

Aid and war: a response to Linda Polman's critique of humanitarianism

The
Humanitarian
Policy Group
at ODI

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Dutch journalist Linda Polman has some sharp things to say about humanitarian aid in an interview in the *Observer* newspaper promoting her book *War Games: The Story of Aid and War in Modern Times*. Many of Polman's criticisms of the practice of humanitarian action are valid, and echo those levelled at aid workers in the 1990s. Yet progress has been made over the last decade and the picture is not quite as bleak as painted. More importantly, on the fundamental question of the relationship between humanitarian aid and conflict, Polman's critique is based on an incomplete understanding of the scope and purpose of humanitarianism, and what sets it apart from other forms of intervention in conflicts and complex emergencies.

First, the areas where we agree. Relief aid is, as Polman says, big business. Although accurate figures are difficult to obtain, analysts at Development Initiatives estimate that the humanitarian aid sector globally was worth at least \$18 billion in 2008 (Development Initiatives, 2009). In the same year, the sector employed almost 300,000 people (Stoddard et al., 2009). One of the biggest players, World Vision International, spent over \$6.5 million on relief assistance in 60 countries that year, distributing over half a million tonnes of food to 8.5 million people. In short, a lot of money and jobs are involved.

Polman is also right that aid has had perverse and at times catastrophic effects, most notably in Goma's refugee camps in 1994. She is right too that competition between agencies distorts the aid enterprise by forcing agencies to go where the money is, not necessarily where the greatest needs are. It is also true that, in complicated crises like Afghanistan, aid work is now identified with the overall Western political and strategic effort. The notion of rich aid workers living in luxury compounds while those around them struggle to survive is grotesque and the destabilising effects of their high wages on local economies are well known. So too are allegations of sexual abuse.

Then there are the problems Polman doesn't mention. No one really knows, for instance, how much relief aid is diverted by agency staff, leaving aside what is taken by thugs, militias and politicians. Nor do agencies really know how to target help to the very poorest in a society. Very often, everyone receives something in the belief that a little is better than nothing. And then we complain when those who don't want the food, seeds or tools we have given them sell them to others who do.

We tell donors that they're not giving enough, while simultaneously telling ourselves that giving too much creates aid dependency, as if humanitarian assistance were the only resource for people in times of crisis (Harvey and Lind, 2005). A lack of contextual knowledge, plus cultural insensitivity, often lead to inappropriate, unwanted or unsustainable projects. Displaced people are still herded into massive camps because delivering aid is easier and cheaper when they are in one place, despite evidence that camps are often incubators of disease and crime, and often develop into more-or-less permanent communities. At higher policy levels, we worry that humanitarian aid may become a substitute for the state, freeing governments of their responsibility to their own people.

Where we part company with Polman is in her diagnosis of the cause of these ills, her verdict on the sector's efforts to improve and her assessment of the power of humanitarian aid to shape the social and political environment in the world's poorest and most distressed states. According to Polman, the root of humanitarianism's apparent crisis lies in its preoccupation with neutrality, one of the basic principles of the sector. In her view, aid workers use neutrality to sidestep any moral or legal responsibility for the detrimental effects of aid.

This misrepresents what neutrality means in this context. It does not mean dodging responsibility for humanitarian agency actions, or standing aloof from suffering. As an operating principle, neutrality means staying apart from warring parties, thereby protecting agencies'

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access to war-affected people and ensuring the safety of their staff. By not taking sides, so the theory goes, agencies do not present a threat and should be treated with respect. Granted there are many examples where neutrality has failed, and some aid workers, reflecting on the role of aid in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular, wonder whether it still has value. But a commitment to neutrality does not allow humanitarian agencies to behave as they like, nor does it give them permission to duck responsibility and accountability for what they do.

Second is Polman's claim that, while aid workers know the problems, competition between agencies makes them unwilling to address them. Not so. The crisis in Rwanda in 1994, like the Biafran war some 30 years earlier, was an existential crisis in humanitarianism. The painful truth that relief aid was supporting people guilty of genocide led to a radical and sustained rethinking of the nature, purpose and practice of aid. A vast evaluation looked in rigorous detail at the Rwanda response (DANIDA, 1996), and a widely accepted code of conduct was developed governing aid agencies' work (Borton, 1994), along with a humanitarian charter and a plethora of standards and guidelines covering everything from shelter reconstruction to psychosocial care. Frameworks of action have sought to ensure that, post-Rwanda, aid at a minimum does no harm (Anderson, 1999), and the idea of protecting people in the immediate crisis (going beyond the provision of food and shelter) is more prominent in humanitarian discourse, even if there is precious little agreement on what protection is (O'Callaghan and Pantuliano, 2007). At a systemic level, new mechanisms are trying to improve coordination and cut out wasteful duplication, and agencies are more aware of the need to work with local governments and groups.

On the ground, much effort has been put into making humanitarian action accountable to its recipients, as well as to its donors, and aid agencies try to consult people on who should get aid and how. Efforts to work with representative local institutions, make people aware of their aid entitlements, set up complaints mechanisms and monitor delivery aim to ensure that aid reaches its intended destination. Innovations, such as the provision of cash instead of food, are meant to enhance choice and preserve peo-

ple's dignity (Harvey, 2007), and new products and techniques, such as community-based therapeutic care, have improved targeting and treatment (Collins, 2004). Aid projects are now routinely evaluated and impacts assessed, and the sector is more professional and managerial in its approach. Humanitarianism has, in short, become much more complex, sophisticated and reflective than Polman's arguments suggest.

No standards or codes, however, can guarantee effective action on the ground, and humanitarianism remains messy and imperfect. Nonetheless, these are not negligible changes, and show that, in principle at least, thoughtful practitioners are aware of the shortcomings of the past and are conscious of the need to fix them. The trouble is that none of these innovations really gets to the heart of the problem, namely that humanitarian assistance alone cannot ensure that belligerents will behave well towards aid workers or their beneficiaries, or listen to calls to respect human rights and international humanitarian law.

It is not sufficient to say, as Polman seems to on Rwanda, that withdrawing or withholding aid will somehow induce combatants to see sense and stop killing. In reality, complex emergencies are precisely that – complex constellations of social, political, ethnic and historical problems, within which humanitarian aid is only one element among many. For all the terrible mistakes that have been made, the larger failures arguably lie with others, not least donor governments and the political and security organs of the UN.

Influencing the course and conduct of conflict is ultimately the business of politicians, diplomats and soldiers, not aid workers, whose main concern is with the victims of conflict and abuse. Aid workers know all too well the failures, limitations and risks of aid in complex environments, not least because they are often at the sharp end when things go wrong, and they have taken important steps to overcome the problems they face. More needs to be done, but this should not mean making the perfect the enemy of the good, abandoning our common humanity and leaving the victims of conflicts and crises to fend for themselves.

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