

**The monopolitics of humanitarian intervention:
Defining the aid-politics boundary**

Notes for an ODI seminar 31 May 2000

**Joanna Macrae
Research Fellow, Humanitarian Policy Group**

Introduction

The second DFID White Paper will focus on the challenges of globalisation and its implications for poverty reduction and sustainable development.

I confess to being one of those who remains constantly baffled and overwhelmed by the concept of globalisation. In attempt to stave off both confusion and cowardliness, I'm resorting to a focus on one of the perhaps more esoteric aspects of the outline of the proposed White Paper on globalisation- that covering the organisation of government to deliver on its commitments. In particular, I would like to look at the issue of joined-up government, and how it has been applied in the UK in response to complex political emergencies.

What follows are some reflections that draw on a research study that Nick Leader and I have been working on for the past six months, and that is drawing to a close. This study has been looking at the idea of coherence between humanitarian and political action and how it has been understood

and realised by two donor governments - the UK and the Netherlands.

This study is of relevance to the debate regarding the new White Paper in two distinct, but related ways:

First, it has things to say about what joined up government means in theory and in practice. It has reflected on how different UK government departments are assuming new responsibilities for 'political' decision-making with respect to conflict in developing countries. In particular, it has looked at the how responsibilities for the formulation and implementation of international policy have been reallocated between DFID and FCO.

Second, it has sought to analyze the values and principles that are informing the UK's international policy responses to complex political emergencies. Of particular interest has been the question of whether and how the adoption of conflict management objectives by humanitarian aid actors is impacting on traditional humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. In other words, the question of whether aid and political agendas are necessarily complementary.

Reuniting aid and politics

In the early history of aid, a deal was struck to pretend that there was a tidy separation between aid and politics. Diplomats, located in Ministries of Foreign Affairs and their multilateral counterparts were responsible for 'politics' and in particular for resolving threats to security, understood primarily in military terms. Aid agencies were the junior partners in international relations, relegated to the domain of economics and latterly sociology, mythically disconnected from the hard stuff of politics. This portrayal of a neat division of labour was functional for donors, aid agencies and recipient alike. Crucially, it was premised on unconditional respect for the sovereignty of recipient countries - aid would flow as part of a redistribution of international wealth, but would not seek to intervene in the internal political affairs of recipient countries.

In the mid-1980s, a combination of external and internal factors were forcing aid agencies to acknowledge explicitly that aid and politics divide was neither sustainable nor useful.

Externally, the process of political disengagement from non-strategic areas, most particularly from Africa, created unprecedented space for aid agencies to work. Increasingly, aid was the *only* form of international engagement in non-strategic areas.

At the same time, within aid bureaucracies, pressures on budgets forced a re-analysis of the conditions required for aid to be effective and for development to take place. Thus, in addition to the economic prescriptions of structural adjustment, political conditionalities began to be introduced.

By the mid-1990s the analysis that the right political conditions were needed for effective aid, was followed by increasing claims that aid could contribute to delivering these conditions. Specifically, bodies such as the DAC proposed that aid could be used as part of a process of a strategy for conflict reduction. Aid was promising to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of diplomacy

Poor experience of punitive conditionality during the 1990s, lead to a significant revision of aid policy in the latter part of the decade. An increasing number of donors, including the UK began to narrow the scope of the aid programme to those countries whose governments were willing to meet the conditions understood to be necessary for effective aid and sustainable development. *De facto* this means aid ministries deciding on the legitimacy and competence of recipient governments' political strategy.

Significantly, in the humanitarian sphere a similar logic is now being applied. Traditionally free from political conditionality, there is a growing trend towards donor governments examining whether the conditions are in place for the delivery of effective humanitarian aid. Such conditions include security, access for independent assessment and monitoring, and respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. In some cases, where such conditions are not fulfilled, then humanitarian aid is being withheld or conditionalities imposed on its use. The UK adopted this position in relation to Sierra Leone in 1997; the US, the UK and other EU governments have imposed various forms of conditionality on humanitarian aid in Serbia during 1999, and in Afghanistan since 1996. At present there is considerable degree of confusion between the requirement for minimum conditions to ensure effective and principled humanitarian action and the imposition of political conditionality on humanitarian aid. Thus, the conceptual problem of distinguishing between conditions and conditionality is being exacerbated by the structural problem associated with multi-mandated departments.

From aid and diplomacy to international policy

The specific pressures to rethink the aid-politics divide in relation to

conflict-affected countries have been amplified by broader trends in public policy.

In a globalised world, it is no longer viable for a single government department to represent a government's interests internationally. Every specialist departmental interest, from agriculture to telecommunications to the social security of refugees is affected by global conditions and by a broadening of international regulation and legislation. Thus globalisation has forced a shift from a focus on foreign policy to international policy, making new demands on bureaucrats within individual departments, and posing new challenges for inter-departmental working.

In the case of the UK, these challenges looked particularly pressing following the creation of DFID in 1996. Freed from the controlling hand of the Foreign Office, there was clear potential for conflict as well as complementarity between the two departments. Indeed, at first sight the separation bucked the trend seen in many donor countries towards an *integration* of foreign and aid policy, designed precisely to achieve policy coherence.

Closer examination suggests that more important than the name on the brassplate at the front doors of respective ministries, is the actual division

of labour between what might be called 'aid driven' desks and 'politically driven' desks. Particularly in relation to conflict affected countries on the periphery of the global economy, aid departments, and specifically humanitarian aid departments, are taking the lead.

Diplomatic disengagement from these non-strategic areas combined with the increasing assertiveness in the political arena on the part of aid actors, has meant that responsibility for formulating international policy in relation to conflict in non-strategic areas has been transferred from the diplomatic to the aid domain. Put crudely, DFID, and the Conflict and Humanitarian Aid Department in particular, might be seen as the Ministry for Non-Strategic Countries - combining its aid programme with an unprecedented level of political advocacy.

Thus the trend set in motion in the early 1980s for development aid actors to substitute for political engagement, has evolved in recent years. With development assistance also withdrawing from those countries where the right conditions don't exist, humanitarian aid departments now constitute the key pillar of international policy responses to conflict, providing not only a palliative, but increasingly informing and negotiating political interventions.

Principles of international policy: the emergence of 'Third Way' humanitarianism

The traditional aid-politics relationship implied distinctive mandates and competences of bureaucrats in the respective ministries. The new form of international policy requires that aid bureaucrats serve multiple mandates. The reconfiguration of the Emergency Aid Department of DFID in 1998 is an example of this. The Department's brief was extended from providing a palliative to humanitarian crises, including those caused by conflict, to playing an active role in conflict reduction. An important rationale for the integration of these previously distinct tasks, was the need for coherence between these two domains, and in particular the argument that aid constituted a significant lever for political action. This assumed that humanitarian interests were necessarily compatible with domestic foreign policy interests and with political intervention in conflict affected countries.

A major shift in UK international policy and a number of other like-minded governments over the past decade, has been the introduction of an ethical dimension to foreign policy. In common with the idea of 'good international citizenship' proposed by Gareth Evans, the former Australian Foreign

Minister, the Third Way foreign policy adopted by the Blair government dispenses with the simplistic division between realist and liberal internationalist schools of foreign policy.

In a globalised world, concern about human rights, democratisation and the eradication of poverty is seen as a national self-interest, as well as being a requirement of membership of international society. An important implication of the rights-based approach to foreign policy is that states that abuse human rights forego the right to be treated as a legitimate member of the international community, and should become the object of international scrutiny, censure and occasionally military intervention.

Such interventions are justified not in terms of conventional definitions of military security, but in terms of defending human rights and averting humanitarian crises. Thus, there would appear to be a clear and positive convergence between Third Way foreign policy and the objectives of the humanitarian community. Military intervention in Kosovo is certainly presented as a case where the lessons of Rwanda had been learned, and where a political intervention served to avert a 'genocide' in Kosovo.

Recent experience suggests that, far from being identical, humanitarian

and conflict management objectives frequently conflict. For one thing, the purity and even legality of the interventionist motive is far from clear, as the case of Kosovo showed. This point was not lost on non-Western members of the Security Council during the crisis last year. For another, integrating humanitarian and political action means compromising on the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality. Abandoning these principles has important consequences not only for the security of aid agency staff, but also in terms of populations' access to life saving goods and services. It means someone, somewhere distinguishing between the good and the bad victim, or deciding that some deaths now are a regrettable means to the more important end of conflict reduction.

The UK government has experimented perhaps more than any other European government in seeking to integrate aid and political responses to chronic political emergencies. These experiments in coherence were signalled in the 1997 White Paper and were to an extent underwritten by an emerging consensus within the UN, donor and NGO communities that the separation of humanitarian aid from political action was untenable, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Missing from this period of experimentation was a clear set of rules to

regulate conflicts between humanitarian and conflict management objectives. Interestingly in contrast to the EC and Switzerland, there is no statutory basis governing the use of humanitarian aid funds, thus the conduct of humanitarian aid in the UK has been governed by a combination of bureaucratic self-regulation and sometimes bitter public scrutiny. The results of these often controversial experiments are of potentially wide interest to humanitarian policy makers throughout Europe. The emerging consensus within DFID and the UK NGO community seems to be that humanitarian and political action might be complementary, but they are and should remain distinct. It is defining what this complementarity means in practical terms that remains the real challenge.

Conclusions

In the absence of unconditional sovereignty, the rules governing external intervention in the internal affairs of countries are no longer clear. While this confusion remains, and in particular while there remains a lack of consensus between major regional blocs regarding the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention, humanitarian action remains particularly at risk. These risks are at once ethical and practical.

Much as structural adjustment policies were driven by an enforced adherence by countries to what Christopher Clapham has called mono-economics, so inclusion in international society now seems premised on governments subscribing to a mono-politics of what has been described as the values of 'liberal peace', in other words, Western-style democracy. Populations whose governments do not embrace these values, and they are among the poorest on the planet, are increasingly excluded from the mainstream of international relations, including bilateral aid relations. Now there seems a risk that the same principles that rationalise this selectivity will be used to justify the withholding of humanitarian aid.

The categorical prescription of structural adjustment is now widely questioned, even among by some its most ardent former advocates. It is striking that there is not similar scrutiny of its new political variant within official agencies or more widely. For example, the extent to which the process of globalisation and aid policies themselves are reducing states' capacity to govern effectively is examined only relatively rarely, with the blame for maldevelopment concentrated on internal failures of states themselves. Whatever the reason for their nastiness, the diplomatic equivalent of ignoring pariah states will not make them go away. There remains a poverty of political analysis and strategy, perhaps explaining in

part diplomatic raids on aid coffers.

The suspicion that aid responses to complex political emergencies are simply part of a Western project is reinforced by the trend for humanitarian assistance to become more and more bilateralised. These strategies might enable donor governments to enhance the otherwise poor accountability of humanitarian action. However, used selectively they suggest an attempt to use humanitarian assistance to implement a particular political agenda, not simply to alleviate suffering.

The final problem with the perhaps now tarnished vogue for political humanitarianism is the scant evidence that it works. The rationale for integrating humanitarian and conflict management objectives rests upon an assumption that aid constitutes a significant political and military resource for combatants, and that it therefore exerts leverage. While not insignificant, in the majority of conflicts it would seem that other sources of political and military capital far outweigh the value of relief. It is precisely in identifying and using these pressure points that 'post-modern' diplomacy seems to be particularly ill-equipped.

In sum, while donor governments might hold the monopoly on the aid purse

strings and increasingly in relation to the ability to use political and military force, clearly they do not hold the monopoly of wisdom or 'rightness'. Traditionally, humanitarian assistance has sought to be 'above' politics, in the sense of not making judgements of rightness, or wrongness, but only of need. As one interviewee put it to us:

What we are seeing is the reemergence of the concept of the just war, with good guys and bad guys. More and more we see aid as coming from the right side.

In the morass of state disintegration, transnational corporate interests and post-Cold War jostling, such confidence in the justness of any cause appears misplaced. In this context, incorporating humanitarianism into the mono-politics that now appears to govern the wider aid agenda is likely to prove problematic ethically as well as practically. It is through a politically informed, rather than a politically driven, form of humanitarian action that aid actors are most likely to be able to fulfil their mandate of assisting those most in need.

