likely to remain so. It is not its purpose, nor is it generally achievable through humanitarian instruments. The exception may be about the process of negotiation: the process of negotiating humanitarian ground rules with warring parties in South Sudan and Liberia has been argued to have had at least some preventive (and protective) effect. But others in this room are better able to speak to that than I am.

I'd like to end with a thought about humanitarianism and peace processes. We know that peace agreements are unlikely to last if they are non-inclusive, leave grievances fundamentally unaddressed, are based on unrealistic or artificially induced return processes (as perhaps now in Northern Uganda). The ability to deliver basic services, which lies somewhere between the humanitarian and development agendas in conflict or post conflict settings, may be a key ingredient in durable peace settlements. But it is also true to say that humanitarian and peace agendas may be in tension. Few wanted to grasp the humanitarian and political nettle of Darfur in 2003 at a time when the CPA was the top political priority; to have done so (it was tacitly agreed) would have risked undermining the whole process. Ironically, we now have a situation when the almost exclusive focus on Darfur has led to a neglect of the CPA.

So, to sum up: I am very doubtful about the role of humanitarian action in conflict prevention, both on grounds of principle and feasibility. But the use of humanitarian negotiation as a potential stepping stone to ceasefire agreements and peace talks seems to me a natural and desirable process. And I think that humanitarians need to become much more savvy in their reading of political landscapes, if only to avoid the kinds of intervention that play into the more damaging strategies of warring factions.

One last thing. Invoking the sense of common humanity, the recognition that both sides have suffered, is an essential part of reconciliation. This has been true in Northern Ireland, in Bosnia, even Rwanda. In that wider sense, I think humanitarianism is fundamental to conflict resolution. Thank you.