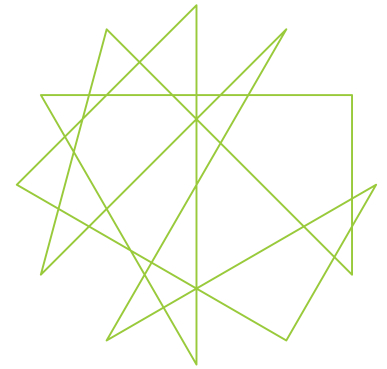


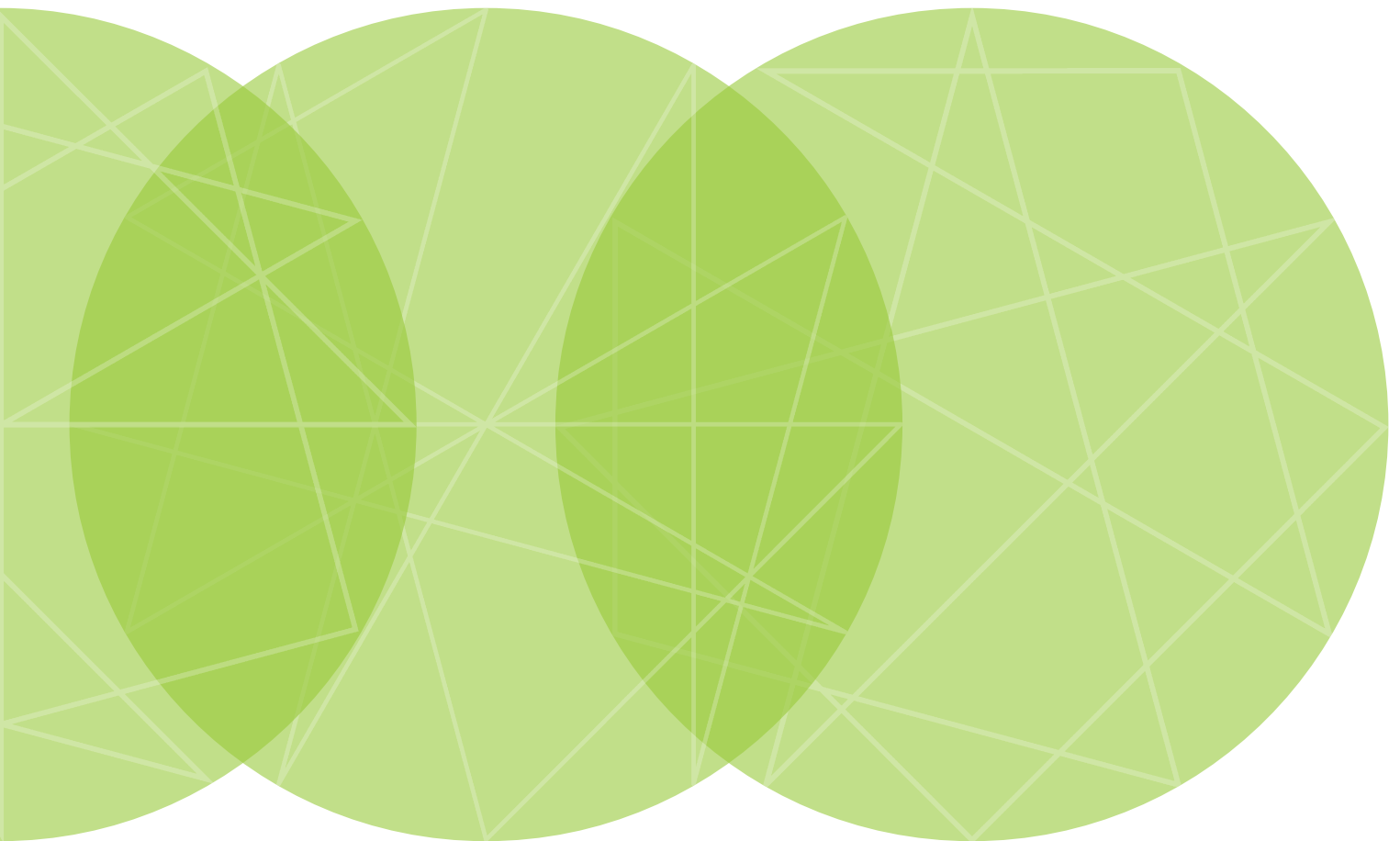
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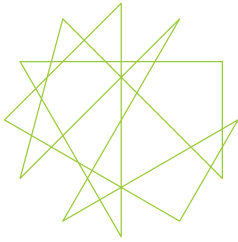
Managing Aid Agency Security in an Evolving World: The Larger Challenge

Koenraad Van Brabant

EISF Article Series



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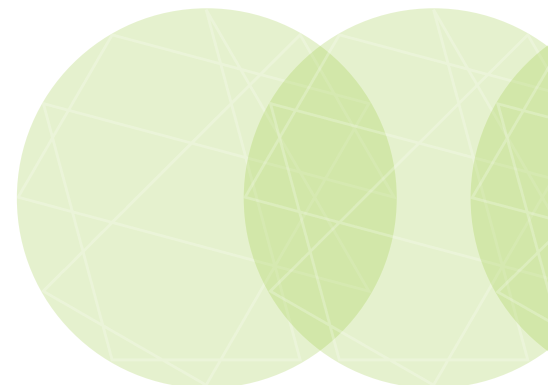
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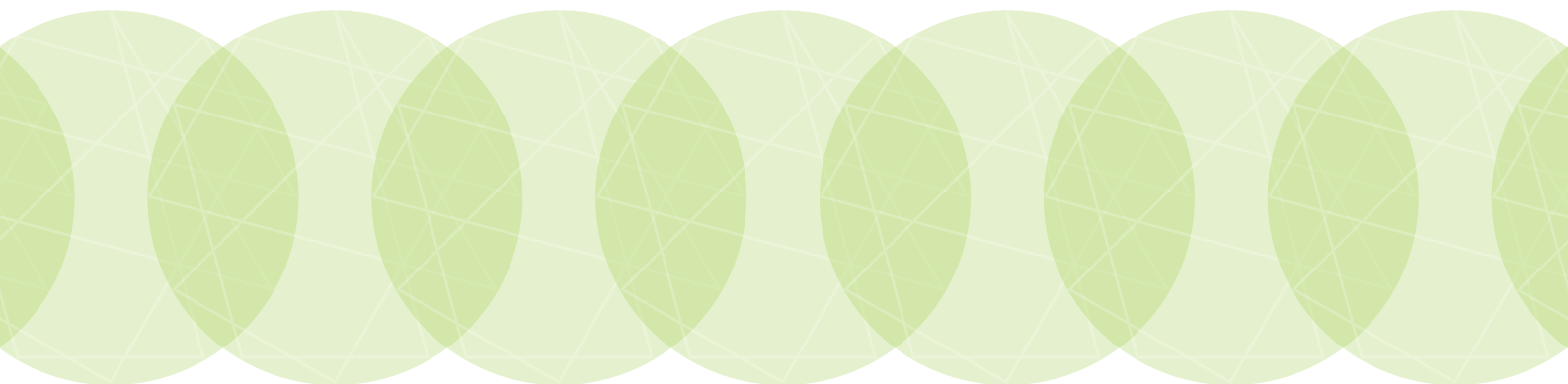
About the Author

Koenraad Van Brabant has over 20 years experience in international engagement, particularly in conflict situations. Several years of humanitarian field work in different countries were followed by a great reflective and learning opportunity as part of the Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute in London. His own experience led him to challenge existing security management practices at the time. Intensive collaborative work with a variety of practitioners then culminated in the *Good Practice Review on Operational Security Management in Violent Environments* (2000). For the past seven years he has reoriented himself towards peacebuilding, working with Interpeace, a Swiss-registered international peacebuilding organisation, where he is the head of Reflective Practice and Learning. This article is written in his personal capacity, and does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Interpeace.



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This article considers security management by international aid agencies against the realities of an evolving wider world. It describes the broad challenge of 'acceptance' which stretches far beyond the management capacity of security personnel, and thus requires a deep internal questioning within each organisation. The focus is very much on the primarily 'Western' aid agencies that still dominate global aid provision.

The past decade has seen impressive growth in investment and advances in operational security management by and for international aid agencies. This article takes a cursory look at these developments, recognising the progress made but also pointing out some persistent challenges. It is suggested that the undeniable progress needs to be placed against a seemingly deteriorating wider 'security environment'. The article reflects on some of the apparent drivers of this deterioration, and looks ahead to the next 10-15 years. While the opposite may be hoped for, the expectation is that in the medium-term future the dominant 'international' aid enterprise is likely to find itself more often and more seriously challenged and contested. Often this broader contestation will be peaceful, but it can also be expressed through violence.

Aid agencies tend to hold others responsible for the greater contestation of international, even 'humanitarian' aid, but in reality they themselves bear a very significant responsibility. Meeting the wider and more fundamental challenge of 'acceptance' will require a profound re-think of the values, identity, (in)dependence, grounds for legitimacy and modus operandi of international aid agencies. This should yield greater clarity about the organisational 'message'. For that message to have continued credibility, will require greater consistency between discourse and practice than is often the case today.



Aid agency security management: a decade of significant advances

Over the past decade many – though by no means all – international aid agencies have tried to strengthen their security management. Many aid agencies now have an explicit policy on (safety and) security and a practical manual. Whereas ‘security’ often used to be an ‘add-on’ for the logistician, there is now a growing number of ‘Security Advisors’, ‘Security Officers’, ‘Risk Managers’, and so on. The supply of security training has expanded greatly, and so has investment in ‘security’, or at least in security ‘assets’. Given the inevitable ‘security inter-dependency’ among agencies in a given environment, it is heartening to see more efforts to develop effective inter-agency security ‘platforms’ in different operating contexts. Such operational inter-agency collaboration is further encouraged by the existence and work of inter-NGO platforms like the European Interagency Security Forum, Interaction’s Security Coordination Unit in the USA, and the ‘Saving Lives Together’ initiative between the UN and NGOs. Inter-agency collaboration has also enabled the development of better incident databases, providing a more solid foundation for patterns and trends analysis. At the same time many agencies continue to struggle with critical issues. Five of these areas are described below.

a. Fully integrating security into all aspects of work, or developing a genuine ‘security culture’

The presence of security policies, manuals, and one or more dedicated security people, doesn’t necessarily equate with a real security culture. In some aid agencies security personnel feel largely ignored by management, and other considerations habitually override security concerns in decision-making. Even where security concerns are taken seriously, the increase in dedicated NGO security personnel who themselves do not have extensive programming experience – as has long been the case in the UN – can actually lead to further tensions between ‘programme staff’ and ‘security personnel’. The International Organization for Standardization’s document *Risk Management – Principles and guidelines* provides a good framework for aid agencies to work

with (see ISO 2009). Staff, peer and donor pressure to encourage organisations to commission a formal audit to assess whether they meet ISO standards, is definitely appropriate.

b. Risk assessment and management

At the operational level, risk management often remains a very subjective and implicit practice, which is led by ‘gut feeling’, based on anecdotal ‘information’ and stories, and doesn’t establish – or respect – agreed thresholds of acceptable risk. How much ‘risk’ is worth taking should be assessed against the potential benefits, i.e. how many lives would be threatened if we did not initiate or maintain an aid operation in this environment? Such explicit weighing of potential risks versus potential benefits is by no means common.

More generally, security management is expected to be an enabling factor: it should allow an agency to enter or stay in a given environment that without security management it could not. Yet although there are now attempts to note where high insecurity has forced the (temporary) suspension of the provision of aid, as yet there does not seem to be much focussed research to assess cases where better operational security management might have enabled access and the provision of humanitarian assistance that otherwise would not have been possible. This challenge has been recognised, however, and focussed work is being undertaken to strengthen risk management practices (see Behn and Kingston 2010).

Risk can sometimes be transferred to contractors, local partners, national staff, local or national government institutions, etc. This ‘transfer of risk’ is a type of security strategy that wasn’t explicitly acknowledged as such a decade ago, but is now fairly normalised within the security management discourse. Although concerns have been articulated about the ethical boundaries of risk transfer, no credible framework for decision-making – which should also explicitly incorporate moral dilemmas – seems to have emerged as yet.

Away from the field, 'risk' may be weighed differently, bringing into consideration other factors such as financial and reputational interests of the organisation, which not infrequently override security considerations. Informal conversations yield many stories, but actual practices cannot really be assessed and examined unless these stories are systematically documented and treated as case studies.

c. Duty of care

As employers, aid agencies have a responsibility to ensure a healthy and safe working environment. This tends to be well accepted in the environments where many headquarters are located but is not necessarily transferred to the more dangerous field locations. Relief work, like various other professions, involves an acceptable measure of risk. However, aid agencies have difficulty matching the general willingness to take risks with the duty of care obligation, and with ensuring that all those that are going to be running that risk do so in full knowledge and with 'informed consent'. In recent years, there appears to have been an increase in legal challenges to aid agencies on the grounds of negligence in their duty of care, but as most cases are settled out of court, strong judicial precedents have not yet been set.

A significant grey area is the role and responsibility of international aid agencies regarding the security of their local operational partners, or local contractors. Do they have a legal responsibility even if the local operator has its own legal identity and hence carries the primary duty of care? What can or should be done if the local partner or contractor is not receptive to the organisation's offer of support for security management, or does not adhere to basic good practice?

d. Adequate security competencies among national staff

National staff make up the majority of the workforce in most international aid agencies. Yet they still have less access to security training than international staff, are not necessarily very involved in operational security management, and usually have little clarity about the safety- and security-related duties and obligations their employer has towards them, and vice versa.

e. Remote management

Remote management is a situation in which international staff (or national staff from another geographical region in the country in question) remain at a distance from an operating environment, because they are assessed as being at greater risk than local or national staff. Remote management is perhaps more common than a decade ago, but reflective evaluations of the practice so far offer more insight into remote programme management than remote security management. The issue is of course closely related to the security management of national staff and/or national partners or contractors.

In a few extremely hostile environments, some aid agencies have adopted a very low profile; operations are typically carried out mainly by local staff or local counterparts, often (though not always) in combination with a remote management set up. This means forsaking office buildings and vehicles that would attract attention, removing all logos and other aid agency markers, being extremely discreet about movements, and so on. Agencies may even go as far as not mentioning to their beneficiaries who they are receiving assistance from. So far there is very little structured reflection on whether these measures create a significant obstacle for determined as opposed to opportunistic attackers, how the risks weigh up against the benefits in this modus operandi, and what this actually means for the identity of the sponsoring agency, and the nature of 'humanitarian' action.



The wider operating environment: a global increase in risk?

The general improvements in security management made by aid agencies over the past decade have unfortunately been accompanied by a slow but steady deterioration in the global security environment.

During the first years of the 21st century, the numbers of serious incidents involving aid workers were relatively steady, or even declined slightly in proportion to the estimated total population of aid workers. Analysis of trends for 2006 to 2009, on the other hand, indicates an increase both in serious incidents, and in politically-motivated targeting (Stoddard et al. 2009). Even if this latter trend has been very much driven by statistics from a limited number of countries, it is this perceived targeting of aid agencies that causes the greatest concern. If the 'aid community' is shocked when aid workers are knowingly killed by criminal groups, the military or militias, it is even more shocked when it finds itself targeted by a 'terrorist' attack. Targeted attacks challenge the deeply-held assumption of the 'inviolability' of aid workers, an assumption that, for some, goes together with an image of themselves as altruistic 'white knights'.

The deteriorating security environment is largely caused by two major trends: the spread of lawlessness and criminality, and the increasing influence of radical ideologies.

Lawlessness and criminality

Weak states, suffering from small tax bases, corruption, politicised public institutions, and ineffective and/or abusive security forces, cannot maintain a monopoly of force. Add to this in many places an overwhelmingly young population and limited prospects for meaningful employment, the easy availability of small arms, and possibly a recent history of serious societal violence, and you have a fertile ground for crime. One manifestation of this is youth gangs. In many countries they provide young people with a social identity, with respect and a framework of rights and obligations that their families and wider societies cannot offer. Some, though by no means all, turn to violence as a livelihood but also as a means of resistance to a society they perceive as

indifferent and even aggressive towards them. At another level, criminal entrepreneurs have shown themselves very capable of exploiting the opportunities created by globalisation. Criminals do not target aid workers, except in situations where the latter stumble upon criminal operations (for example, a forestry or wildlife conservation project that discovers illegal logging, poaching, or trafficking in protected species). However, aid workers may find themselves operating in generally dangerous environments. The high levels of violence and high rates of homicide in, for example, South Africa, Central America and Papua New Guinea, have been known for a while. Those in other countries, such as Venezuela, tend not to make headlines. But it is probably the explosion of violence in Mexico, not typically perceived as a weak or failing state, that in recent years has most vividly highlighted the risk posed to aid workers and aid operations by spreading lawlessness and criminality.

Radical ideologies

Political reactions to the events of 9/11, more than the event itself, have shaped and continue to shape important aspects of the global dynamic. The failure to clearly frame the target of the 'war on terror', both rhetorically and in practice, and to adopt strategies and tactics that would gain broad social and political support, has allowed it to become perceived by many Muslims as a 'war on Islam'. This failure in strategic communications has had dire consequences. Almost a decade on from 9/11, a radical political ideology that cloaks itself in Islam has managed to attract more followers and to occupy significant ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan, South-Central Somalia, Yemen and parts of the Maghreb, while showing its head in other places too. For such radicals committed to a 'war on the West' (and on national governments perceived to be allies or puppets of the 'West'), aid workers and agencies that can be associated with 'the West' become a legitimate target. This is a very serious issue. Hype about 'Al Qaeda' and the 'war on terror', should not however distract from the fact that radical ideologies are also flourishing outside the 'Muslim' world. Religious-nationalist Jews also hold

extreme views and have gained more political influence in Israel. Radical and nationalist rhetoric is flourishing in the USA and in many European countries. Ten years ago, there would have been public outrage and wide political condemnation of the type of derogatory comments and discourses of intolerance that are becoming normalised in the public sphere today. In short, hardliners and extremists on all sides have gained much ground.

Aid workers, of course, are by no means the only or even the primary targets or victims of this political or criminal lawlessness. Respect for 'non-combatants' has little improved after the large-scale atrocities against civilians that characterised the 20th century. Both criminals and political extremists use tactics of terror in which the killing of innocent bystanders is regarded as 'justified'. Both have also eagerly taken up the practice of kidnapping for financial and/or political gain, a phenomenon that has become a 'boom industry'. Criminals and radical militants of whatever persuasion are largely non-state actors, and tend to have little regard for international conventions pertaining to human rights or international humanitarian law. Moreover, as they do not seek political power within the established framework of the contemporary state, they have no incentive even to appear to respect such standards and norms.

Today's criminals and radical militants thrive on chaos, and seek to gain followers through intimidation rather than a more legitimate form of governance. This by and large disables the preferred primary security strategy of aid agencies: 'acceptance'. On the ground, the dominant security-response has been a visible attempt by aid agencies to 'harden' themselves, by strengthening protection and more readily adopting deterrence measures. While increased protection and deterrence calls for even greater investment in the pursuit of 'acceptance' by the many actors who are not that 'radical', in practice, this does not usually take place. Instead, greater dissociation from the operating environment for security reasons leads to a significant reduction in interactions with that wider environment, which in turn increases the potential for mutual incomprehension.



What has happened to 'humanitarianism'?

Aid agencies tend to describe the overall evolution of the global security environment in terms of a perceived 'shrinking of humanitarian space' or 'humanitarianism under threat'. 'Humanitarianism' originates in compassion for one's fellow human beings. It is grounded therefore in the recognition of a shared 'humanity' and empathy with the plight of others. Compassion is an important driving motive, and expresses itself in compassionate and respectful behaviour. It is not 'intrusive and abrasive' (Slim 2004:6). 'Humanitarianism' as a legal construct is grounded in international humanitarian law. This attempts to enshrine certain principles related to respect for non-combatants in law, and to allow for certain – independent – people to provide assistance and protection to non-combatants, *on the provision that they respect certain rules and conditions in doing so*. Although the threat to 'humanitarianism' described in this article comes from both external and internal factors, agencies have so far paid less attention to their own role.

'Humanitarianism' under threat – the external actors

The general tendency is to blame declining respect for humanitarianism on others. Agencies like to point fingers at the politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian action, and to a lesser degree at the infiltration of the aid world by for-profit actors. Two of the main arguments are well known.

Firstly, policy in various countries (including many regular donors to the UN and to international NGOs) has been developed with the aim of 'policy coherence' and 'whole-of-government' approaches, at a time when (state rather than human) security is high on the agenda again. This has encouraged the practice of subsuming aid, including emergency aid, under foreign policy objectives. In addition, some of the donors who support relief and other aid are themselves 'belligerents' in some operating environments.

Secondly, the perceived association of aid with foreign policy agendas and 'foreign interference' has been further encouraged by military forces engaging in humanitarian and reconstruction work ('winning hearts and minds'), and by the sometimes extensive use of for-profit contractors, not only to provide security but also to implement significant reconstruction, governance and state-building programmes. Add to this public statements by prominent Western political and military figures to the effect that aid agencies are a significant 'force multiplier', or an important source of intelligence, and it becomes hard to convince sceptical observers that those providing aid are really 'neutral' or 'impartial'.

Globally there is much greater awareness of the political uses of international and especially 'Western' aid. This generates various degrees and forms of resistance: sometimes towards the objectives of the 'foreign intervention', and sometimes to the methods adopted. Even when local people and governments more or less agree on the 'what', they may object to the 'how'. The 'international community' can be quite overbearing (and the same is true of its 'aid component'). It is remarkably indifferent to pursuing a broadly shared sense of 'legitimacy' and ownership in target societies. There are of course those who, for a variety of reasons, utterly reject any 'foreign' agenda and with it the 'foreign presence', and are prepared to fight it with violence. Their targeting of aid agencies is not the result of a 'misunderstanding' about the 'independence, neutrality, impartiality, and universalism' of aid. On the contrary, many of them are very well able to connect the dots and see how 'aid', including emergency aid, is part of a larger foreign – mostly Western – agenda. The problematic self-image of aid workers as 'white knights' (discussed in section III) is envisaged more literally by members of these groups: the 'white knights' are people in white overcoats bearing crosses, bringing medical care whilst also advancing or defending a particular interest, like the Knights Templar of the Crusader days.

'Humanitarianism' under threat – the aid agencies themselves

Indeed, the challenges to 'humanitarian action' cannot be exclusively ascribed to the political and military establishment of mostly Western governments. Aid agencies would do well to look critically at their own practices and how these contribute to greater suspicion, less general 'acceptance' and, unfortunately, outright hostility. The following are some of the images the mirror would reflect:

- **Failing to stand up for independence:** While there is much grumbling and even vocal criticism about the politicisation of aid by donor governments, one cannot deny that some aid agencies have been unable or unwilling to distance themselves effectively from this politicisation. Certainly, when a lot of governmental money is available for programmes in places where this is clearly linked to strong foreign policy objectives, some agencies, particularly those that are heavily dependent on bilateral (and multilateral) funding, but also others, have not always had the courage to say 'no'. Some simply need to be present and operating in such environments in order to maintain cash flow. Others are lured by the budgetary growth opportunities.
- **Beyond relief and development:** Agencies which were originally focused on 'emergency and/or development' have been pushed and pulled to get involved with programmes related to peacebuilding, statebuilding, governance and democratisation. While 'relief' and 'development' are not entirely apolitical activities, it is easier to pretend they are than in the case of these wider objectives. Some agencies have begun to go beyond relief and development out of a concern to engage with the perceived causes of violence. Others do so because it provides new sources of funding.

The net result is that even 'relief' and 'humanitarian aid' have – in a number of much-publicised contexts – become embedded in a larger 'project' with strong and explicit political and social transformation objectives for whole countries and societies. The desire for political and social transformation in someone else's society is not objectionable per se, yet often it fails to build broad and strong local legitimacy and support among those who are most directly affected. Nobody likes to have a political system and concomitant social norms imposed on them, even if the intent is 'benign'.

- **The aid business:** 'Humanitarianism' is not only under threat from criminals and radical extremists, and from political and military figures in donor circles, but also from the 'relief industry' and the 'aid business'. International aid, including the provision of relief, is now big business: 'money talks' in the not-for-profit sector too. Financial sustainability of an organisation is a valid concern, but an overriding obsession with 'cash flow', 'growth' and 'market share' erodes the heart and soul of an aid organisation.

Fortunately there are still individual aid workers who are genuinely driven by 'compassion' for their fellow human beings. But for others it is or has become 'just a job'. Sadly, the prevalence among aid workers of arrogant attitudes and derogatory comments about the populations they are supposedly helping, signals something more disturbing than mere 'compassion fatigue'.

Anybody who spends some time in the Western-dominated aid world, cannot but be astonished by the pervasive levels of distrust: distrust between people within agencies, between agencies, between agencies and their alleged 'beneficiaries', between donor and recipient governments. Such widespread distrust is an indicator that there is something profoundly wrong with an enterprise that claims to be built on compassion for other human beings.

Two unhelpful myths

Myths serve different purposes. One such purpose is the maintenance of an illusion – for the outside world but also for oneself. I would argue that, in general, aid agencies actively maintain myths in order to avoid facing up to the realities of what they are within the contemporary political economy, and/or what they have allowed themselves to become. Two prominent myths are referred to in the phrases the **‘aid community’** and the **‘humanitarian agency’**.

The ‘aid community’ supposedly consists of the collective of not-for-profit agencies, largely non-governmental but often also including bilateral and multilateral aid agencies and administrations. The word ‘community’ suggests a certain form of common identity, which does not really exist in this case. The notion of a ‘community’ cannot be sustained without any boundaries; anybody who can raise some funds can mount an ‘aid operation’, especially abroad, for any purpose whatsoever, based on any kind of motivation, and claim to be part of the ‘aid community’. Legislation in donor and recipient countries may provide oversight over generic characteristics such as not-for-profit, and put some boundaries between the ‘charitable’ and the ‘political’, but does not differentiate very deeply. The internal standards and Codes of Conduct that many agencies have signed up to have hardly any real meaning in the absence of oversight and enforcement mechanisms.

Talking about an ‘aid community’ suggests that its members have more in common with each other than what differentiates them. This is not the case. There is fierce competition for money and even for ‘beneficiaries’. More importantly, there are profound differences in the motivations that drive different agencies, the goals they aspire to, and how they try to reach them.

The current loose reference to a mythical ‘aid community’ avoids any serious conversation about the differences between faith-based and secular agencies, between (political) ‘solidarity’ movements and ‘impartial’ agencies, and so on. Churches and solidarity movements may be non-governmental and provide aid on a not-for-profit basis, but otherwise may have different motivations, objectives and *modi operandi* from secular or ‘impartial’ agencies. Churches have acknowledged this on occasion by referring to their relationship with secular NGOs as ‘we are with you but not of you’. It would be more realistic to speak of a not-for-profit ‘sector’ (as distinct from the for-profit sector), or even an ‘aid industry’ rather than an ‘aid community’.

A second persistent myth is that most organisations that provide aid are ‘humanitarian agencies’. This phrasing suggests that their ‘core business’ is humanitarian action. But for the majority this does not hold true: they also do a lot of other things, which are variously classified as ‘recovery’, ‘development’, ‘democratisation support’, ‘peacebuilding’, and so on. This goes way beyond saving lives and providing succour to the wounded, and is certainly not ‘neutral’ or ‘impartial’. Again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to do much more than keeping people alive and protecting non-combatants, but those organisations engaged in these activities cannot claim to be ‘humanitarian agencies’. They are general ‘aid agencies’ or even ‘social activist agencies’, which – among many other things they can and will do – provide ‘relief’ if the situation warrants it.

Aid for political purposes and aid as a business are both contemporary realities, and are probably not new phenomena. But they should not claim to be ‘humanitarian’: neither the motives that drive them nor the *modi operandi* are grounded in ‘humanist’ sentiment or international humanitarian law. For organisations to pretend otherwise and refer to themselves inappropriately as ‘humanitarian agencies’ confuses the meaning of ‘humanitarianism’. This contributes to the perception that ‘humanitarianism’ is nothing but politics or business in disguise, and hence not worthy of respect.



Crystal ball-gazing: the medium-term future?

Predicting the future is a presumptuous exercise, but trying to anticipate what it may look like is not. Here are some of the trends that may shape the 'space' especially for international aid agencies in decades to come.

- **Financial power shifts eastwards:** The global financial and economic crisis of 2008-9 may have diminished the prestige of Western capitalism; it has certainly contributed to a further shift of wealth from the 'West' to the 'East'. Many Western governments, traditionally major donors of international aid, have run up significant budget deficits which it may take decades to reduce. This, together with the reflex reaction of 'our people first', common in times of economic stress, is likely to take a toll on aid budgets. A decline in institutional funding for 'Western' aid agencies may take place in parallel with funding from 'new donors' increasingly going to non-Western agencies.
- **Ideological polarisation:** The G.W. Bush administrations (together with the far right in the US) and radical Islamists worked in tandem to push the world to greater polarisation. Both advocated their own versions of the 'if you are not with us you are against us'. As a result, hardliners on all sides have already gained significant ground. This situation feeds on itself and may well worsen before it gets better. Deep divisions exist not only between 'countries' but also within countries. The space for 'moderates' and those who want to come 'in-between' to provide help to victims and survivors and to the poor and needy, is under pressure. It is more difficult not to be perceived – or be portrayed – as being part of one side or another.
- **Religion at the forefront:** Ideological projects cast in religious terms have gained significant new traction. This tactic disguises who benefits from the projects and puts them above rational debate. 'Secularism' will be challenged more and with it the underlying secular humanism that is one source of compassion and universal human solidarity. There will also be fault lines and difficult debates among believers. Those who emphasise the primacy of the spiritual experience – and hence could be in a position to reduce polarisation – currently seem to be at a disadvantage in relation to those who translate religion into a political project. This takes place in the Christian just as much as the Muslim world, and amongst Jews. These debates spill over into questions about the provision of aid and who is entitled to receive it.
- **The spread of political economy perspectives:** While many international aid agencies and aid workers remain in a state of denial about how political many of their programmes actually are, local populations, local organisations and recipient governments around the world have become more 'savvy'. The communications revolution, particularly satellite TV, access to the internet and to a lesser degree the spread of mobile phones, means that many more people now have access to far more information, from a much greater variety of sources. Aid agencies have been advised to adopt 'political economy' perspectives but most are still struggling with this while quite a few people on the receiving end already understand 'international aid' as part of a global 'political economy'.
- **The assertion of 'national capacities':** National governments are contesting international aid (other than the provision of finance by itself) for a variety of reasons, sometimes valid, sometimes less so. This may be due to perceived conditionalities, because aid workers bypass and therefore undermine government institutions, because they are undesired witnesses, or actively meddle in 'governance' models and matters, and/or because they are not very accountable to national authorities (or local societies). Furthermore, national governments often see aid as very intrusive. Similarly, in the future, more local and national 'aid' organisations are likely to challenge international agencies for receiving large sums of money over many years for 'local capacity-building', while continuing to compete with local organisations or acting as an expensive 'middle man'.

- **Institutional and human weaknesses:** On a more mundane level, populations and governments have become smarter about the persistent weaknesses of aid agencies. This should not come as a surprise in situations where local people may have observed aid agencies in action for 10 or 20 years. Many people have experienced how volatile the engagement of aid agencies can be, especially those that are financially very dependent on public funding for typically short-term projects. Millions around the world will gratefully acknowledge the aid they received at one time or another, yet for most this will only have been a small and temporary addition to their own efforts at survival and recovery, and not always an unmitigated pleasure. They have seen the aid providers fiercely compete with each other while preaching 'collaboration' to locals. They have also noticed that aid workers are not immune to that particularly irritating mixture of ignorance and arrogance, to racism and class-superiority, to corruption and sexual abuse, to ineffectiveness and incompetence. Many aid workers fail to demonstrate the compassion and commitment that should be driving motives for their presence. Sometimes they have no time for basic human contact; many seem to have no interest in it.



'Acceptance' in the bigger picture

The need for aid and protection in the world is not likely to diminish. But the acceptance of or consent to the presence and programming of foreign, and specifically 'Western', aid agencies and aid workers will be less easy than it used to be in the short period between the end of the Cold War and the first few years of the 21st century. For a variety of reasons, some fairly valid and others very self-serving, more 'stakeholders' on the receiving end are likely to contest 'international aid'. Sometimes that contestation is violent.

'Acceptance' has become the preferred 'security strategy' for many aid agencies. In essence it means gaining and maintaining consent for your presence and programming from 'all-those-who-matter' in a given environment. The failure of many agencies to understand the practical implications of an 'acceptance' approach is by now well known. 'Acceptance' cannot be simply be 'assumed' nor equated with 'community acceptance'. It requires extensive and persistent investment in identifying, contacting, informing, negotiating, explaining, reaffirming, clarifying, etc., with a (sometimes large) number of actors who have influence in a particular operating environment, but who may not even be present. Such active pursuit of acceptance is typically beyond the capacity and often the skills of one or a few dedicated Security Officers in the field. Pursuing an 'active acceptance strategy' has never been easy. It is becoming still more difficult in environments with a proliferating number of actors (including aid providers), some of them rather 'shadowy'. It has become very difficult to 'control the message' and hence how an agency is perceived. The contestation of international and particularly 'Western' aid is fuelled by broader reasons than the particularities of an individual aid agency's activities in a given environment. These broader challenges, critiques and contestations of international and particularly 'Western' aid pose larger and far more strategic questions for international aid agencies than the operational management of security in a given environment. These challenges require a serious internal interrogation of fundamental issues such as:

- **Values and operational principles:** This goes far beyond simple 'value statements' that can be stuck onto posters on office walls, and includes complexities and dilemmas relating to 'needs' and 'rights' agendas; the role of religion (or not) in relief work, which understanding of 'religion' prevails, and what this means in practice for how one operates; and questions about how agencies relate to human rights and international law, not only in theory but also in practice.
- **Mandate or mission:** Within each agency, the nature and limits of the mandate or mission need to be realistically assessed in the light of its independence, or lack thereof.
- **Politics:** What is an agency's 'politics', how is this defined, and how does it find practical expression in the agency's work in a variety of often complex contexts? This relates to the previous points. One of the most critical questions is that of 'legitimacy'. How does an agency gain sufficient 'legitimacy' globally, and from those in whose societies it 'intervenes'?
- **Funding base:** From whom does an agency take money, under which circumstances and conditions? What are the practical implications for organisational survival and growth? What are the practical implications for how the organisation can both pursue its mission and remain true to its values – and politics?
- **Identity:** In a globalising world, what is or should an agency's identity be? What does this mean in terms of the location of offices, the profile of staff, the organisational culture, the practical and symbolic connotations of the designation of 'international' and 'national' staff, and your 'supporter' base?
- **Personnel:** What does the above mean in terms of who you recruit and retain, and what sort of motivations and behaviour you expect from those who work with and for you? What skills – including relational skills – do your personnel require?

- **National/local capacities:** What does the above mean for your strategic and practical position with regard to national capacities and partnerships with national organisations?
- **Forward accountability:** What does the above imply for your accountability to local and national stakeholders, the intended ‘beneficiaries’ of your presence and programmes?
- **The organisational message:** What is your organisational message about who you are, what you do, why, and how? How do you communicate a consistent message to a much larger range of audiences than the traditional supporter base? In addition to consistent communication, the credibility of this organisational message must be retained and reinforced by consistent practices. This includes practices that generate perceived legitimacy within the societies you have come to help.

If each of these points is difficult individually, the difficulty is significantly increased by their interconnectedness.

Crucially, answers to these difficult questions cannot remain at the level of discourse. Too often the impression is given by international aid agencies and aid workers that the leading motto is ‘do not practice what you preach’. People are increasingly looking at consistency between practice and discourse. This also implies putting an end to the myths of an ‘aid community’ and of ‘humanitarian agencies’ (when applied to multi-mandate agencies which, amongst other things, also provide relief).

International aid organisations need to engage seriously with these wider but fundamental questions about their values, identity, politics and legitimacy in a changing world, and clarify their individual position in and towards the evolving global political economy. Strategically, this may require Western aid agencies to substantially ‘de-Westernise’ (see Micheletti 2010). This step should not be taken in order to attract more funding from ‘emerging donors’, but to gain more legitimacy globally. Some agencies are already doing so. This approach does not guarantee greater acceptance and fewer security incidents – although there are some indications that it can help. But it will at least reduce the risk that one is rejected and targeted for the wrong reasons.



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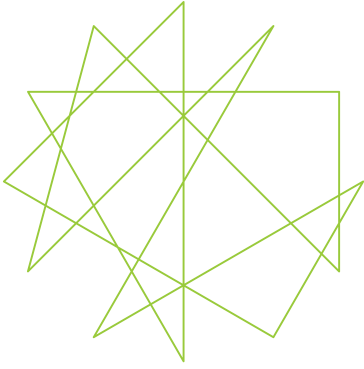
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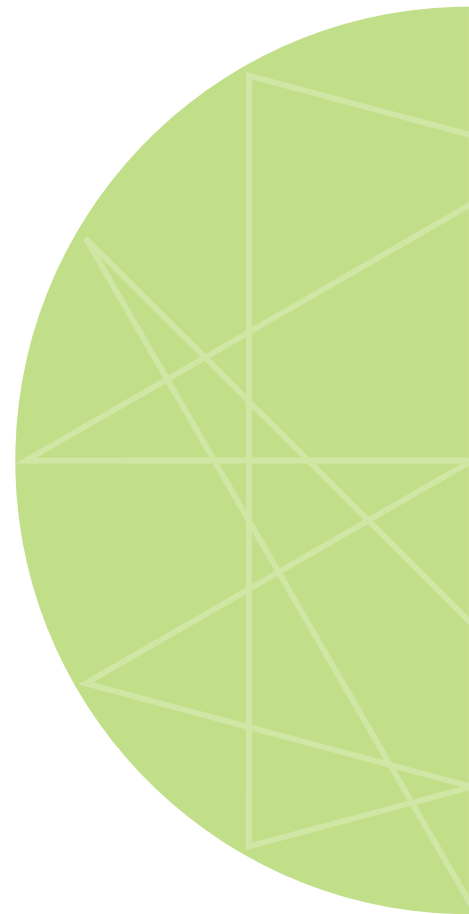
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