

## **SYNERGY IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

### **What can be learnt from recent experiences?**

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### **HUMANITARIAN AID ACROSS BORDERS:**

### **ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES OF MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES**

#### **1. Humanitaire? Vous avez dit humanitaire?**

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), in Germany „Ärzte ohne Grenzen“, is an international medical aid organisation which has been created 26 years ago with the aim to bring medical assistance to people in acute danger – caused by natural disasters, epidemics and, of course, conflicts. Therefore MSF's operations are rooted in and encompassing what we call „Humanitarian Aid“.

It is self-evident today to say that humanitarian aid has become an important factor in the dynamics of conflicts – humanitarianism is everywhere. This is why the use of the very word „humanitarian“ has become dangerously inflated - especially during the years 1991 – 1996 when it served as a wonderfully practical, seemingly innocent sticker which almost everybody put on almost everything: aid organisations on packages of shampoo; the Security Council on a genocide when it called what happened in Rwanda a „humanitarian crisis“; the French Government on a minister who did not much more than to organise a televised concert in Dubrovnik; the German Blue Helmets on their sanitary intervention in Somalia; the UN convois which fed the people in the enclaves of Bosnia instead of protecting them. The word „humanitarian“ gave everything a golden moral shimmer – no matter how disastrous the outcome of the „humanitarian action“ for the people concerned actually was.

Despite those failures: humanitarian aid is, in most instances, still reaching the populations in danger and assisting them, sometimes even helping to protect them. What I want to outline here are some of the possibilities, the limits and the dangers of humanitarian action. More specifically, to answer the question if and how humanitarian aid is a factor in the dynamics of conflicts, why and how it can fuel violence, and what an aid agency can do to prevent further violence, requires a clearer understanding of what humanitarian aid is and what it is not.

As an independent operational organisation that needs to be close to the victims of conflicts and which therefore is present in conflicts with international medical and technical staff as well as equipment, MSF faces dilemmas concerning its role and responsibility in conflicts that are different from human rights or UN observer organisations. But there probably exist as many views as there are relief organisations as how best to achieve this difficult task of saving people's lives – doing humanitarian work. This brief overview will therefore focus on

my own organisation's experience, concerns, and reflections. It should not be taken for the prototype of an aid organisation's position.

Before looking at some aspects of humanitarian aid's potential role in conflicts in general and at MSF's experience in Rwanda in particular I will give you a personal five minute crash course on the history of humanitarian aid, an attempt to define humanitarian aid and a short introduction into what an organisation like MSF does on the ground and what our fundamental principles are.

## 2. Snapshots of the History of Humanitarian Aid

**1859, Solferino:** Henri Dunant, a Swiss philanthropist, finds 40 000 wounded, suffering soldiers, abandoned by their respective armies after the battle of Solferino, and takes a decision. Four years later he creates the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

**1864, Geneva:** Twelve states sign the first Geneva Conventions for the protection of wounded soldiers; International Humanitarian Law is born.

At the heart of Dunant's work and of humanitarian law lies the fundamental idea, that man is a human being first and a soldier (if) only second. The moment a soldier is wounded he leaves the battle, he is not party to the conflict anymore but neutral, a human being entitled to help. The three basic ingredients of Dunant's efforts are:

- Aid in a situation of war must be offered by a neutral and independent organisation. This is the only way to place aid outside the conflict and make it therefore acceptable to the warring parties.
- This organisation must be a permanent one. Otherwise aid would still be offered on an ad hoc basis, too slowly, would be non-professional and inefficient.
- The right of the wounded to receive assistance as well as the right of the organisation to offer assistance must be laid down in an international, legally binding contract between the potential warring parties – the states.

The Geneva Conventions define the humanitarian space in the middle of war – and thus are part of the Law of War; they do not attempt to abolish war – only to limit its impact on non-combatants.

The Red Cross movement becomes a huge success and creates a new conscience regarding the victims of war in many societies. During World War I more than four times as many American Red Cross staff are active in Europe than American soldiers stationed here.

**1921, Ukraine:** But only a few years later, humanitarian aid is used for political manipulation on a big scale: During the big famine at the end of the civil war, Lenin uses international aid to strengthen his new, fragile regime. By receiving international support his government gains credibility, and by controlling its distribution it controls the recipient population. The separation of the humanitarian from the political sphere is jeopardised.

**1939-45, World War II:** Totalitarianism and total warfare in World War II are devastating experiences for humanitarian organisations. In a situation where none of the common principles of humanity counts for anything, there is no humanitarian space left. The silence of the Red Cross in Auschwitz which decides against speaking out on the genocide in favour of maintaining partial access to the concentration camps is the most horrifying example of how blind neutrality can mean disaster for the victims.

The ray of hope for peace created by the foundation of the United Nations after the war quickly gives way to the relentless low-intensity fighting of the cold war. After the Conference of Bandung in 1955, convening the non-aligned states of Asia and Africa, a new challenge enters the political stage: development aid which quickly becomes the fertile ground for ideological cold war battles. Many aid organisations abandon the humanitarian ideals and adopt a political cause – in the name of freedom, liberty, socialism, revolution etc. But the beginning of a period of conflicts in the aftermath of decolonisation brings humanitarian aid back on the centrestage of political events in the seventies and eighties:

**1968, Biafra:** After the declaration of independence by this South-Eastern province of Nigeria in 1967 a civil war breaks out, and a total embargo on Biafra causes a terrible famine. About a million people die. The ICRC tries to negotiate in its usual formal way with both parties while some church organisations, not feeling bound by the same legal notion of neutrality, act and establish a nightly air bridge to bring goods and medical material into the besieged province - thus giving the first example of a humanitarian intervention. But the aid organisations are at the same time victims of massive manipulations by the leaders of Biafra who use the famine to draw international attention to their plight.

For the citizens of Western countries this civil war signifies the discovery of the Third World and the first time the agony of a dying people is broadcast on television. A wave of generosity is mobilising, especially in Europe, but nobody asks for the political causes of the disaster. The doctors in the field who are often working under very harsh conditions are furious and desperate. They find intolerable the international community's reverence for the principle of sovereignty of states declaring the Biafra war an internal affair of Nigeria. Some of them revolt against the ICRC's strict neutrality which prevents them from telling the world what they think is really happening.

The ICRC experience in Biafra brought a few French doctors to found in 1971 „Médecins Sans Frontières“, the first specialised medical emergency aid organisation. Not being bound by a formal mandate in the Geneva Conventions like the ICRC, MSF includes from the beginning a moral duty to act as a witness in the interest of populations in danger in its objectives – if necessary also publicly speaking out. From the start, the tension between strict neutrality and the duty to protest against abuses of humanitarian aid and violations of the Geneva Conventions has been present in MSF's actions.

**1980, Afghanistan:** Between 1977 and 1985 the number of refugees in the world increases from three to eleven million. Refugee camps and guerilla warfare define humanitarian work in the eighties. The superpowers are involved in these conflicts, but cannot confront each

other directly. The UN and the ICRC can often not intervene directly, it is the age of NGOs (Angola, Mosambique, Somalia, Uganda, Tschad, the Cambodian camps at the Thai border).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan leads to the total isolation of large parts of the Afghan population from any kind of health care because they are on the Mujahedin side. MSF decides to intervene only on their side – in the name of impartiality, because the other side is reasonably well cared for. The ICRC cannot become active because the Soviet side does not approve of their presence which makes it impossible for them because to work on the Mujahedin side since this would violate their neutrality.

For MSF it has been one of the most dangerous missions of its history. The roughly 550 doctors and nurses who work there in the mountains over the years, together with a few other NGOs, bring the only international aid that reaches these populations during the war years. It is these people also who inform the public about massive Soviet air raids against hospitals and other civilian buildings and who bring in journalists.

**1985, Ethiopia:** The Mengistu Government stages a huge famine in order to conceal politically motivated forced population movements and to attract international humanitarian aid which it shamelessly uses for its criminal tasks. The French section of MSF protests and is being thrown out of the country. As a result of this protest the European Governments put pressure on Mengistu to put an end to his murderous policy. Although not directly felt as a success, MSF realises that NGO protest can make a difference.

#### **1991 - 1995, Kurdistan, Somalia, Bosnia,**

The hope for more peaceful times after the end of the East-West-conflict was bitterly disappointed. The catastrophies in Kurdistan, in Somalia, in Bosnia and Rwanda cause death and despair. The importance of humanitarian aid increases while the international community is incapable or unwilling to address the root causes with political means. Millions of people die, are taken hostage or massacred – and our governments send humanitarian aid or try themselves to become humanitarian actors. The wonderful new concept of „humanitarian intervention“ by states was never very humanitarian – the dominance of political interests over genuinely humanitarian concerns, the selectivity in this approach became quickly obvious. If military intervention may be needed, even justified in certain situations, it should not be confused with humanitarian work which needs to remain impartial and pacifist. Srebrenica, a safe zone guarded by the UN, fell to the Serbs, probably thousands of men were killed. In many instances it is not so much humanitarian aid that is missing, but protection.

**1994-today, Rwanda:** Despite the presence of UN troops, and despite the fact that some Western embassies know what is being prepared in the country, a horrendous genocide explodes in the beginning of April 1994. About one million Tutsi and oppositional Hutu are killed within three months. The ICRC, and under its umbrella MSF, are the only organisations to stay in Kigali throughout the massacres, while the UN troops present in the country are largely withdrawn. Some organisations are trying to yell into the world what is happening in Rwanda – nobody wants to listen. Because in a case of recognised genocide the states, the international community would be obliged to act.

Only after the orchestrated exodus of more than one and a half million people to (then) Eastern Zaire and the outbreak of a violent cholera epidemic in the precarious makeshift

camps does the international community start to move – putting into place the biggest humanitarian show of the century. Refusing to even think about the perverse effects humanitarian aid has under these conditions on the situation in the camps, quickly becoming bastions of those responsible for the genocide, the international community is continuing to maintain these camps through humanitarian aid until they are violently dissolved at the end of 1996 by the Alliance troops of Kabila. Until today the fate of more than 200 000 refugees who disappeared in the Zairian forests, chased by Kabila's and Kagame's troops, and who probably died in huge numbers – starved, killed, exhausted – is unclear.

But I will come back to Rwanda.

### **3. Everybody is Humanitarian? One Definition and Three and a Half Principles**

As to my knowledge there is no internationally recognised definition of what is, and is not, humanitarian or for that humanitarian aid. At one point the International Court in The Hague, trying to find a definition which could clarify which goods were included in humanitarian aid and therefore excluded from the embargo declared against Serbia, decided „that humanitarian aid is what the ICRC does“.

This „definition“ (there are more precise ones) has its origins in the Law of War and is understandably a bit too limited for an organisation like MSF, the roots of which are medical and humanistic. Therefore MSF often uses the following definition:

„The humanitarian action aims at preserving life while respecting human dignity. It aims at restoring people's capacity to care for themselves where they have been deprived of this by violent or catastrophic circumstances. Humanitarian aid is given with pacifist means, without any discrimination and without any other consideration, in the name of the principles of humanity and of humanitarian law.“

Thus, humanitarian aid does not have as an objective the transformation of a society, in that sense it has no political goal, but to help people in need to survive a violent disruption of a former – if precarious – equilibrium.

Three basic principles seem essential for an organisation that strives to bring humanitarian assistance to victims of conflict:

- **Independence**
- **Impartiality**
- **Neutrality**

An additional principle is important for some organisations, in particular MSF:

- **Volunteerism**

Being the fundamental quality of a humanitarian organisation, for MSF independence is being characterised above all by an independence of spirit which is a condition for

independent analysis and action, namely freedom of choice in its operations and the duration and means in carrying them out. This includes questions of the origin of financial resources as well as, for example, the problem of collaborating with armed UN troops. Only an independent organisation will be able to stay out of the conflict, and only an independent organisation has any hope of acting, and being perceived as, impartial.

Impartiality is defined by the principles of non-discrimination and proportionality: Non-discrimination in regards to nationality, politics, race, religion, sex or any other similar criteria; proportionality of assistance as it relates to the degree of needs – those in the most serious and immediate danger will receive priority.

Neutrality is a principle which poses some problems – as we have seen in the short description of what happened in Afghanistan, in Bosnia or in Rwanda, or actually in Auschwitz. Neutrality for the ICRC is defined as follows:

„In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.“

It may seem futile to go into such definitions but they tend to have consequences on how one acts. The ICRC needs to be accepted by, and be present on, both sides in a conflict – which sometimes is not possible (Afghanistan in the early years of the Soviet occupation) or else to keep silent about massacres or ethnic cleansing or abuses of humanitarian aid.

MSF has adopted a slightly different position, stating that MSF does not take sides in armed conflicts and in this sense adheres to the principle of neutrality. However, in extreme cases where volunteers are witness to mass violations of Human Rights, MSF may resort to denunciation as a last available means in helping populations it assists. In these cases, simple assistance is rendered in vain when violations persist. For this reason, MSF will drop its strict observance of neutrality and will speak out to mobilise concern in an attempt to stop the exactions and improve the situation for these populations.

There is, on many levels in various organisations, a hot debate going on on the notion of neutrality – including inside MSF. Therefore the „half principle“ of the headline. Interestingly enough, the Geneva Conventions stipulate that „humanitarian, impartial organisations like the ICRC“ can offer assistance to victims of war – neutrality does not appear.

MSF is an organisation based on volunteerism (which, admittedly, is not a pretty word – may be „voluntary service“ would be better). This notion principally implies an individual commitment to assist people in precarious situations. The responsibility of the organisation is based on the responsibility taken by each volunteer. Volunteers need to be disinterested, attested to by their non-lucrative commitment. We feel that volunteerism is a determining factor in maintaining a spirit of resistance against compromise, routine, and institutionalisation.

A humanitarian organisation that is totally government funded is not independent (and does therefore not deserve the name) – neither is any UN organisation. The European rehabilitation project in Mostar was not humanitarian in the sense that it was not impartial: both sides, the Croat and the Bosnian part of the city, received approximately the same amount of aid, although the muslim part was heavily destroyed while the Croat part was more or less intact. Aid was not given according to need, but according to a political scheme – which may be justified politically, but then don't call it humanitarian. Humanitarian aid that is not distributed in a controlled way by an independent organisation may be deviated from those most in need and therefore not remain impartial.

#### **4. „MSF ACCUSE“ – How to Combine Medical Ethics With a Duty for Witnessing**

Jean-Hervé Bradol from MSF in Paris once put it this way: „Je me tais, tu te tais, ils meurent“. If silence does not change the course of violence, it may still constitute an act of complicity – in many cases silence can kill. He cites the unacceptable conditions which were imposed on the humanitarian organisations that were working in Burundi during the pogroms in 1993 after the murder of President Melchior N'dadaye and the period of violent repression by the army that followed. About 50 000 people – women, children, old people - were systematically killed within one month, only about 200 to 300 were evacuated and cared for. Impossible for humanitarian organisations to have access – and there were hardly any wounded. This „episode“ of the history of the Great Lakes region's violence is widely unknown – partly because a strict law of silence was imposed by the authorities.

The conditions imposed on humanitarian organisations in Burundi at that time were clear: You could work only in areas designated by the authorities – zones where the population's needs were very serious or where the repression was the most violent were inaccessible. This renders aid partial – and therefore it becomes a part of the pattern of repression. MSF tried to work nevertheless and in that sense failed – no way to open your mouth. Which of course does not mean that one organisation alone can change a situation just by witnessing. But often this is a first step to alarm public conscience - Ethiopia was a positive example in the end, the genocide in Rwanda a devastating one.

The need for witnessing about what had happened in Biafra had led to the foundation of MSF: MSF was created in an attempt to combine medical competence in emergency assistance programmes with a possibility to speak out publicly on the plight of populations in danger. This, of course, creates a permanent tension between the medical ethics – which requires presence at the side of the victims as long as there is a medical need – and the humanitarian impetus which needs to assess the political context and the role and function of aid in a particular context.

The actions of MSF are first and foremost medical. This predominantly consists in providing curative and preventive care to people in danger, wherever they may be. In cases where this is not enough to ensure the survival of a population – as in some extreme emergencies – other means may be developed, including the provision of water, sanitation, food, shelter etc.

Witnessing, an integral part of MSF's activities, is done with the intention of improving the situation for populations in danger. It is expressed through

- the presence of volunteers with people in danger as they provide medical care being near and listening,
- a duty to raise public awareness about potential or actual victims,
- the possibility to openly criticise or denounce breaches of international conventions. This is a last resort used when MSF volunteers witness massive human rights violations, including forced displacement of populations, refoulement or forced return of refugees, genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

In exceptional cases, it may be in the interest of the victims for MSF volunteers to provide assistance without speaking out publicly or to denounce without providing assistance, for example when humanitarian aid is manipulated.

For MSF the two go hand in hand, they are two aspects of the same concern: helping people in a crisis situation. In large parts of Burundi or North-West Rwanda today there are no humanitarian organisations present anymore and therefore no witnesses. Blank spaces on the map. In Chechnya or the Bosnian enclaves people were grateful for the assistance the organisations brought in, but to many of them the presence of independent, impartial witnesses was much more important.

Témoignage (the French word for witnessing) or witnessing is one of means an organisation can use to try to influence, to raise awareness of governments, the media or the public. It can be a powerful tool – at least changing the outside world's perception of a disaster. But it can be a very complicated tool to use, since in the eyes of the authorities and people denounced the organisation is seen as giving up its neutrality, although it does not in a political sense take sides in a conflict.

In one instance for example a well-known French paper, Libération, published a summary of a MSF report – on the 240 000 refugees that had disappeared on their flight from the Eastern Zairian camps west into the jungle after Kabila's troupes had exploded the camps. It was an extremely sensitive, potentially explosive matter accusing the Alliance and indirectly the Rwandan forces to have systematically chased and killed many of these refugees. The report had used very moderate language, letting the facts speak for themselves. Libération, on their front page, published this report on the day of Kabila entering Kinshasa under the headline, in huge letters, „MSF ACCUSE“ (referring to the famous Zola headline about the Dreyfuss affair). Well there we had a problem, everywhere – in Zaire, in Rwanda, in Europe. Libération, being well known for its anti-Rwandan government position, and France having a terrible history of supporting Habyarimana and Mobutu, MSF was immediately seen as taking sides with Mobutu, against Kabila and Kagame. It was not the happiest day in the life of MSF – not because we did not want public attention for our report, but some of us felt recuperated for goal that was not ours.



The consequences of witnessing, or rather denouncing, publicly can be serious: Putting your staff at risk, maybe even your patients, confiscation of equipment and material, sometimes even expulsion. On the other hand it has happened that MSF chose to leave its programmes in order to protest against systematic repression and abuse of aid (see further down).

## 5. Feeding the Butchers to Feed the Victims? Some Recent Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid

The humanitarian context has changed compared to the seventies and eighties – here a few key observations:

- The nature of conflicts and their global political context have changed, often leading to fragmented, lawless, state-less areas.
- In those areas, international conventions, humanitarian principles and the principle of protection of and care for the citizens by the state no longer exists. As a consequence, aid organisations are no more seen as impartial, they are even used as a means to further the war machine (looting of relief, taking hostages for ransom, attracting victims for ethnic cleansing etc) or become targets themselves. The murder of the ICRC delegates in Chechnya or Burundi are terrible examples. Unwillingly, often unwittingly, aid agencies can become accomplices to human rights violations or contribute to perpetuating the war.
- The political actors have no real interlocutors in these situations. They often hide their impotence and their unwillingness to intervene with the means that are theirs only (political, military) behind a fig-leaf of humanitarian aid, dragging aid agencies to the centre of conflict resolution – where they definitely do not belong.
- The NGO world has become more colourful and varied which often is an advantage. But in conflict situations it can mean too many different players with as many different approaches to analyse the political context and the role of humanitarian aid. Accordingly, decisions made about how to lobby governments on certain issues or how to go public, to develop common positions which are then jointly defended, is often difficult.
- The media, due to ever faster technology, faced with tightening deadlines to beat the competition, are eager recipients of the information that aid agencies can provide, often not even bothering to verify its accuracy on the spot.
- Aid agencies themselves lost a bit of their halo – which is certainly in itself a good thing. But sometimes they are criticised for the wrong reasons. Knowing that aid can have perverse effects does not necessarily imply that the scrutiny aid agencies are exposed to is automatically the most competent or justified one.

What are the consequences for MSF? Here are some – may be you can think of some others.

- The first **dilemma** is whether to intervene or not in a given, complicated context. There are always needs, but can you argue for a minimum of guarantees that maintain some humanitarian integrity – in the interest of the victims? For example to avoid fuelling new violence?
- If an intervention is decided (majority of cases), a **compromise** has to be found between life saving activities and the duty to remain loyal to basic humanitarian principles. You may need to reduce your material means so that they are less seducing to be looted (Liberia '96). Or you may need to organise your health centre at the edge of, not inside, a

regroupement camp in order to provide care for the population but do not become an accomplice to this hideous kind of ghettoism (Burundi '97).

- In any event – especially under rather compromising circumstances – witnessing, or in its more aggressive form, **advocacy** is an essential complement to medical action. We may need to compromise, then try to use a twin-track approach and lobby against abuses while staying operational.
- But then MSF needs to discuss (and this is not easy) where to draw the line. How do we deal with a situation where MSF is used as a lure to attract refugees who after leaving the forests where they were hiding are being slaughtered right away (Shabunda/Rwanda '97)? Or when humanitarian aid feeds those responsible for a genocide and contributes to the continuation of impunity (Goma ,94 - '95)?

Are there limits to our medical action? Or else – in which extreme situations does humanitarian aid become ineffective/senseless or may be even dangerous (because of fuelling a conflict) so that we should decide to stop our intervention or only continue under the condition that the underlying causes for the conflict are politically tackled by the international community?

## 6. Who is Responsible?

### The Example of Humanitarian Assistance in the Great Lakes Area

As already mentioned in the brief historical outline above MSF, like some other organisations, tried to draw international attention to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, a futile exercise. The international community decided to avoid the term „genocide“, thereby refusing to accept its obligation to intervene and rendered the 1948 Convention against Genocide a worthless piece of paper. But when cholera broke out in the Rwandan refugee camps of Eastern Zaire, the humanitarian show got going. Saving hundreds of thousands of lives, certainly, but at the same time abandoning all political view of the situation, forgetting about the reasons behind what happened and thus preparing the ground for more violence to come.

MSF had been working since the beginning in these camps, at times with close to one hundred international volunteers and more than 2500 local staff, doing primary health care – curative and preventive, and nutrition.

By the end of 1994, MSF took the decision to withdraw progressively from the camps around Goma and Bukavu, choosing the very last resort of protest. For any humanitarian organisation such a decision is extremely painful, and dramatic discussions within the organisation took place over many months. The dilemma which we faced is the classical dilemma of humanitarian aid: Medical duty versus humanitarian ethics, staying with your patients knowing that your assistance is used for military purposes by those responsible for the genocide or leaving your patients and thus trying to avoid fuelling further violence? This decision therefore has to be seen as one of the most dramatic actions of protest and a contribution to conflict prevention which an aid agency is capable of.

The main factors responsible for MSF's decision were:

- The camp leaders were responsible for the genocide, and the old Rwandan power structures were largely reproduced in the camps.
- Aid was controlled by these structures and often used to reinforce the leaders' control over the population which was held hostage in the camps. Surveys were also under the control of the leaders, and therefore inflated population figures were used leading to inflated assistance programs.
- Efforts to rearm and train military groups in the camps with the clear aim to prepare new aggressions against Rwanda.
- The sheer amount of money brought into the camps by humanitarian organisations: At the end of 1994 MSF's 2600 local staff had to pay what amounted to about US\$ 85 000 per month from their salary as a tax to these leaders.
- The nutritional and health situation of the camp population was not critical anymore.

MSF, first by protesting, then by withdrawing, wanted to focus the attention of the international community on these perverse effects of the humanitarian effort and the danger of continuing conflicts..

But there was clearly no political will to properly address the problem.

Who then is responsible for not preventing the genocide? Who for not intervening while there was still a possibility? Who is responsible letting the activities in the camps of Eastern Zaire go on? Who is responsible for the drama that happened around Kisangani? Who for the failure of the UN investigation commission that was supposed to find out what happened to the lost refugees in Zaire/Congo in 1997?

Some of the humanitarian organisations have tried to draw attention to what they saw happening. But they don't have the power and the means to take the responsibility of states.

## **7. No Recipes – But Some Tentative Conclusions and Observations**

Humanitarian organisations have been largely absent from the great catastrophies of this century: the genocide of the Armenians, Auschwitz, the Gulag, Cambodia, Ethiopia, and in the end also the genocide in Rwanda. Humanitarian aid is impossible in contexts that deny human beings their fundamental humanity.

Humanitarian organisations need a framework to be able to become active – that is what Dunant tried to achieve. But these organisations themselves are not in a position to create or impose that framework. This is the responsibility of the governments, of the UN. The organisations try to help innocent people to survive – this is a universally recognised right. But it is sacrificed every day on the altar of political and economic interests, or just because of sheer indifference and apathy.

Here are a few elements that we think are important to consider for future work in the humanitarian field:

- Aid agencies need to be politically and economically more independent in order to preserve the main humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality.
- Aid agencies are responsible for doing as little harm as possible, for avoiding any action that goes against the benefit of the very people they want to help – watch your means and watch your allies. Aid agencies are responsible for drawing the attention of the donors and the international community to situations where humanitarian aid is abused.
- Aid agencies need to better understand the political and economic implications of their work. While they cannot be held solely responsible for situations where humanitarian aid may fuel the war economy, they are accountable for the correct use of their assistance.
- Aid agencies should intensify their efforts to develop common positions on specific issues endangering people in need and humanitarian aid.
- The UN conference for the creation of the permanent International Criminal Court has just convened. The ongoing impunity for perpetrators of crimes against humanity and of genocide is unacceptable. Establishing this court would signify a recognition of the crime and of the rights of the victims and put an end to this kind of collective guilt that is not punishable.
- Access to vulnerable populations must be possible again – and states must take their responsibility, enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, seriously to protect these populations – and the staff of the aid agencies.
- States or governmental organisations are not humanitarian organisations – we should avoid confusing the issues. But they have an important role in improving respect for the Geneva Conventions and in making humanitarian aid possible.
- Arms trade control needs to become one of the central issues for the next years.
- And if we talk so much about conflict prevention we should not forget that there are very powerful interests in the world for NOT preventing a conflict.

To end this tour de force, here for those of you who read German a little poem:

## **Gezieltes Spielzeug**

### 1. Abwurf

von Spielzeug  
statt Bomben  
zum Fest der Kinder

sagten die Marktforscher  
das  
macht zweifellos  
großen Eindruck

Es hat sehr großen  
Eindruck  
gemacht  
auf die ganze Welt

2. Hätte das Flugzeug  
lieber vor vierzehn Tagen  
Spielzeug hinuntergeworfen  
und jetzt erst die Bomben

hätten meine zwei Kinder  
noch vierzehn Tage  
durch eure Güte  
etwas zum Spielen gehabt.

Erich Fried

Zum vietnamesischen „Fest der Kinder“ warfen US-Flugzeuge Spielzeug ab, auch auf Dörfer, in denen ihre Bomben noch kurz zuvor Kinder getötet hatten.

Aus „und Vietnam und“, Berlin 1966

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