
An Insider's View of Humanitarian Assistance

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With Sudan's grim civil war as a backdrop (one that has already claimed over two million lives), a women's conference was held in Khartoum in August 1998. Attendees included women from the villages who dealt with the effects of conflict on a daily basis, as well as women living outside Sudan. While the women from the villages were clear about their plight and were genuinely looking for a forum to address this, women from outside Sudan presumed to have the solutions to all of the problems facing women and children in Sudan. A paper was presented at the conference on the rights of women under the Geneva Conventions and how both the government in Khartoum and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) are signatories to it. One brave woman from the villages asked to speak. She told the conference that her husband had gone to the front line, leaving her alone with her six children; that the Khartoum government's Antonov bomber terrorized them almost daily; that her children suffer from disease, having no access to clean drinking water, and that her children are not attending school. She lives with the fear of being abused by soldiers and other men because she lives alone with her children. She asked: if there is such a thing as the Geneva Convention that is meant to protect women, why are there women still being abused in Sudan? Does the U.N. even know that these women exist?

This article offers an insider's view, as well as a woman's view, of the challenge of relief and rehabilitation in southern Sudan. In particular, this article examines why humanitarian assistance programs frequently fail to produce sustainable solutions among affected populations. Donors live far away from the realities of emergencies, but I have lived and worked inside that reality for the past five years. Aid agencies, which survive on donor support, often approach

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emergencies with a closed-minded attitude that stems from a belief that they have an accurate idea of the needs of the people. As a result of this attitude, many agencies fail to get a good understanding of the complexities of the emergency and are unable to develop programs that effectively address local relief and rehabilitation agendas.

In Africa over a third of the independent countries have engaged in armed struggle either within their borders or against neighboring countries. The continent's problems are aggravated by natural disasters, particularly in the Sahel region. The combined effects of conflicts and natural disasters have generated immense human suffering. Widespread and lasting emergencies have forced people to leave their homes in search of food and security. Countless lives, properties and livelihoods have been lost. Humanitarian agencies have responded to these emergencies by providing relief food, medicines and shelter. However, expatriate staff salaries and transportation costs have made these operations very expensive, often accounting for over half of the total value of the humanitarian assistance. In the end, only a fraction of the total cost of humanitarian assistance is spent on relief items and services that reach the beneficiaries. This makes the delivery of humanitarian assistance very cost ineffective, and donors have developed fatigue as a result. In southern Sudan, the missteps of humanitarian aid are best characterized by the following set of problems.

PROBLEM I: QUICK FIX APPROACH

While natural disasters require short-term emergency interventions focusing on meeting the basic needs of the victims, this is not usually the case with armed conflicts, which typically require more substantial intervention in addition to meeting basic needs. Unfortunately, impact indicators for quick-fix emergency interventions have often been used to evaluate the contributions of donors as well as the efficiency of the delivery system. Impact indicators include dollar values of the assistance (tons of food, aircraft loads, expatriates) and number of beneficiaries accessed. Such indicators, however, are poor measures of the real impact of assistance on the community, not to mention their capacity to absorb these volumes of aid.

Some donors are unwilling to commit to long-term assistance. Several agencies in southern Sudan have adopted a quick fix approach, avoiding any commitment to provide humanitarian assistance in the long run. This preference is reflected in the practice of funding short-term humanitarian assistance dealing with food, shelter and health services, rather than funding long-term rehabilitation interventions that address the root causes of problems. Such root causes include illiteracy, lack of primary education for children, lack of good governance, breakdown of law and order, psychological trauma, rape and other abuses prevalent in war affected

areas. The donors' refusal to consider a program in education that demands long-term funding ensures that generations of children will reach adulthood without schooling.

Similarly, even though relief operations are heavily reliant on roads and bridges, donors in Sudan spend far more on alternative, faster transportation (airplanes and barges) rather than commit resources to road repair. Donors resist funding road repair projects when they think the work supports the war efforts of one faction. Nevertheless, neglect of infrastructure significantly slows down rehabilitation activities, which involves access to production inputs, markets, technologies trade materials and redistribution of local produce. The strength of roads, transport and agriculture are central to the development of any economy and could drive development in other sectors such as trade, education, health and so forth. Donors also refuse to fund de-mining programs to make it safer for communities to engage in productive activities such as farming or trade.

Donors in southern Sudan tend to shy away from assisting local civil authorities to establish democratic and accountable governments. This last agenda item would enable community elders and leaders to take more responsibility for the well-being of their communities.

PROBLEM 2: BEHIND THE MASK OF HUMANITARIANISM

Since the famine in Ethiopia, the picture of emergency needs in Africa that is broadcast to the rest of the world is of dying and malnourished children, or food diversions by rebels. For some viewers, Africa is a place of warlords and hopeless communities that prefer to fight each other rather than improve their situation. This negative image of Africa has allowed donors to blame the failures of inappropriately designed humanitarian programs on the recipients! It has also fueled the myth that help must come from somewhere else, and that Africans are incapable of solving the crisis themselves. For example, during the 1998 famine in Bahr El-Ghazal, the international aid community brought in food from outside the region rather than take advantage of food surpluses in nearby Western Equatoria.

In truth, there are some aid agencies that have no right to be involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Aid agencies falling under this category are immorally wasteful and extravagant with funds. They provide luxurious housing and office facilities to their staff, they make unnecessary trips, organize unproductive workshops in expensive hotels and extend benefits to their expatriate staff that dwarfs in comparison the benefits extended to the target population. Other agencies pride themselves on writing beautiful proposals to donors for programs that are more in the interest of donors than recipients of the humanitarian assistance. Programs targeting women and children beneficiaries exemplify this donor-driven approach to aid.

Some agencies are truly motivated by humanitarianism but nevertheless fail to be innovative—a critical skill in relief. For example, several aid agencies in Sudan have been distributing seeds and tools to internally displaced communities for five to six years. On average, a hoe provided to a household lasts for at least two production seasons. During this period, assuming rainfall is good, the household *should* be able to replace the hoe from sales of their production and reserve enough seeds for the next planting season. Yet after five years of freely distributed seeds and hoes, the demand is far from diminishing, suggesting that something is not working with the program. In spite of this dilemma, aid agencies have determined to continue with the program instead of asking why it is not working and generating new approaches to fill this need.

In a related issue, aid agencies in Sudan continue to import seeds for food security programs from the neighboring countries of Uganda and Kenya despite evidence that areas within Sudan (especially Western Equatoria), which have been relatively peaceful, have been producing hundreds of tons of grain surpluses since 1995. Moreover the local population have skills in seed production. The decision of donors to fund expensive and unsustainable programs that depend on importing seeds can easily be interpreted as a political challenge by representatives of seed-producing regions. At the very least, it suggests a failure to recognize local capacities.

At times, because donors have food to give away, aid agencies will submit a proposal to implement food distribution programs, even if the beneficiary needs in their areas of operation are quite different. At least to some extent this looks as though aid workers are merely trying to secure employment for themselves. Given the large number of inappropriate humanitarian assistance programs implemented in Sudan, particularly in areas where the emergency has extended over years, it is hard to dismiss this suspicion.

PROBLEM 3: THE GENDER AGENDA

The aid community has introduced into the language of humanitarian assistance the word “gender.” Unfortunately, gender has been confused with “feminism” and often draws negative reactions from men and women in southern Sudan. Males in south Sudan generally believe that gender means switching roles, such as asking men to replace women in the kitchen, or asking that men share chores such as washing diapers or bathing babies. In reality, when aid workers use this word they intend for men to include women in service committees and ensure participation of women in decision making. Although some perceptive community leaders have recognized the advantages of appearing to support gender sensitivity in order to impress aid workers and guarantee access to aid resources, the fact remains that the term gender does not exist in our south Sudan communities nor does it fit well in any African social context. This is a key

difference since, in the African context, the welfare of community members is the responsibility of everyone. Isolating problems faced by women and labeling these as gender issues both confuses the community as well as blames them for neglect. There are two ways south Sudan communities have responded to this. The first response has been to maintain hostility toward any programmatic ideas that target women's needs, including the rare program that addresses the genuine problems of women's workload and access to information and humanitarian assistance. The second response has been for the community's leadership to simply dissociate all issues relating to women and children. This second response feeds the view that issues relating to women are aid agencies problems and are therefore theirs alone to solve.

The gender agenda of aid agencies in Sudan demonstrates the naiveté of donors who have prioritized the needs of women and children without regard for the context of the emergency. For example, World Food Program (WFP) started distributing food aid to local women's groups, which, although efficient, has made women targets for looting and other abuses. Placing women in charge of resources to which chiefs, elders and armed groups no longer have access threatens traditional leadership roles.

In spite of the donor agenda of prioritizing the needs of women and children, critical issues have been missed in Sudan. Women living in armed conflict environments are forced to deal with problems for which neither they nor their society are prepared. It is common to find women left alone with their children, the sick and the elderly. As head of the household, a woman must solve problems of access to food and healthcare, displacement and insecurity. Some of the roles assumed by women are non-traditional, for which they are ill-prepared. Additional roles increase their workload and reduce time they have for attending to themselves and their families. Heavy workloads also prevent women from active participation in community activities. As a result, women do not get information about available humanitarian assistance programs, including skills training. This makes it very difficult for women to effectively utilize humanitarian assistance, including those programs specifically intended for them.

Instead of helping women manage their heavy workloads or improve their access to information and resources, several aid agencies have focused efforts on training women in income generating activities such as tailoring, needlework, food service and craft sales. Remarkably, aid agencies are promoting tailoring and dressmaking skills where the excess supply of secondhand clothes has virtually eliminated all local textile and dressing making businesses. Profits from these businesses are so low that women who have been taught these skills may never make enough income to support their families. In other words, aid agencies are funding economic activities for women that do not empower them sufficiently enough to allow them to adopt more profitable and sustainable businesses.

Income generating activities also have the disadvantage of keeping women away from their homes and families for too long. As a result, programs intended to assist women have been widely opposed by spouses who claim that their children are being deprived of care and attention. In one case the children of women involved in activities outside their homes developed symptoms of malnutrition and other health problems resulting from negligence or insufficient care.

Ironically, in spite of the gender agenda, aid agencies have also failed to pay attention to women's knowledge in designing their programs. Instead, aid agencies in Sudan have regarded women in terms of what they could be trained to do. It would be far more productive if aid agencies could come to regard women as teachers rather than learners. Women heal the sick, cultivate in the garden, tend to small livestock, gather wild foods, prepare medicines and earn incomes in the market. Yet, these skills and capacities have gone largely unexplored by aid agencies.

Women are often the first to identify sickness and are prime decision-makers on the type of treatment, whether home remedy/traditional medicine or modern medicine. When a woman decides the patient should receive home care, she also decides what type of treatment and herbs to use. When a woman decides that the patient should receive modern medical care, her knowledge of which health services are available at which center is crucial. Her knowledge of general hygiene, how to prevent and treat diseases such as diarrhea and malaria and how to protect her children from diseases such as measles and tuberculosis has direct implications for the overall health of the family.

During times of severe hunger it is usually women who know where to find wild foods and how to prepare them for the family. Until fairly recently, this valuable knowledge had not been researched and documented in Sudan. In fact, poor insight into Sudanese culture has sidelined women in Operation Lifeline Sudan's household food security assistance programs since 1989. These programs typically provide food aid, tools and seeds. Production inputs are distributed through heads of household, who in most cases are men. Agriculture production training programs are also targeted for men. Traditional systems in Sudan do not encourage sharing information, resources and skills between male and female members of the same household. Consequently, these knowledge and skills often do not get transferred to women. Yet women produce 80 percent of food in Africa! By ignoring the role of women in cultivating food, aid agencies have contributed to the low impact of their seeds and tools programs over the past eight years.

Women in the African tradition are a symbol of motherhood, love and peace. In some communities women initiate and negotiate peace, particularly between tribes. Women frequently marry across tribal boundaries and, even in war times, are allowed to cross enemy lines for trade purposes or for visits with relatives. Here again, aid agencies have not made sufficient attempts to utilize the competence of women in conflict prevention and resolution.

PROBLEM 4: REPLACING TRADITIONAL STRUCTURES

In a peaceful environment traditional structures in Africa protect and guarantee that basic needs are met for the most vulnerable in the community (i.e. women, children, orphans, widows and the disabled). Kinship support and the extended family are foundations of this traditional value system. Anyone found neglecting his responsibilities can be punished by the traditional court of law. According to this value system it is shameful for a man to be unable to provide for his family. It is equally shameful for a mother to have nothing to give to her dying child or for a community to have nothing to offer to the vulnerable.

In an emergency, not only do people lose their food, property and loved ones, but traditional support and value systems are also destroyed, leaving communities exceptionally vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Most humanitarian agencies in southern Sudan have responded to the weakened traditional systems by creating artificial structures or systems to deal with problems of targeting assistance, such as so-called relief committees. Unlike traditional systems, these newly created structures are insensitive to the community's support preferences and values, and are instead instructed to carry out the priorities of the aid agents. (Artificial structures in south Sudan have in practice become very powerful as they are being used for the distribution of valuable goods, consequently further undermining traditional structures.) In some cases village chiefs and community elders have neglected their responsibilities towards vulnerable members of the community since they feel their roles have been taken over by aid agencies. The power shift from chiefs and elders to aid agencies is bound to have a tremendous impact in the long run. Respect is now accorded to aid agencies instead of local authorities, which is very much resented by the traditional chiefs and elders. Occasionally this results in friction between community leaders and humanitarian workers, with grim consequences for the vulnerable in the community. In practice, humanitarian agencies have interpreted any lack of cooperation or diversion of relief items by local leaders as an inability to manage the operations rather than perceiving local leaders' efforts to resist their loss of power.

PROBLEM 5: IS AID PROMOTING DEMOCRACY?

The government in Khartoum has been cited for human rights abuses and its support of international terrorism. As a result, it has been banned from receiving development assistance from several donors, including the U.S. Opposition held areas are thus denied funds for rehabilitation/development activities so long as the government in Khartoum maintains sovereign powers over the whole of the Sudan. Yet in some areas of south Sudan, such as western Equatoria, the Khartoum government has had no presence or influence for over eight years. So long as

opposition authorities who control the region go unrecognized internationally, their incentive to guarantee human rights may weaken. Similarly, their efforts to develop a foundation for democracy and good governance will also suffer.

Many donors have started to move away from traditional relief interventions, which involve the provision of food aid, shelter and medicine, to include aspects of rehabilitation. This strategy devotes considerable effort to identifying root causes of conflicts, in order to develop programs that are more responsive to local needs and situations. This includes helping communities to address issues affecting their food security, economic rehabilitation, and lay foundations for a system of governance that is democratic, transparent and accountable to its people.

Even in this new approach to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, it must be understood that talking about democratic and accountable systems of governance will not be enough to guarantee full inclusion of women in the decision-making process. Nor does it mark automatic improvement in their status. Knowledge of culture and traditions, the status of women within society, as well as changes in roles and workloads of women is very critical. If there is no information or documentation of these then studies should be funded to generate baseline information to help in designing appropriate and responsive programs, and for selecting sensitive verifiable indicators to determine the impacts of the interventions. The seriousness of the point raised above and the probability of its happening is captured in a proposed constitution that sets the terms of participation in the decision making process at every level of society. One particular article called for 30 percent representation of women at all levels, while allowing them to compete with men for the remaining 70 percent.

In reality, there are not enough women with sufficient experience and skills to fill the 30 percent of government seats reserved for them. To begin with, the electorate does not understand the responsibilities of these representatives nor do they understand what they will achieve through active participation in these councils. Most women have voted just because it was expected of them or because some village elder or local authority asked them to do so. Second, of those who have been recently elected into office, more than half were not clear about their roles and responsibilities. Worse still, the attendance of women in the council meetings was very low. While many women blame their poor attendance on interference with family responsibilities, others complain that their male counterparts expected them to cook during meetings instead of participate. Certainly, giving women a quota, inviting them to participate, and then expecting it to happen smoothly is far too presumptuous.

Traditionally, although women do not have direct access to decision making outside the household level, there are still channels through which they can offer advice or raise complaints to the elders. Through these traditional structures,

women have been guaranteed protection. Outside the accepted structures women are often denied further rights. These systems affect women in their right to choose whom and when to marry, property inheritance, education and the practice of wife inheritance. There is a great need to change these conditions. On the other hand, women and children are part of the community. For positive and sustainable transition to occur, the entire community needs to reach consensus and clearly understand the call for change. In other words, desirable changes that are to benefit women must be a part of a community's own development agenda. Otherwise it will be a waste of time and resources.

Therefore, aid programs intending to promote democracy and good governance will have to go a step further, to include studies on the status of women in particular communities as well as elements and forms of democracy. Aid programs could then identify factors that need to be promoted or discouraged in order to increase the participation of women in the decision-making process and policy formulation.

CONCLUSION

Humanitarian assistance programs can save lives, but when inappropriately designed and carelessly implemented, they can also have negative, unintended impacts, particularly on women. Donors and agencies must spend more time in understanding the social dynamics of affected societies. And whenever possible, programs need to focus on local knowledge and expertise and communities' own analyse of their problems in order to find and implement sustainable solutions. ■

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