

HPG Briefing

Number 12 • July 2003

HUMANITARIAN POLICY GROUP

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About HPG

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute is Europe's leading team of independent policy researchers dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice in response to conflict, instability and disasters.

In brief

- Non-governmental organisations have become a crucial pillar of the international humanitarian architecture.
- The NGO landscape is dominated by a handful of 'giants' in the US and Europe. These agencies account for the lion's share of aid resources, and set the terms of debate for the rest of the community.
- In the altered international environment following 11 September, competition for funding, philosophical disputes and cultural differences are set to become still more pronounced.



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Humanitarian NGOs: challenges and trends

Introduction

Non-governmental humanitarian organisations have evolved into a crucial pillar of the international humanitarian architecture. This Briefing Paper reviews the issues and trends affecting the humanitarian non-governmental sector in the wake of the sea-change in the geopolitical agenda after 11 September. Events since threaten to change the landscape of non-governmental humanitarian action in important ways, and are likely to widen the rift between US and European NGOs. Old questions, to do with relations with governments or armed forces or the shape and proper place of advocacy, have become sharper, while new challenges, such as the consolidation of the aid oligopoly, have emerged. While humanitarian agencies have to a surprising extent carried on 'business as usual', they are steeling themselves for uncertain times ahead.

The NGO landscape

The West is home to an estimated 3,000–4,000 internationally operating NGOs. The majority of these are development-only organisations. Others are what are sometimes known as 'briefcase' NGOs, created to respond to specific problems, and often to particular funding opportunities.

Once these are excluded, the number is closer to 260. A handful of large and influential organisations predominate. These include CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision. All but the US-based CRS are composed of multiple national affiliates under various forms of confederation. CARE International,

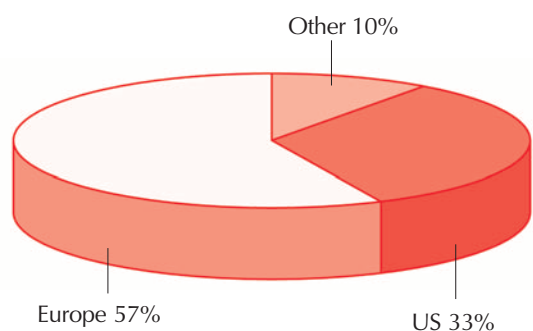
Oxfam International, the Save the Children Federation and World Vision International range from ten to 65 national members. Although all of these NGOs conduct programmes across sectors, most occupy a specific operational niche: CARE in food delivery and logistics, MSF in health, Oxfam in water and sanitation and Save on the needs of children. By the 1990s, a more confederated style of governance had begun to emerge across these organisations. In part, this reflected the perceived need for tighter policy coherence among national members, and the desire to increase southern participation.

Strands and traditions

Three main historical strands or traditions have been important in the evolution of modern humanitarian action: the religious, the 'Dunantist' and the 'Wilsonian'.

The religious tradition, the oldest of the three, has evolved out of overseas missionary work, but apart from the evangelical organisations, most religious humanitarian agencies do not proselytise in any direct way. Catholic organisations, such as CRS, Caritas and CAFOD, represent some of the largest and most visible aid organisations. These organisations see their humanitarian programmes as straddling the church and the secular world, combining social and religious goals. For Jewish and Islamic humanitarian organisations, proselytisation is in theory less of an issue; Judaism's universal covenant means that Jews are not driven to recruit for their religion, while the Koran also allows for civilised disagreement within a wider framework of universal human values.

Figure 1: Operational humanitarian NGOs based in industrialised states



‘Dunantist’ humanitarianism is named for Red Cross founder Henry Dunant. The oldest of today’s ‘super-NGOs’, Save the Children UK, was created in the Dunantist image at the end of the First World War. Others in this tradition include Oxfam and MSF. ‘Dunantist’ organisations seek to position themselves outside of state interests.

‘Wilsonian’ humanitarianism characterises most US NGOs. Named for President Woodrow Wilson, who hoped to project US values and influence as a force for good in the world, the Wilsonian tradition sees a basic compatibility with humanitarian aims and US foreign policy objectives.¹ CARE, the largest and quintessentially American NGO, came into being during the Marshall Plan after the Second World War, and began life delivering ‘CARE’ packages to war-affected Europeans. Wilsonians have a practical, operational bent, and practitioners have crossed back and forth into government positions.

The activist–pragmatist split

Differences in approach between US and European NGOs concern financial structures and the giving patterns of the public, as well as divergent political histories and philosophical traditions. European NGOs tend to enjoy greater financial independence from governments. Operationally, the Dunantist agencies tend to take a long-range, contextual approach to crises, and see advocacy as at times having more lasting importance than the actual aid operation itself. US NGOs are fundamentally pragmatic, focused on the logistical and technical tasks of aid and intent on maximising efficiency within the short-term operational setting of an emergency. The European agencies that engage in advocacy tend to be deliberately confrontational, while their US counterparts typically prefer behind-the-scenes policy advice. The Dunantist critique holds that US organisations offer only short-term solutions with little lasting impact; the Wilsonian counter-argument has been that independence at any cost is foolhardy, and that the reification of humanitarian space serves agencies’ ethos more than the people in need of assistance.

Recent developments and post 9-11 implications

The debates surrounding humanitarian assistance and NGO performance that emerged in the 1990s are still very much alive, and some have gained new urgency in the post 9-11 environment.

¹ David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

Table 1: NGO federation profiles

Organisation	National affiliates	Countries of operation	Founding member	Year founded	Total revenue 1999* US\$m	Total revenue 2001 US\$m
CARE	10	70	US	1945	525	446
MSF	18	80	France	1971	304	349
Oxfam	11	117	UK	1942	504	303
Save the Children	32	121	UK	1919	368	253
World Vision	65	92	US	1950	600	712

Source: Agency annual reports for 2001; * M. Lindenberg and C. Bryant, *Going Global: Transforming Relief and Development NGOs* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2000).

Financing

Globally, NGOs are estimated to receive a quarter of their finances directly from government humanitarian funds, with some individual governments giving much higher proportions. Denmark channels 36% of its humanitarian funding through NGOs, France 40% and the US upwards of 60%. In addition, UN agencies rely on NGOs as implementing partners. In 2000, 44% of UNHCR’s budget was programmed through NGOs.²

How NGOs are financed reflects and reinforces their divergent perspectives. The major (secular) US NGOs simply could not operate at their current level without public funding. Almost 50% of funding for CARE and Save the Children US comes from the US government, and IRC is close to 73% publicly funded. In contrast, Oxfam US receives 75% of its funds from private sources, and Oxfam GB takes only about a quarter of its funding from the British government. MSF maintains a 70% private-to-public ratio, and refuses funding from governments that are belligerents in a conflict, or whose neutrality is otherwise compromised. The US donor public is less easily tapped than their European counterparts, and what giving there is tends to focus on domestic causes. The bulk of charitable donations going to international causes is religiously oriented, allowing World Vision and CRS to sustain much lower levels of public funding than secular organisations.

The effects of 11 September appear to have harmed the funding of US NGOs, particularly in terms of private giving, much more severely than the European agencies. In the months following 9/11, there were drastic declines in non-public funds flowing to US NGOs. Private citizens, corporations and foundations, already hit by recession and a plummeting stock market, channelled the remainder of their resources to domestic recovery and victim support.

The NGO–donor relationship

More government aid funding is flowing bilaterally through NGOs, or more precisely through the handful of largest NGOs, than ever before. The share of multilateral aid (i.e., unearmarked contributions to multilateral organisations) dropped from around 31% in the late 1980s to 25% in the mid-1990s. This trend towards more bilateral grant-making coincided with a doubling of official humanitarian assistance. One implication of this trend is that many donor governments are channelling more aid through

² Judith Randel and Tony German, *The Reality of Aid 2002* (Geneva: Development Initiatives).

Box 1: Towards a typology

There have been a number of attempts to construct a typology of NGOs. Thus, Thomas Weiss posits a continuum, from ‘Classicist’ at one end, where he puts ICRC, to ‘Solidarist’, where he puts MSF.¹ Steve O’Malley and Dennis Dijkzeul offer a ‘mental map’, which plots organisations on two axes according to the nature of their relationships with governments: from ‘Independent’ to ‘Public Service Contractor’ on one axis, and from ‘Impartial’ to ‘Solidarity’ on the other.² Thus, ICRC is shown at the far end of the impartial and independent axes, with MSF as a close second. A third ‘typology’ might take into account the divisions among NGOs on the question of what sort of community they would like to institute among themselves: one based on shared codes and rules and a formal accountability structure, or a more atomistic collection of entities. Such a typology, incorporating the distinctions between the Wilsonian and the Dunantist traditions, is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Lines of demarcation within the secular NGO traditions

In favour of rule-based coordination	Care Save the Children US IRC	Oxfam Save the Children UK Concern Worldwide
Independent/rule-averse	Americares other in-kind donation organisations	Médecins sans Frontières Action contre la Faim Médecins du Monde
	Wilsonian More dependent on and cooperative with governments Short time horizon Service delivery emphasis	Dunantist More independent of and oppositional towards government Long time horizon Advocacy emphasis

¹ T. Weiss, ‘Principles, Politics, and Humanitarian Action’, *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 13 (1999).

² S. O’Malley and D. Dijkzeul, ‘A Typology of International Humanitarian Organizations’, paper for the International Expert Conference ‘Security and Humanitarian Action: Who is Winning? A US–Europe Dialogue in the Wake of September 11’, Columbia University, 24–25 May 2002.

NGOs, resulting in closer relations between donors and NGOs, the introduction of new contractual and management tools designed to regularise and formalise relations and greater pressure for accountability to donor-defined performance measures.

European NGOs such as MSF and Oxfam are in a better position to refuse government grants when accepting them is politically awkward, and thus can more readily distance themselves from state interests. Yet ahead of the conflict in Iraq in early 2003, prominent US NGOs, including Save the Children US, stated that they would not participate in planning exercises or accept grants from the US government for new programmes in and around Iraq. Many more US-based NGOs established bases and pre-positioned supplies in neighbouring countries in anticipation of refugee outflows and war-related emergency needs.

NGOs and the military

The relationship between humanitarian actors and the military has become increasingly fraught, and the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have only made it worse. Most NGOs have, at one time or another, coordinated with military forces in the execution of their aid activities. This is done with varying degrees of caution and reluctance; US organisations are typically the most amenable. Agencies have not yet found a comfortable way to position themselves *vis-à-vis* the counter-terror agenda.³ Some have tried to distance themselves, while others take the aid funds available to them and the context of their provision as simply political realities that define their operational universe. The most extreme

³ Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, 2002).

Wilsonian stance has seen some NGOs accepting their role in the military effort. This position draws the line at using humanitarian deliveries for specific political aims, but sees no inherent conflict between the work of humanitarian organisations and the US military in, for example, Afghanistan. There, calls for the expansion of the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) beyond Kabul, to provide security for humanitarian NGOs, were not heeded. Instead, ISAF troops have been dispatched to do small-scale projects for which they possess no demonstrated comparative advantage, beyond carrying sidearms to protect themselves.

Advocacy

NGOs’ advocacy is directed at governments, to effect policy change, and at the public, to educate and build constituencies behind certain values and ideas. It can be conducted through a variety of means, including lobbying, public statements, publications, press articles and editorials; the mobilisation of demonstrations or petition campaigns; and in international forums and government offices. In the past five years or so, as advocacy has increased in importance, NGOs have added new internal structures to generate and disseminate clearer messages. Through groups such as the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), based in Switzerland, and InterAction in the US, NGOs have sought to unify their advocacy *vis-à-vis* governments and international organisations, and all of the major NGOs maintain liaison and policy offices at the UN.

In the changed security atmosphere following 11 September, some avenues of NGO advocacy have been closed off, while

others have opened. UN member states have largely shelved the kind of low-level security issues that have been prominent in NGO lobbying, such as landmines or small arms. On the other hand, for agencies in the US there appeared to be a new opportunity to engage the traditionally introspective American public in international issues. Whether this opportunity can be fully exploited is, however, open to question. Meanwhile, the US administration's embrace of pre-emptive security may challenge the traditional Wilsonian identification with US government policy.

The question of faith

Religious NGOs face an additional and more delicate set of issues in the aftermath of 11 September. For Christian and Jewish NGOs operating with US public funding in Afghanistan, this means a redoubling of efforts to demonstrate neutrality and impartiality, on both political and religious lines. Muslim organisations, especially those based in North America that deal in the international transfer of cash, goods and services overseas, have come under relentless scrutiny, and several have had their assets frozen and operations effectively halted by the US and Canadian governments. Prior to 11 September, a good deal of attention was paid to the US administration's so-called 'faith-based initiative', which aims to support and encourage the work of religious NGOs. In the wake of 9/11, the US government may seek to downplay the initiative given the administration's insistence that its counter-terrorism efforts have nothing to do with a rejection of Islam. The majority of beneficiaries of this initiative are Christian organisations.

Whither the NGO community?

By their nature, NGOs inhabit relationships of mutual dependence. The scale of modern humanitarian emergencies, and the comparatively limited capacities of NGOs, demand that they coordinate their activities with each other, with multilateral agencies, with governments and with the media. In most emergencies, even the largest NGO is incapable of launching an effective response individually.

Despite the fact that NGOs have different mandates, organisational histories, cultures and interests, epistemic and collegial links among staff members of the major NGOs are strong. Over the past ten years, NGOs have greatly increased their coordination, in practice and in principle, covering virtually every aspect of their work. Umbrella groups and consortia such as the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR) and ICVA in Geneva, InterAction in Washington and Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE) in Brussels have served as forums for dialogue and information-sharing, and as vehicles for joint advocacy.

A plethora of new mechanisms and initiatives took shape in the second half of the 1990s, spurred on by perceived failures in the Goma crisis and increasing criticism of aid in general. Organisations have sought to enhance their performance and effectiveness, to strengthen their accountability and to restore

public trust in the humanitarian enterprise. Examples include statements of principle such as the Red Cross Code of Conduct and the Sphere Project's Humanitarian Charter; and operational guidelines and best practice, such as the NGO Field Cooperation Protocol, the People in Aid Code for managing and supporting humanitarian personnel and Sphere's Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. In mid-2003, a code of conduct was being developed by IASC in response to sex scandals in West African refugee camps.

Sections of the humanitarian NGO community, led by Oxfam and other British organisations, wish to see a tighter, more rule-based community emerge, where codes have teeth and NGOs are held to performance standards and made fully accountable for their programmes. The centrepiece of this movement is the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP), which has sought to establish an ombudsman or watchdog presence in the field. Other sections, notably francophone agencies led by MSF, strongly oppose such initiatives on the grounds that they risk creating a set of rigid, lowest-common-denominator standards; inhibit innovation and independence; are open to manipulation by donor governments; and solidify the dominance of the core group of major NGOs. This group is also concerned that the professionalisation of NGOs will further marketise the humanitarian community, particularly in the US.

Ultimately, today's NGOs enjoy a wide range of options as to how they want to work together, and how to approach donor governments. They can choose to do so as a group, singly, behind the scenes, or in a public confrontation. With national positions hardened over the war with Iraq, NGOs will have to search more carefully for common ground, as debates around proximity to donors and fidelity to humanitarian ideals become more urgent and emotional. In the end, the epistemic networks and operational linkages between NGOs, which bind practitioners and shape the humanitarian agenda irrespective of individual mandates, donors and governance, may hold the most potential for building bridges across the community's divisions.

This Briefing Paper is drawn from Abby Stoddard, 'Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and Trends', in Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer (eds), *Humanitarian Action and the 'Global War on Terror': A Review of Trends and Issues*, HPG Report 14 (London: ODI, 2003).

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