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## **The Role of NGOs in Emergency**

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# 1. The Role of Non Governmental Cooperation in Development and Humanitarian Aid

The last decade has seen an enormous increase of international funding for humanitarian aid, often to detriment of development aid programmes.

Over the period 1988 to 1996, expenditure on humanitarian by OECD member states rose from ECU 410 million to ECU 3,066 million per year, at a time when overall aid programmes are tending to stagnate or, more often, decline.

In the European Community aid programme, emergency and humanitarian relief amounted to 195.3 MECU in 1991 and has arisen to 656.6 in 1996 and about 700 in 1997.

The overall spending of the EU in humanitarian and development programmes amounted, in 1997, to 5,114 MECU of which 2,000 for Eastern Europe.

An average of 65% of European humanitarian aid is managed by NGOs.

The term NGO includes a platter of about 15,000 organisations all over the world. In developing countries NGOs are a relatively recent phenomenon. Although there are few "southern" NGOs which have been established since the end of the W.W.II, the majority of them has been created in the last 20 years, as an effect of the increasing responsibility of "northern" NGOs in development aid.

If we refer only to the NGOs based in OECD countries, they number approximately 2,500 and mobilise an amount of resources whose aggregate is impressive: in the 1990s, their average contribution to international aid amounts to more than 10 billion ECU per year.

NGOs normally rely on a mix of private, governmental and international funding. In European NGOs, private financing normally amounts to 25% of their total budget, therefore those organisations are more bound to public/international funding and are more obliged to comply with standards of transparency, effectiveness, legal status and overall professionalism as required by the financing institutions. This condition makes some NGOs more reliable than many others.

In the past ten years, many NGOs converted (or expanded) their activity to humanitarian aid, and new specialised NGOs have been founded, also because of the increased availability of funds. Unfortunately, the policy pursued by donors has favoured organisations that could ensure a quick response and a maximum visibility, encouraging a process of replacement of development projects with short term humanitarian operations: a less expensive but more visible form of assistance which relies on the complicity of media, though neglecting much of the specific value added of the NGOs approach.

For a better understanding of the role of NGOs and the general political framework of humanitarian aid, we must begin with a brief analysis of the relationship between development and humanitarian crisis. We will specifically focus our attention on war.

## 2. Development and conflict

There have been an estimated 180 wars and armed conflicts in the Third World since 1945, with 25 million deaths and three times as many injured among civilians, and there are over 35,000,000 refugees and other uprooted persons, at present.

The rate of civilian casualties is one of the most impressive features of modern wars: Only 5% of all casualties in World War I were civilians, 50% in World War II, 80% in the US war in Vietnam, and currently over 90%.

This means that wars are now directed against civilians and often fought by militias that are difficult to control. War is no more an inter-state confrontation but has become a domestic affair of countries affected by an internal structural instability.

If traditional wars might have a paradoxical positive effect on society (strengthening social cohesion, stimulating extraordinary efforts and unveiling unexpected resources), contemporary wars are devastating for the absence of any rule, the uncontrolled rate of violence, the loss of every ethic control over combatants, and a number of interests in play, in the background.

One of the most serious problems, in such situations, is the lack of whatever point of reference for the population. The only solution is fleeing. This explains a mass of 35 million refugees.

It is widely accepted that there are three main causes of this new type of conflicts: acute inequality in development patterns, jeopardy to one group's cultural identity or physical existence and massive violation of human rights. Normally the three causes are strictly intertwined in a general framework of underdevelopment.

Almost all the wars occurred in the last 50 years have taken place in underdeveloped countries, with very few exceptions.

The first question is whether there is a verifiable direct connection between war and underdevelopment.

Here are some figures:

The extent of poverty, in the world, is enormous: more than 1.3 billion people are absolutely poor, with incomes of a dollar a day or less per person, while another 2 billion are only marginally better off.

(IFPRI 1997)

If we take one of the foremost indicators of underdevelopment, the food security, the equation war = poverty becomes visible:

In the world there are currently 29 countries in need of emergency food aid (of which 17 in Sub-Saharan Africa). Around half of them are involved in armed conflicts.

If we look at the list of the 11 countries with the most acute food supply inadequacy, we can see that all of them are involved in conflict or serious unrest:

**Countries with the highest food supply inadequacy**

COUNTRY	1990-1992	1979-1980
Somalia	35.1 %	20.4 %
Afghanistan	34.2 %	7.2 %
Haiti	32.4 %	17.1 %
Mozambique	29.2 %	20.8 %
Ethiopia	28.0 %	19.0 %
Central African Rep.	25.5 %	8.0 %
Chad	25.0 %	32.9 %
Liberia	23.0 %	6.2 %
Sierra Leone	19.9 %	10.3 %
Angola	19.6 %	10.1 %
Burundi	17.6 %	15.2 %

With the only exception of Afghanistan and Liberia, where food scarcity is probably an effect rather than a cause of war, all the other countries already suffered of a serious inadequacy 20 years ago.

The link between conflicts and underdevelopment becomes even more evident if we use a more sophisticated set of indicators like the Human Development Index. Developed by the UNDP since its 1990 Report, the HDI is an attempt to avoid a measurement of development exclusively based on economic issues like the GNP. In fact, the HDI uses a wide series of indicators, which consider health, gender, education, food, access to public services, and many other patterns, which are still under systematic refinement after 8 years.

Let us look at the group of 45 countries with a low HDI:

### Lowest Human Development

HDI rank	COUNTRY	HDI rank	COUNTRY
131	Myanmar	154	Nepal
132	Ghana	155	Bhutan
133	Cameroon	156	Haiti
134	Kenya	157	Angola
135	Equatorial Guinea	158	Sudan
136	Laos	159	Uganda
137	Lesotho	160	Senegal
138	India	161	Malawi
139	Pakistan	162	Djibouti
140	Comores	163	Guinea-Bissau
141	Nigeria	164	Chad ↵
142	Zaire	165	Gambia
143	Zambia	166	Mozambique
144	Bangladesh	167	Guinea
145	Cote d'Ivoire	168	Eritrea
146	Benin	169	Burundi
147	Togo	170	Ethiopia
148	Yemen	171	Mali
149	Tanzania	172	Burkina Faso
150	Mauritania	173	Niger
151	Central African Rep.	174	Rwanda
152	Madagascar	175	Sierra Leone
153	Cambodia		

We can see that 45% of lowest-HDI countries have been directly affected by dramatic conflicts in the last 10 years.

If we compare this group with the 65 countries with a medium HDI, the percentage lowers to 14%. In the group of 65 countries with a high HDI the percentage is only 1.5%.

We can assume, then, that a direct relation between war and underdevelopment does exist, and consists of lack of “structural stability”.

In a document of 1996, the European Commission offers such definition of this term:

*“Structural stability is to be understood as a term denoting a dynamic situation, a situation of stability able to cope with the dynamics inherent in (emerging) democratic societies. Structural stability could thus be defined as a situation involving sustainable economic*

*development, democracy and respect for human rights, viable political structures, and healthy social and environmental conditions, with the capacity to manage change without to resort to violent conflict. Working towards structural stability would mean **the targeted reinforcement of those factors that enable peaceful change.** “*

This clarification is important because the process of economic development, in itself, necessarily involves social and political changes, superimposed upon often rapidly evolving demographic and environmental situations. In such a dynamic process, the costs and benefits of change may be unequally distributed amongst the population. In the absence of specific mechanisms to address the grievances of groups which perceive they have been adversely affected, and without proper means to deal with such issues, tensions can rapidly build up, often aggravated by natural disasters, ethnic differences or economic dislocations.

In such circumstances these tensions can easily degenerate into violent conflict and, where the instability has deep roots, like in Somalia, Afghanistan, Liberia and Sierra Leone, it may end in the actual failure of such states: the state vanishes and leaves nothing but instability, insecurity and abuse.

### 3. Specific Aspects of NGO Role in Prevention, Emergency Relief and PSOs

The NGOs are particularly effective in tackling the root causes of underdevelopment which underlies the situations at risk of conflicts. Their actions can address such causes during all the phases of a crisis, does not matter whether it is disclosed or not. Their capability of dealing with development patterns in integration with human rights, social development and participation, is the most effective form of prevention at grass root level.

#### *Prevention*

Although it is obvious that economic development and prosperity are major factors for ensuring non-violent change, the term structural stability rather implies the fact that working towards economic development alone is insufficient for an effective policy of peace-building and conflict prevention, that the policy goals of sustainable development, democracy and human rights, viable political structures, healthy social conditions and healthy environmental conditions are interdependent and need a comprehensive approach.

Integrated development programmes are specific of NGOs' approach. They are normally based on a participatory methodology that highlights the perception of problems at community level, and is substantial to identify those issues that may determine structural stability or instability. Other substantial tools, for this purpose, are political analysis and human rights monitoring.

On this basis, different preventive actions may be addressed according with specific situations:

#### *Situation without evident tension*

This is the situation where the country is seemingly stable and largely quiet but where (structural) sources of potential conflict may be discerned. For example, the constant

marginalisation of an important minority or the use of repressive instruments, in the absence of effective mechanisms for the peaceful conciliation of divergent group interests.

*Immediate aims* Peace-building: Establishment - under respect of democracy and fundamental human rights - of viable political and socio-economic structures (mechanisms of peaceful conciliation of interests, viable democratic models and so on).

*Instruments* Targeted assistance incl. training, education, social and economic cohesion, strengthening human and social development, democracy building, good governance and civil society, institution building etc., political dialogue, watching changes, voicing concerns.

### Situation of tension

This is the situation where conflict in society become clearly apparent (social unrest, armed opposition, mass demonstrations etc.). The gravity of the situation depends not only on the events themselves but also on the existing political and power structures (Is the 'opposition' able to present negotiable demands? Is the government in a position to fulfil them? And so on).

*Immediate aims* Conflict prevention (in the strict sense): Reduction of tensions; prevention of full outbreak of hostilities.

*Instruments* Political dialogue with the parties concerned (missions, preventive diplomacy); advocacy of specific measures (incl. preventive deployment of troops) and/or of specific solutions to the problems; (threat of) sanctions; deployment of observers; own and contribution to other humanitarian / emergency aid (also to prevent refugee flows for economic reasons). Peace-building measures could continue to apply and could even be intensified. They will have most effect if targeted to the heart of the conflict (easing the economic situation of a marginalised group while offering assistance to the government to find a sustainable solution, for example).

### Open conflict

*Immediate aims* Conflict management and resolution. Reducing the threat of vertical and horizontal escalation (incl. the reduction of immediate human suffering and the handling of the refugee problem). Ending the hostilities and starting peace negotiations.

*Instruments* Threat of sanctions (incl. to third countries), political dialogue, own and contribution to other humanitarian / emergency aid, (advocacy of) preventive military intervention; observer missions. Sanctions, political dialogue, advocacy of specific solutions, support for peace initiatives, (advocacy of) peace-enforcement.

### Post-conflict situation

This is the situation where there is no longer organised armed violence. A cease-fire or a peace agreement might or might not yet have been already signed. In any case, the consequences of the war are still present and obvious in a large part of the society (refugees and ex-combatants still in the progress of re-integration etc.), and it is still uncertain if the situation will deteriorate (back into the phase of tensions or open conflict) or improve (towards a situation without obvious tensions or structural stability).

<i>Immediate aims</i>	Conflict resolution / peace-building: Successful peace negotiations, return to normality
<i>Instruments</i>	Demobilisation and disarmament, repatriation and re-integration, de-mining, post-conflict relief and humanitarian aid, rehabilitation, peace-building measures (see above), political dialogue, advocacy of specific solutions, watching changes, confidence building measures, (support for) conflict resolution initiatives, re-building of government structures.

A policy of peace-building and conflict prevention is not necessarily dependent on the adoption of new programs or the creation of new institutions. First and foremost, it necessitates the adoption of a peace-building approach in the sense that all measures should take the structural root-causes of violent conflicts into consideration, and should be targeted at the stabilisation of societies ("targeted assistance"), in particular at the imbalance of political and socio-economic opportunities between different (regional, ethnic, religious etc.) identity groups within a given state, the absence of viable mechanism for the peaceful conciliation of the divergent interests of these groups, the need for a government that enjoys widespread legitimacy among the population, and for consensus on key 'national' issues.

### *Emergency relief*

These abilities are seldom used to their full extent, in a humanitarian operation. In fact, the purpose of Humanitarian Aid *theoretically* should be:

- Sustain life
- Relieve suffering
- Strengthen local institutions (where they still exist)
- Prepare the ground towards reconstruction and future development
- be integrated with existing governmental and/or NGOs structures
- be adapted to local cultures and societies
- not cease abruptly
- be immediately followed by reconstruction activities

*Actually*, under the intense pressure of urgency, because of the difficult environment (war) and in absence of sound donors' policies, only the first two goals are achieved. This creates problems after the emergency ends. Although in such situations the priority is saving human lives, it is extremely important not to forget the long-term perspective.

The peculiar role of NGOs enables them to be the core of humanitarian aid. In a situation of social disgregation, in absence of institutions, authority and community organisation, NGOs become the only point of reference for the population. This role is quite stronger when the NGO has been active in the community before the crisis broke out.

NGOs tend to identify themselves with local community, they defend its interests and understand its problems. This also means that they may lack neutrality but almost always they will try to remain impartial, as this is the only way to ensure the conditions for them to work. This special relationship with local communities is a special asset that makes NGOs extremely effective in delivering aid and providing assistance to victims, also thank to a series of characteristics:

- Long time presence in the area of operation, knowledge of local culture, systems and resources.

- Prestige and authority. A good development agency, which has been able to carry on a good job in the local community or has brought assistance to an affected population, enjoys respect and consideration.

- Interdisciplinarity.

- Flexibility and readiness, vis à vis the proverbial lack of flexibility of military and slowness of governmental structures, which can sometimes be a limitation to effective actions.

- Communication skills.

- Mediation capabilities.

- Low operational cost.

But there are also other serious limitations which sometimes affect the effectiveness of NGO work:

- Lack of co-ordination

- Involvement and partiality

- Resistance to working with the militaries

- Scarce self-sufficiency

- Small size of organisations

- Very localised presence

- Dependence from individuals

- Extreme diversity of organisations

For instance, their proliferation (particularly after 1989) has magnified coordination problems in recent peace operations: coordinating NGOs between themselves, or with militaries, requires enormous efforts: in recent years, many attempts to create coordinating bodies have been carried out with modest success.

Another serious point is that their relationship with the militaries has always been extremely difficult: they are two different worlds, separated by a serious cultural gap, that have to cope with each other.

#### NGOs and MILITARIES

dialogue	command
independence	decisions at the top
resistance to authority	hierarchy
scarce coordination	discipline
small size	big size
creativity and flexibility	scarce flexibility
immersion in local culture	impermeable to local culture
gender equity	absence of women
young leadership	old leadership

To overcome this cultural clash, a process based on mutual acknowledgement, dialogue, identification of common concerns (i.e. security), and participation in training and planning is commendable.

## 4. The Continuum Emergency - Rehabilitation - Development

We have seen how Emergency Humanitarian Relief provides a short term aid in order to save lives. Rehabilitation-reconstruction programs should gradually take the place of emergency aids to stabilise the social economic situation and streamline the transition toward a medium and long term development strategy.

As matter of facts it is extremely important to establish a continuum between these three stages as a better “development” helps to prevent emergencies and can reduce the need of emergency aids. At the same time a better “emergency aid” may create the basis of future development as well as a better “rehabilitation” may facilitate the transition between the other two.

### *The Ideal Relief Model*

The basic elements of the ideal relief model are the following:

- (1) Relief should not undermine development (all relief operations, even the most urgent ones, should be carefully planned to protect development assets, e.g. tools, seeds and livestock).
- (2) The basic principles normally applied in development projects should be applied to relief:

- Relief should be integrated into existing government structures or (if these are absent or party to the conflict) into independent local NGO operations and/or beneficiaries' own representative structures, thereby ensuring the participation of the beneficiaries of aid.
  - Relief should be flexible in such a way that relief items and distribution systems match local culture and society.
  - Relief should pay special attention to the gender dimension by taking into account the division of labour between men and women which is likely to be even more important under emergency situations.
  - Relief should be predictable and should not be terminated in an abrupt or premature manner.
- (3) Relief should be immediately followed up by and where possible implemented in parallel with rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes in order to ensure a smooth "continuum" on the way back to a long term development process.

In the design of such strategy we should always keep in mind three main points:

1) Emergency Aid may create dependency. After months - or years - of food supplies and medical aid, in the framework of a de-structured society and weakened cultural identity, the population tends to remain dependent from the international aid and refuse to return to their places and occupations;

2) Rehabilitation and reconstruction are not a merely technical matter: reconstruction means mainly to re-build a community, re-conciliate the parties, create a situation where the winners and the losers work together to establish a new order;

3) Development also means creating the conditions to avoid further conflicts: more equal distribution of wealth, integration of marginal groups, democratisation, empowerment, human rights.

In this sense it is important that the same "agent" may manage all the process, contributing to eradicate the chronic causes of conflicts during all the phases. While, at present there exist an institutional separation between emergency and development aid, in terms of financing procedures, operational criteria, organisational priorities and implementing agencies.

Of course, chronic crisis with armed conflicts are the context where it is more difficult to develop a coordinated approach to the continuum Emergency Aid - Rehabilitation - Development.

In this sense it is important that the same organisation may manage all the process, contributing to eradicate the chronic causes of conflicts during all the phases. While, at present there exist an institutional separation between emergency and development aid, in terms of financing procedures, operational criteria, organisational priorities and implementing agencies.

Against this conceptual model, the actual programmes of relief agencies are often criticised as being mediatic, short-term and short-lived, top-heavy, centralised, standardised, resource-intensive, donor-dependent and neglecting local administrative structures and social customs.

## 6. Perspectives of Humanitarian Aid

In lack of a European common foreign and security strategy, humanitarian policies are stagnating today: no donor has developed a budget line and procedure capable of embracing the whole process which begins with humanitarian aid and accompanies a community out of the crisis to sustainable development; NGOs have lost their capability of advocating for a more comprehensive approach and prefer to act on a stage which offers high visibility and easier fund-raising; the silent and almost invisible work of prevention and preparedness is equally uninteresting for both donors and implementers. Although relief agencies may be well aware of these criticisms, they may have difficulties in addressing them all because of the framework in which they work: lives must be saved, time is short, highly specialised partners are implementing actions, the mandates for follow-up actions belong to development agencies or departments whose procedures and resources are not always suitable for ensuring a smooth transition from relief to development.

Nonetheless, it is sure that a new approach has to be developed in humanitarian aid. The renewal of Lomé Convention, next year, will be an important moment for a general re-design of our approach to humanitarian policies. The effort carried out by the European Parliament, together with NGOs, to insert the themes of prevention and preparedness in the debate on the new treaty is laudable. Lomé has to overcome the old post-colonial scope in favour of a new definition of the relationship between Europe and the “Third World”, and conflict prevention and humanitarian aid have a crucial role in this.

NGOs also have to re-design their role. The next decade should be devoted to acknowledge the skill achieved by southern organisations, transmitting expertise, enabling autonomous local capabilities, focusing on prevention and preparedness, building capacities where it is needed. Northern NGOs should shift their attention on northern societies and institutions, lobbying for new rules and policies, advocating for the rights and needs of southern countries.

A more sound and responsible policy has to be promoted. Donors and agencies should both recover that capability of political projects that has produced, for instance, the success of Central America, when UN, EU, militaries, NGOs and the civil society have equally contributed to a durable peace; where the positive convergence of a balanced and integrated approach, a wise coordination and a credible political project has gradually brought a group of countries out of the war, towards human rights, political stability and sustainable development. The story of a success that has yet to become a lesson learned.