The Continuing Metamorphosis of the Humanitarian Practitioner: Some New Colours for an Endangered Chameleon

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In this article I set out an agenda of good practice for today’s humanitarian practitioner. I first outline the distinctive political and conflict-related features of today’s complex political emergencies, and the new interventionist strategies of the international community and the United Nations in responding to them. From this description of the new operating environment faced by humanitarian practitioners since the end of the Cold War, I go on to identify a range of key skills required by today’s relief workers. These include: informed political analysis; negotiation skills; conflict analysis management and resolution; propaganda monitoring and humanitarian broadcasting; a broader understanding of vulnerability to include notions of political, ethnic, gender and class based vulnerability; human rights monitoring and reporting; military liaison; and personal security and staff welfare. Finally, the article focuses on the moral skills required by today’s humanitarian practitioners if they are to work out a new model of humanitarian identity and positioning which supersedes the traditional but devalued notion of neutrality.

In 1985, Susan George gave a satirical description of the ideal relief worker. The result was a ludicrously well-qualified and superhuman character type, able to adapt to any situation:

First they must take graduate degrees in social anthropology, geography, economics, a dozen or so difficult and unrelated languages, medicine and business administration. Second, at a slightly more practical level they must demonstrate competence in agronomy, hydrology, practical nursing, accounting, psychology, automotive mechanics and civil engineering. In addition, they must learn to give a credible imitation of saintliness, and it would be well if they could learn sleight-of-hand as well, since they will often be called upon to perform feats of magic. (George, 1990, p. 50.)

Like all good satire, George’s spoof of an identikit relief worker contained an element of truth. But George was designing her superhuman relief worker in 1985 and confining his or her role primarily to the food emergencies and natural disasters of that time. In this paper, I want to suggest that the majority of today’s humanitarian emergencies require relief workers to have even more skills than this parody of their eighties predecessors. Today’s emergencies — described variously as complex
emergencies, political emergencies or per-
manent emergencies — have seen relief
workers working in radically new opera-
tional and policy environments. The classi-
cal set-piece relief operation of previous
decades is often unworkable in many of
these situations (Slim, 1994), while the
new options for international intervention
have set precedents for increasingly politi-
cized humanitarian action (Slim and Pen-
rose, 1994).

This paper describes a number of
features which are distinctive to this new
operating environment and identifies new
areas of work which are essential to cope
with them. I argue that for relief workers
to adapt successfully to their new environ-
ment requires re-skilling in certain key
areas — yet more colours for this
chameleon profession. But more than re-
skilling, today’s emergencies also require a
fundamental reappraisal of the relief
worker’s essential identity. In particular, it
is necessary to examine that precious
saintliness alluded to by George. Of all the
colours in their camouflage, this saintli-
ness has been the one which ultimately
protects relief workers from attack in their
environment. It is this aura of neutrality
which has allowed them to be perceived as
being in the world of conflict but not of it.
But is such positioning possible in today’s
emergencies? Is the best form of protection
now to be found in taking sides? Today’s
emergency practitioner, therefore, must
also be something of a moral philosopher.
He or she often has to decide between the
Scylla and Charybdis of what has been
described as the choice between neutrality
or solidarity (Duffield, 1994a; African
Rights, 1994b).

The stereotypical media image of a
relief worker in most western countries is
that of a dynamic and rather harassed
white medic or administrator breathlessly
quantifying the terrible scale of the latest
eexample of man’s inhumanity to man.
Needless to say, this is an over-simplified
image of the different groups who actually
manage today’s relief programmes. In
broad terms, there are three categories
of humanitarian practitioner. In this paper I
seek to address them all and use the phrase humanitarian practitioner to
encompass all three categories.

First there are the members of the
‘international relief elite’ (African Rights,
1994b, p. 9). These are the civil servants
and employees of the government, UN
and NGO organizations who dominate the
relief and development business and form
the humanitarian establishment. Secondly,
there are the many thousands of national
employees of these organizations (known
somewhat patronisingly as ‘local staff’ by
the establishment) who manage the great
dulk of relief programmes and frequently
put themselves and their families at risk of
intimidation and death. These national
employees who work in international UN
agencies and NGOs are often confronted
with a very effective glass ceiling which
severely limits their professional advance-
ment. This prevents them from rising to the
most senior positions in these organizations
and having any real policy influence. They
do, however, tend to form a national relief
elite, a kind of development bourgeoisie
within their own societies. Thirdly, there
are the founders, members and employees
of national NGOs or community-based
organizations (CBOs) whose organizations
are (equally patronisingly) referred to as
‘local NGOs’. These practitioners and their
organizations may start off as independent
and radical self-help groups working with
their own communities in emergencies, but
can also be co-opted by the international
relief elite over time.

THE NEW ENVIRONMENT
In the last four years, the radically differ-
ent nature of many humanitarian emer-
gencies has combined with equally radical
new humanitarian policies by the more
powerful members of the international community to create a new operating environment for humanitarian practitioners. Duffield has led the way in analysing the distinctive features of complex or political emergencies, and has traced the accompanying evolution of donor and NGO policy and practice (Duffield, 1990, 1994b and 1994c).

The overriding feature of complex emergencies is their thorough politicalness and their domination by conflict. Duffield argues that today’s complex emergencies are wholly different to natural disasters. Although the latter are recognized as complicated social and political phenomena, they do not have the wider wrecking power of a political emergency (Duffield, 1994a). The majority of conflicts in today’s world are internal conflicts. No longer the socially cohesive wars of liberation in the Cold War period, many of today’s wars are ‘resource wars’ in which violence is used as a rational strategy for survival within the context of limited environmental resources and increasing marginalization from the world economy. Their most significant feature is therefore to wreck and destroy national, governmental, social, civil and trading structures (Macrae and Zwi et al., 1994). It is this state of affairs above all others which dictates the conditions in which relief workers now work and which is determining a new agenda for humanitarian practice. While these types of conflict are by no means new — Cambodia under Pol Pot and Uganda under Amin are examples from the Cold War — they are distinct from the proxy wars of the Cold War.

The second new feature of today’s complex emergency is the new scope for international intervention which has emerged since the end of the Cold War, and which has been increasingly formalized in the new strategies of the current UN Secretary General’s Agenda for Peace (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). The UN’s new policies of peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-building strategies are founded on the increased deployment of UN military forces in complex emergencies. And this new form of interventionist military humanitarianism has been a major new ingredient in many of today’s emergencies, and one which has radically changed the operational landscape for civilian humanitarian practitioners.

THE NEW SKILLS

The distinctiveness of complex emergencies and the more interventionist style of ‘new world order’ humanitarianism makes it essential to understand the implications of these changes for practitioners. In doing so, it should be possible to identify new skills which will allow them to operate effectively. Needless to say, many practitioners are already engaged in these new areas, but recognition of them as part of the expanded parameters of humanitarian work will help to formalize them as essential elements of good practice.

Political analysis

In today’s emergencies, the relief worker is faced with conditions of byzantine political complexity. Sophisticated political analysis and negotiation are now a major element of humanitarian practice in complex emergencies. In the past, a certain naivety was considered a useful asset to relief workers, and political ignorance was the bliss in which they thrived on the fringes of many wars and dictatorships. But today, political ignorance can be fatal. The need to keep pace with the changing
political and military configurations of events is vital to the safe and effective operation of a relief agency.

Because an increasing amount of emergency aid is now delivered on the principle of negotiated access (Duffield, 1994c), collecting information in complex emergencies is more akin to intelligence gathering. Agencies need to know which faction is in control where, who will be amenable to negotiation and on what terms. With relief supplies increasingly recognized as a weapon of war, sophisticated analysis of who is benefiting and who is losing out from an agency’s relief programme must be at the heart of responsible good practice (Keen and Wilson, 1994). Humanitarian workers frequently have to handle this kind of analysis and negotiation themselves. They can learn these skills on the job, but relief agencies are recognizing that their staff are becoming political analysts, intelligence gatherers and front-line negotiators. They need to value these skills and develop them in-house.

Negotiation

Negotiation is a particular area in which increasing demands are being made on relief workers. In many of today’s emergencies, the days of having a signed and sealed operational agreement with a central government authority are over. Likewise, the new generation of umbrella agreements through the UN — e.g. the Memorandum of Understanding in Iraq, Lifeline in Sudan and with UNHCR in Bosnia — are also proving less and less attractive to a number of large NGOs. They are frequently criticized as inappropriate international compromises which function more as palliatives to competing factions than providers of targeted and needs-related aid. If NGOs want to develop creative and long-term relief programmes, therefore, they may increasingly need to go it alone. This involves ad hoc patterns of alliance and co-operation with different factions on the ground, which must be constantly monitored and renegotiated.

This operational style, with its web of relationships, requires a constant supply of deft negotiators, and negotiation is another complicated and exasperating skill which needs to be added to the ‘person spec’ of today’s relief workers. If they are to thrive in the politicized and multifactional environment of complex emergencies, the mass of negotiating experience and theory in the commercial, diplomatic and military communities might usefully be applied to training relief workers in the art of negotiation.

Conflict analysis and management

The environment of today’s complex emergencies is above all one of continuing conflict. Consequently, conflict analysis and management represents a major new area of practice for relief workers. A whole cluster of skills are involved here around the core areas of conflict analysis; conflict early warning; mediation; and conflict resolution. They represent an increasing part of sound humanitarian practice, essential to the effectiveness of relief programmes and to the creation of new peace-building rehabilitation and development programmes.

Skills relating to conflict prediction and management have become an essential part of working in conflict. A plethora of NGO workshops have taken place in the last two years on this subject in an attempt to understand the dynamics of conflict and train staff accordingly (e.g., Oxfam/ACORD, 1993; Bradbury, 1994a, pp. 125–44). In particular, conflict early warning is now a major preoccupation of NGOs and the UN system alike. In its most recent human development report, UNDP is now monitoring ‘human secur-
ity’ and ‘human distress’ through indicators of personal, community and political security (UNDP, 1992, ch. 2). In this field, a whole new range of NGOs concerned with conflict and peace, like International Alert, have discovered a common agenda with relief agencies and are now attempting to work together, during and in advance of, complex emergencies (Rupesinghe, 1994).

The race to find these and other early indicators of emergent conflict is to the 1990s what the race for the magic formula of famine early warning indicators was to the 1970s and 1980s. While it is hoped that the quest for conflict indicators will make rapid progress, the translation of such efforts into conflict prevention and resolution will no doubt run into many of the same obstacles encountered by famine prevention efforts. Those managing famine early warning systems in the 1980s soon discovered the vast chasm which lay between information and response—a chasm which could only be bridged by concerted political will and public action (Buchanan-Smith et al., 1992; Dreze and Sen, 1989). Conflict prevention initiatives may reach a similar threshold of impotence if the necessary political leaders and humanitarian policy makers are not prepared to act for peace. From the start, therefore, all conflict prevention and resolution programmes will need to incorporate or generate a critical mass of political will.

Initial examples of successful conflict resolution and peace-building strategies by NGOs in Somaliland have shown that, appropriate structures permitting, this can be done from the bottom-up by working with representative community leaders and negotiating fora. The long view and commitment of the NGO concerned was also recognized as critical (Bradbury, 1994b). But conflict analysis, management and resolution is a skilled and complicated task, and not one for the impatient or faint hearted. If emergency practitioners continue to take it on as part of their long-term humanitarian role in complex emergencies, they will need further training alongside the fiery baptism of experience.

**Propaganda and humanitarian broadcasting**

Recent events in Somalia, Rwanda and Former Yugoslavia have shown the crucial part played by media-based propaganda in the escalation of conflict. In Rwanda, for example, the notorious Hutu radio station ‘Mille Collines’ encouraged the most extreme forms of violence against Tutsis, and then terrorized Hutus into fleeing to Zaire in the face of RPF victories (African Rights, 1994a). Relief agencies and their staff will need to develop skills in monitoring this kind of propaganda in future if they are to be able to monitor the escalation of conflict and its consequences. But more than just monitoring it, they will need to develop the ability to counter such propaganda with information broadcasting of their own in which voices of dissent from within the affected communities can counter the dominant propaganda offensives. The fact that the very first flight of the US military response to the Rwandan refugee emergency in Zaire included radio jamming equipment may be the shape of things to come. Counter-propaganda, it seems, is now a first-line relief response along with oral rehydration solution.

Faced with the propaganda and misinformation inherent to political emergencies, the relief establishment will have to become a powerful communicator itself. Concerted peace broadcasting ‘upstream’ in advance of major conflict, combined with humanitarian information broadcasts ‘downstream’ in the heat and aftermath of complex emergencies, will become increasingly important (Loizos 1994). Lewis has shown how critical radio is to even the most isolated Somali com-
munities (Lewis, 1994) as a source of information on which to base their survival strategies. UN agencies have already experimented with this type of broadcasting in cooperation with the BBC World Service in Afghanistan and Cambodia (Loizos, 1994), while in Rwanda the BBC has teamed up with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to set up a daily fifteen minute ‘emergency radio lifeline’ as part of a five-country family tracing effort (Crosslines, 1994, p. 49). Such techniques of peace broadcasting and humanitarian information broadcasting will need to be developed even further as the political aspects of complex emergencies demand that humanitarian practitioners operate within the contested information space surrounding today’s emergencies. In doing so, the principles of accuracy and genuine representation will be essential to creating the credibility upon which such broadcasting depends.

Accepting a new urban terrain

Another distinctive feature of political and conflict-driven emergencies is the emergence of the urban setting as an increasing locus of crisis and humanitarian relief. In complex emergencies, the UN agency or NGO no longer journeys into the countryside on ‘field trips’ from its head office in the national or regional capital. Very often today, the capital city is the field. Cities are frequently the epicentres of today’s political emergencies. The food emergencies of the 1970s and 1980s took place mainly in the countryside, with cities being well protected from them by governments who feared the displeasure and proximity of an urban mob. In contrast, because today’s emergencies are political, they focus on cities as the centres of regional or national power. It is in places like Mogadishu, Kigali, Sarajevo, Gorazde and Huambo where the wrecking power of resource wars and their conflict is concentrated. Agencies have seen death and destruction from the doorstep of their head office in the capital, and seen conflict break out inside that office amongst their own staff. A relief system which used to coordinate from, and relax in, cities has now had to learn how to survey, register and distribute in them. It has also had to learn how to be besieged in cities and how to flee from them.

At an operational level, this means learning the ways of the city as well as the countryside. The process of urban livelihood is a new phenomenon to many of the relief workers who have not worked in earthquakes, hurricanes or floods. Assets are different in the city and the importance of cash, constant trade and labour is more marked. Because of this, strategies for coping and surviving are also different and must be understood by relief workers and targeted accordingly. In times of war and crisis, rural people also use cities as a refuge and resource, and the interaction between the two communities needs understanding, as does the consequent congestion in and around such cities which, in cases like Juba and Khartoum, may last for several years.

In situations when the countryside itself is unsafe and inaccessible to relief agencies, information gathered from urban markets and the displaced rural community in urban areas becomes a vital source of information about wider conditions and the targeting of relief operations (Nathanail and Nur, 1993). The particular dynamics and priorities of relief work in cities under siege also need to be understood to develop good practice in these increasingly common conditions (Cuny, 1994).

Extending the horizons of vulnerability

The high impact of complex emergencies on urban communities is just one example of a new vulnerable group in today’s
emergencies. But there are many others. Conflict and political emergencies have transformed the traditional 80s and 90s concept of vulnerability and vulnerable groups (Duffield, 1994b, pp. 95–107). Most classical food emergencies have concentrated on responding to and understanding the vulnerability of the poor. But vulnerability in complex emergencies is no respecter of the rich. Relief workers are having to come to terms with political vulnerability related to political allegiance, ethnic group and class in conflict situations (Keen, 1994). The particular vulnerabilities of gender in emergencies of this kind are also increasingly recognized and must inform all relief strategies. The use of rape and sexual violence against women is often used as a deliberate military strategy. This exposes women to terrible abuse within the private sphere of their lives alongside the additional burdens on their public roles in wartime (El Bushra and Piza-Lopez, 1994). Poverty is therefore no longer the key determinant of vulnerability. A defining feature of the wrecking power of internal conflict, terror and political aggression is that it can make vulnerable a whole cross-section of society, both rich and poor.

If vulnerability is no longer a respecter of wealth, it is also no respecter of time. The timeframe of vulnerability has also proved to be radically different in complex emergencies. In contrast to the creeping and escalating vulnerability of food emergencies, vulnerability in political emergencies comes like a thief in the night. Destitution happens in hours and days, instead of weeks and months. The massive, widespread and extremely rapid flights of Iraqi Kurds, Bosnians and Rwandans are obvious examples of the speed and comprehensive social impact of such vulnerability.

There are important skills implications from this expansion of vulnerability. It requires sophisticated understandings of political, ethnic and class relations. It also involves relief workers extending the notion of their traditional constituency from the rural and urban poor to include the middle class. At a practical programme level, this means a new effort to understand and support the different coping and survival strategies of these groups. At a cultural and interpersonal level, the experience of finding middle class people as ‘beneficiaries’ may jar with the traditional and essentially patronizing dynamic of the agency–beneficiary relationship. To work with an articulate community of people used to power themselves can be something of a shock to relief workers who are seldom used to feeling inferior in emergencies.

Human rights monitoring

The political and conflict-related nature of today’s emergencies requires a merger between the humanitarian and human rights agendas — two traditionally uncertain partners who have avoided each other at great cost. In situations like Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Angola, human rights monitoring and reporting is now a front-line humanitarian task. Gathering accurate information about massacres, rape and other war crimes is now rightly recognized by the UN and others as an essential part of humanitarian work. And identifying alleged perpetrators and bringing them to justice is a crucial part of long-term healing and rehabilitation during and after such an emergency. In this respect, the work of the UN Secretary General in setting up Commissions of Experts to investigate and collect information on human rights abuses and war crimes in Former Yugoslavia (UN, 1992) and in Rwanda (UN, 1994a) is an essential initiative to which humanitarian staff can contribute in the field. The role of the UN Commission on Human Rights in reporting on the Rwandan emergency (UN,
1994b) has further established human rights work as an integral part of rapid response in complex emergencies. Many parts of the international relief system are increasingly recognizing human rights work as a key part of the humanitarian assistance package in such situations.

We should expect human rights workers — so-called ‘white helmets’ — to become an increasing part of the operational landscape in complex emergencies. But also, we should hope that relief workers themselves take on the task of human rights monitoring as part of their humanitarian mandate. A traditional relief agency view has persistently seen human rights work as ‘political’ and not ‘humanitarian’. This position stems from an operational pragmatism which seeks to avoid confrontation with the various authorities with whom they have formed working relationships. African Rights has criticized this form of ‘fieldcraft’ and ‘discretion’ because it tolerates a certain amount of corruption and keeps silent in the face of human rights abuses (African Rights, 1994b). In political emergencies, such pragmatism is indeed increasingly impractical and unethical. Instead, the collection of information about human rights abuses and war crimes is to complex emergencies what the collection of rainfall data and market prices is to a traditional food emergency. It is now beyond doubt that humanitarian professionals need essential training in international humanitarian and human rights law. They also need the skills to report, or at least draw attention to, human rights abuses and so work in partnership with the designated human rights agencies in such matters. In situations in which this will bring them into confrontation with government authorities or factions and so put their programmes at risk, agencies have a choice between strategies of disguise or transparency in how they release such information. Either they must develop distancing tactics which allow them to release such information through a third party which disguises them as the source, or they must act transparently and publicly in concert with international human rights authorities in such a way as to find safety in numbers and under the spotlight of publicity.

But human rights monitoring is also required at the heart of the relief system itself, to monitor the behaviour of different agencies, particularly as new forms of military intervention are explored. To date, this type of monitoring has been taken on by independent human rights NGOs like African Rights (e.g., African Rights, 1993a and 1993b). The international relief system is still self-regulating and has no real public accountability. But many concerned parties now recognize that a more independent and powerful form of accountability and transparency is required at the international level if the humanitarian profession and its operations are to be accountable in any real sense to affected populations and donors alike. The creation of some form of independent commission on humanitarian operations is increasingly being put forward as a means to monitor the humanitarian system and its actions, or indeed its lack of action (Save the Children, 1994).

Armed guards and protection

The arming of the international relief system is one of the most outstanding features of changing humanitarian practice in the last three years. An increasingly common, if rather bizarre, skill required by relief workers in today’s complex emergencies is the ability to select, manage and coordinate armed guards. Relief operations in Somalia and Iraqi Kurdistan have seen relief agencies, including ICRC and NGOs like Save the Children UK, using and paying armed guards to protect relief convoys, stores and offices. In particular situations where relief workers them-
selves have become targets, they too are accompanied round the clock by personal bodyguards. With individual NGOs having as many as 300 armed guards in particular countries, it is no exaggeration to describe some NGOs as employing small private armies in some of today’s relief operations. In such situations, relief workers must make critical judgements about the individuals or group they employ to provide protection, and the price (financial and political) at which they do so. These decisions rely heavily on the kind of informed political analysis described above.

The armed protection of relief convoys is by no means a new phenomenon in the history of humanitarianism — armed escorts were used by western relief agencies during the Russian famine in the 1920s (Breen, 1994). What is perhaps unprecedented and alarming is the nature of the protection offered. With its mafia-like resonance, the notion of protection has a sinister double meaning. Frequently, physical protection has indeed been supplied as part of a wider financial protection racket, or soon developed into such a racket (African Rights, 1993a). Where no government authority is in control, armed protection has become a permanent feature of the political and financial arbitrage of the resource wars which underlie complex emergencies. Winning and maintaining the contract to protect a western relief agency is big business and well worth fighting for. Agencies have little choice but to enter the protection market to operate in such situations. Abiding by the rules of some form of protection now appears to be essential practice in complex emergencies. Winning and maintaining the contract to protect a western relief agency is big business and well worth fighting for. Agencies have little choice but to enter the protection market to operate in such situations. Abiding by the rules of some form of protection now appears to be essential practice in complex emergencies. Winning and maintaining the contract to protect a western relief agency is big business and well worth fighting for. Agencies have little choice but to enter the protection market to operate in such situations. Abiding by the rules of some form of protection now appears to be essential practice in complex emergencies.

Working with the UN military
Locally recruited armed guards by no means represent the only militarization of the international relief system. Since 1991, military intervention by international and UN forces has become an increasing feature of humanitarian relief. The conflation of traditional UN peacekeeping roles with humanitarian protection and peace enforcement has been a major policy of the current UN Secretary General and the more powerful members of the international community in the last three years (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). The result has been a huge increase in so-called military humanitarianism where international UN military forces (or national forces responding to a UN request) have escorted relief convoys, protected designated safe areas, enforced peace and security, and provided direct relief. There are currently some 80,000 UN military personnel deployed around the world, compared to a mere 12,000 in early 1992 (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1994). For the civilian humanitarian practitioner, this represents the arrival of a major new player in today’s humanitarian operations.

New relationships between civilian and military humanitarian organizations have had to be formed under intense pressure. These relationships are still marked by a certain ambivalence. Most recent comment by NGOs and the civilian relief establishment on military involvement is a barrage of mixed messages. This is perhaps unsurprising from such a diverse community, but also serves to illustrate the civilian dilemma with military humanitarianism. In Somalia and Rwanda, NGOs in particular called for and welcomed military involvement and then criticized and distanced themselves from it. The current tension in the relationship as operations are scaled down and redundancy looms (Visman, 1993).
seems to exist at four levels: a professional level relating to matters of good practice; a cultural level; a political level, and a competitive level.

At a professional level, NGOs have frequently criticized military humanitarianism as insensitive and ill-informed (Bradbury, 1994a; Slim and Visman, in press). Once the military role goes beyond moving supplies and standing guard, they are seen by ‘professional’ humanitarians as a liability. The military sledgehammer is reckoned as ultimately inappropriate for the many small nuts of today’s complex emergencies. This criticism has been especially levelled at UN military efforts relating to the reconstruction of civil society in the aftermath of complex emergencies in Somalia and Cambodia.

Also at a professional level, the issue of association is a major concern to civilian UN agencies and NGOs, and one which makes them wary of working closely with the military. In most military interventions to date, there has come a point where the UN forces enter into direct conflict of some kind or become extremely unpopular with the affected community, as in Somalia and Former Yugoslavia. This may be the result of its being given an unworkable mandate, as in the case of UNISOM II (Slim and Visman, in press) and UNPROFOR (Duffield, 1994d), or when it seems to be responding to a covert political agenda of its own, as in the case of the French ‘Operation Turquoise’ in Rwanda (McGreal, 1994). At such a point, it appears that the UN military have taken sides or made enemies. In these situations, NGOs and UN agencies often fear that their efforts will be doomed to ‘fail by association’ with the UN military. They make great efforts to distance themselves from the UN military and argue strongly for a definite delineation between the humanitarian agenda and the politico-military agenda (Save the Children, 1994; Oxfam, 1993). They regard this as essential to their sense of neutrality and the preservation of long-term partnerships in the country in question.

But beyond the professional reserve with which the civilian relief community view military humanitarianism lies a far deeper political suspicion about the real motives of each UN military intervention. There is a strong sense that increasing military humanitarian intervention is a new and cynical development in international realpolitik, whereby powerful member states of the international community invest in last minute and telegenic intervention at the expense of long-term commitment. It is argued that the late and undevelopmental style of this new form of very melodramatic relief gives a misleading impression of action and engagement with the problem to western public opinion (de Waal, 1994). Duffield has argued that military humanitarianism is not increased intervention at all, but should be read instead as a clear sign that the west is more disengaged and disinterested in Africa than ever (Duffield, 1994a). After all, the international community’s safe haven operation in Iraqi Kurdistan revealed that military humanitarianism can be withdrawn more quickly than development aid (Keen, in press). This view suggests that, in military intervention, the leading members of the international community have now discovered the ideal way to engage with a problem as and when public opinion demands with military resources which they are paying for anyway. Suspicions of this kind account for the political tension which often exists between the civilian and military humanitarian communities at a policy level.

At a cultural level, there is also a certain mismatch between the civilian relief community and the military. Previous generations of relief workers, especially in Britain, included many retired soldiers. More recently, however, since development became radicalized in the 1960s,
most relief workers see themselves as belonging to organizations which are part of a movement for an alternative society, in opposition to the establishment and status quo. In such a context, many relief workers have ambivalent feelings about seeing military forces as allies and partners. In their eyes, the khaki and weapons of the state are akin to the forces of reaction, and they find it hard to accept that soldiers may be enlightened like them. But alongside this resistance sits an element of admiration. Relief workers also pride themselves as embodying certain values like logistical skill, courage and endurance which are perhaps exemplified more in the army than anywhere else. At one level, therefore, relief workers also find themselves in awe of certain military capacity and skills. Although seldom voiced in public, there is perhaps both a fascination with and a resistance to the military amongst many civilian humanitarian practitioners which may account for some of the mixed messages.

In addition to this culture clash and its ambivalence, there may also lurk some serious turf issues. Having benefited from exponential growth in recent years (Borton, 1994), the civilian relief establishment may fear the military is increasingly becoming the organization of choice for the international community in complex emergencies. Although the military cannot take over the day-to-day work of UN and NGO relief agencies, they may well take over an increasing share of the power, authority and leadership in humanitarian emergencies. The organizational structure of UNOSOM II in Somalia, with its total priority of military decision-making, has alarmed many NGOs and UN agency staff as the possible shape of things to come in complex emergencies.

In terms of fund-raising and public image among the western public, the military has also displaced some traditional civilian humanitarian icons. The telegenic image of the compassionate white nurse has found competition for the first time, in the khaki bulk of the compassionate soldier with the light blue beret.

An impossible marriage?

How should today’s civilian humanitarian practitioner manage this relationship with the military? The art of military liaison and cooperation will need to be developed as yet another talent in the skills base of the new emergency practitioner. In the light of increasing military involvement in humanitarian emergencies, civilian relief workers have to develop creative working relationships with the military. They must find a common language with which to talk to the military in these situations. They must constantly identify respective areas of distinctive competence and comparative advantage in humanitarian work, and develop operational partnerships accordingly. The civilian relief community must also make clear its need to distance itself from the military community on occasion, and ways must be found to do this which are acceptable to both groups.

Much of this process will continue to be fashioned out of personal working relationships. But at a strategic level, both communities need to engage at the policy and training levels too. NGOs describe a major part of their work as advocacy or influencing. The next couple of years may well witness a chance to influence a major new player in the field in its formative stages. The civilian relief community should not miss the chance to close with its military counterparts and have a go at their hearts and minds. Only by talking to the military will NGOs be able to share their concerns about military humanitarian practice to date, test their suspicions about the military’s political intent and create a working relationship with their new de facto partner.
Longevity and a developmental paradigm

If conflict and politics are the two most distinctive features of complex emergencies, then longevity, or even permanence, is the third. The reassuring cycle of natural disasters which used to appear on the first overhead in every disaster management training workshop no longer applies. Its merry-go-round phases from disaster at the top through rescue and relief, to rehabilitation, development, prevention and preparedness, look increasingly meaningless as a means of analysing complex emergencies. The comforting idea of a return to normality at the top of the flipchart is an abstraction. Instead, practitioners in complex emergencies talk of coming to terms with the chronic and ongoing nature of these emergencies. Duffield has referred to them as ‘permanent emergencies’ in which war economies develop and winning groups have a vital interest in sustaining conflict above all else (Duffield, 1994c). Recognition of the longevity of these emergencies has led agencies to seek new models of long-term relief practice which develop the principle of ‘operationality in turbulence’ (ACORD, 1992).

Here, perhaps, is a paradigm shift required of humanitarian professionals — one which they have long been groping for in the mysterious zone of the ‘relief — development continuum’, but which has now been forced upon them by events. Many of today’s emergencies are long term. As a state of conflict and emergency persists in places like Angola, South Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda, traditional relief packages and staff intensive programmes are often not feasible, or appropriate. Instead, more flexible, long-term and innovative programmes are being employed. These rely on a sophisticated understanding of the emergency and aim to support communities in chronic crisis. This new relief paradigm accepts a state of ‘turbulence’ as the norm, and a high degree of agency powerlessness as inevitable. It does not see its task as a huge and massive effort to re-supply a community and ‘get it back to normal’. Instead, it feels its way to supporting a community through chronic crisis over the long term, often at a distance and through third parties. Its programme style is more like the slow administration of a drip than an injection, a catalyst rather than a solution. This type of creeping and opportunistic relief model requires a major shift in the mindset and approach of most relief workers. And its lateral thinking may often be a major challenge to the more linear minded relief professional. It is in many ways much more the terrain of the development worker and might be called developmental relief.

Country specialism

Such an approach is also the province of the country or regional specialist. As witnessed by the experience of the Uppsala Group in the Somalia emergency, the international relief establishment needs seasoned experts more than ever before (Lewis, 1994). The generic relief worker who moves from one emergency to the next is no longer sufficient, if ever she or he was. Humanitarian agencies need specialists who understand the history, culture and fast-moving politics of a place, and can communicate them to policy makers. In many cases, relief agencies need to break the glass ceilings in their organizational structures and let national staff members take control.

Unfortunately, this involves bucking the current trend of an emerging class of international humanitarian professionals. Today’s international relief professional is like the multinational executive who feels able to operate in any part of the world because she knows the way the firm
works. However, she very seldom knows the way the country works. Similarly, the humanitarian establishment is developing a tendency towards the generic professional at the expense of the expert. This mirrors a similar trend in both the international media and the world's diplomatic community. Gone are the days of the expert reporter and diplomat in Africa at least. The international media now prefer the extremely mobile cult reporter rather than the resident expert (Hesmondhalgh, 1993). And so it seems do the relief agencies. But both types are required — the one to know the country, the other to know the agency and the international system. In the face of permanent emergencies, relief agencies must continue to develop people like the 'old Sudan hand' and ensure the sufficient promotion and involvement of national staff at senior levels. Country and regional specialism will prove a vital asset in sustaining operations in long-term emergencies.

**Peace-building as rehabilitation**

In the aftermath of political and conflict-related emergencies, rehabilitation means more than seeds and tools. It requires the regeneration and reconciliation of civil society itself. Peace-building programmes have emerged as a major part of aftermath strategies in complex emergencies. The humanitarian professional is likely to find herself concerned with community-based peacemaking, supporting the revival of a judiciary and the creation of national police forces. These new areas are now high on the agendas of NGOs and major donor agencies as part of the mechanics required to reconstitute a 'failed state'.

The rehabilitation of the body-politic is no simple task. It requires commitment, a long view and a great deal more subtlety than traditional infrastructure-related rehabilitation packages. The lessons from Cambodia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Mozambique and Somalia need to be learnt, and agencies need to ensure that an essentially developmental approach is taken to this type of rehabilitation. Once again, the traditional relief worker is not best placed to lead such programmes, but it seems likely that a whole new range of specialist agency units and NGOs may develop to fill this gap. USAID's new Office of Transition Initiatives in the Bureau of Humanitarian Response is perhaps first off the blocks with its concern for demobilization, de-mining, policing and constitutional development. Once again, in-depth political, social and cultural understanding of a society will be essential to the task.

**Personal security and emotional health**

For a profession which was used to feeling and exercising such power, complex emergencies have given many relief agencies and their staff intense experiences of powerlessness. The environment is such that they are often unable to work. Worse still, they are often robbed, attacked and even killed. More so than ever before, their own professional frustration, personal security and emotional health have become major concerns for today's relief workers.

In order to protect themselves in the tangled war zones in which they work, relief workers have had to become acquainted with the weapons and tactics of war and to be experts in their own personal security. The use of armed guards (described above) is complemented with a range of personal measures which need to be adopted at work and at home. The plethora of these procedures and guidelines is now produced and regularly updated in manual form by many agencies, including ICRC and Save the Children. For example, the Mines Advisory Group and Oxfam have recently published a manual for development workers specifi-
cally on landmines and 'mines awareness' (McGrath, 1994).

In addition to their physical security, relief workers also need to know how to look after themselves emotionally. The recruitment of a 'stable character' is often no longer sufficient, as relief workers are being put through ordeals of fear and strain which would test anyone. Fending off frustration is another skill they need. When there can be so many long periods of evacuation, or confinement to the team house, relief workers have to learn patience and rely on other interests to see them through. Unfortunately for some, relief operations are no longer the refuge for the workaholic which they used to be. Instead, agency staff need to know how to occupy themselves indefinitely, often in conditions similar to siege. If every soldier has a field marshal's baton in his knapsack, perhaps every relief worker should carry a copy of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace'. Long enough to keep them occupied, it also shares a theme in common with the situation in which they find themselves.

IS THE CHAMELEON STILL A PROTECTED SPECIES?

The new areas of work and their respective skills outlined above offer today's relief workers a new array of professionalism with which to adapt to their new surroundings. But are they enough? Is the relief worker actually welcome in this new habitat? What if, with all the colours in the world, the oxygen of respect and immunity which he or she needs to survive is no longer present in the hostile atmosphere of today's emergencies? If the halo of saintliness to which Susan George alluded has slipped, then what hope is there for the humanitarian species?

In the last three years, more relief workers (national and international) have been killed than ever before. This may be a result of the increasing risk of relief workers being caught in the crossfire accidentally. But it may also be a sign that an open season has been declared on humanitarian workers. The evidence would seem to suggest that there is not yet an open season, but that attacking humanitarian workers is now an option for various groups in complex emergencies. And here, once again, the chameleon's colours seem to be important. Traditionally, humanitarian practitioners have relied on two types of colour to ensure their protection. First there are the various colours of their protective emblems, or 'heraldic coats of arms' as Benthall describes them (Benthall, 1993, p. 174). Red Crosses and Crescents and light blue laurel wreaths have acted powerfully as protective emblems to mark out humanitarian workers as sacrosanct. Secondly, the international humanitarian practitioner's best protective colouring was perhaps its whiteness. Not all international relief workers are white, but a lot are, and the abiding image of the humanitarian worker is that of an American or European. But it seems increasingly clear that the protection afforded to relief workers by these colours is not what it used to be.

In Former Yugoslavia, these colours cut no ice. In Somalia, with an eye perhaps to Lebanon, greedy and unaccountable factions realized that relief workers might prove profitable if taken hostage. More significantly still, many of the rival factions which are fighting over Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda have no vested interest in relating to the international political system and respecting its codes. Unlike the governments and dictatorships before them, they are marginalized from the new world order and have nothing to gain by playing by its rules. Suddenly, therefore, in many emergencies it was realized that the humanitarian emperor had no clothes. Indeed, those emblems which he or she did have were the badges of a world order...
from which most warring factions are excluded. To some groups, humanitarian workers are therefore not just naked, but wear the insignia of the enemy. In attacking them, you attack the international community from which you are ostracized. In the process you also probably acquire some valuable local political kudos as well as some lucrative material commodities. This all means that to kill a member of a UN agency over a pay dispute suddenly has many advantages if you are a member of a Somali faction dependent on surviving in a local war economy rather than in the international world order.

Questions of neutrality and positioning

The last great skill which today's humanitarian practitioners have to master, therefore, is a moral one. How do they reaffirm their saintliness, their aura of inviolability and their commitment to equity in situations such as these? This is perhaps the most puzzling and the most urgent of all the questions facing the humanitarian profession today.

The crisis of neutrality which faces relief agencies in so many of today's emergencies is one of identity and positioning. When relief aid and its manipulation by political elites is now so clearly recognized as part of war economies, can relief agencies really claim to be operating neutrally? And when humanitarian aid is so identified with a political world order from which so many people feel excluded, how can relief agencies avoid association with the international powers of this world order, who are, after all, their donors and the architects of international humanitarian policy?

These are the questions which are being hotly debated within many relief agencies, and from which may well emerge new principles of humanitarian positioning and identity. A rigorously human rights-based approach to humanitarian relief, as advocated by African Rights, which focuses on solidarity rather than neutrality, may well emerge as the position of choice for many NGOs (African Rights, 1994b). But such an approach is a high-risk strategy. It requires a very exact and well-informed analysis of who is right and who is wrong, and the subsequent identification of good groups and bad groups. In one sense, this is just another form of triage. And just as current attempts at neutrality err on the side of rewarding the powerful, a solidarity approach may err by punishing the weak who are caught up in the grip of the powerful. If the folly of neutrality lies in ignoring the lines of conflict within societies, the folly of solidarity may lie in believing them to be so clearly drawn.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to show the distinctive features of the operational environment of today's humanitarian practitioner. It is an extremely complex one, both at the intra-state and international level. While today's relief workers, like those of Susan George's parody, must remain distinguished by their breadth of skill and function, the overriding characteristic of good humanitarian practice must be a depth of commitment to and understanding of the communities with which they work. In long-term emergencies, such practice is best described as one of partnership with the vulnerable in each situation and across the lines drawn by political factions and conflict. From such a commitment it is hoped that a new model of humanitarian positioning will emerge to replace or enhance the currently devalued notion of neutrality.

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