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Public communication strategies of international humanitarian organizations

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Abstract

The article studies the public communication strategies of large humanitarian NGOs as well as UN organizations with regard to the humanitarian principles. It shows that different strategies concerning impartiality vs. solidarity and independence vs. subcontracting cause a wide diversity of humanitarian positions, which lead to different types of public communication strategies. It also discusses several recent trends and three scenarios concerning humanitarian public communication, focusing on interaction with donors and the military, as well as the security situation on the ground. The article concludes that it is essential for humanitarian organizations to understand the different interpretations of the humanitarian principles and that this will help in establishing a strategic approach toward public communication at headquarters, as well as in the field.

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In our era of sound bites, it has become increasingly difficult to convey the complexity of humanitarian crises, and even to explain the identities of the many players involved, for example warlords, militias, peacekeeping forces, local population groups and humanitarian organizations. In this challenging context, where both humanitarian and non-humanitarian players vie for media

and donor attention, it is crucial for humanitarian organizations to adopt a coherent and credible approach to their public communication. Frequently, their public communication activities will need to be diversified and targeted to the "home" public, ranging from donor government(s) to the general public, as well as to the various players at field level.[1]

Public communication[2] has become a strategic management function in recent years. While this has been well acknowledged by commercial enterprises, the non profit sector, including the humanitarian organizations, has frequently been slower in the application of public communication concepts. This is reflected by the lack of available literature and limited information on public communication policies and outcomes presented on websites of these organizations.[3]

This lack of information, however, does not mean that these organizations do not employ public information policies or communication strategies. But many humanitarian players carefully guard their communication policies and results, because public communication is a strategic and sensitive area for any organization that needs to present itself in a positive light. Humanitarian organizations also face several unique challenges that most commercial and other not-for-profit organizations do not confront. In particular, a humanitarian organization needs to:

1. Explain its humanitarian principles and core beliefs, as well as its objectives and activities, in order to differentiate itself from other humanitarian organizations and "good" causes. In this respect, different humanitarian organizations may stress varying secular principles and religious beliefs;
2. Raise funds from donor governments, the general public, foundations and other funding agencies;
3. Communicate its goals, advertise employment activities, engage volunteers and publicize the outcomes of its humanitarian work;
4. Raise awareness of both loud and silent humanitarian emergencies and carry out broader advocacy campaigns concerning, for example, small arms control or the fight against poverty;
5. Create possibilities for either influencing donor governments and governing elites or for acting independently from them; and

1 Information used for this article has been collected from internal papers and selected public documents of the organizations and interviews with their staff members.

2 Public communication is defined as communication strategies and activities towards targeted audiences. Its main objective is to provide information to these audiences and to raise awareness and influence attitudes or even behaviour.

3 Similarly, public relations can still be professionalized further. Pearson defines public relations as the "management function of an organization that helps that organization get and maintain good relations with all the public that it depends upon for survival." See Ron Pearson, "Beyond ethical relativism in public relations: Coorientation, rules and the idea of communication symmetry," *Public Relations Research Annual*, Vol. 1, 1989, p. 71. Generally, public relations are seen as a part of public communication. For more information with regard to public relations, see Sam Dyer *et al.*, "Managing public relations in non-profit organizations," *Public Relations Quarterly*, Winter 2002, pp.13-17.

6. Explain at field level the principles and activities of the organization in order to rally local support, reduce resistance, and, hopefully, lessen the likelihood of armed attacks.

Public communication may also help the humanitarian organizations to react more professionally to growing public scrutiny.[4] This article outlines and compares the public communication policies and strategies of the main international and non-governmental humanitarian organizations within the context of their guiding principles. It develops a classification of various humanitarian organizations so as to better explain their differences and enhance understanding of their communication strategies. Finally, it highlights several issues for further research.

A community divided

Before analysing public communication strategies and policies, this article begins with a description of the main organizations involved in humanitarian action.[5] One of the problems with the use of the term "humanitarian community" is that it assumes a unity that only exists in the loosest sense. The term came into vogue in the 1990s, just as the number of humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) proliferated rapidly, further fragmenting an already diverse community. Despite attempts by many humanitarians to create venues and mechanisms to increase mutual understanding and develop common positions, the range of aid agencies and the variety of understandings of humanitarian action remain huge. Programme approaches and operational practices differ considerably.

Many of these differences stem from the lack of shared agreement on definitions of the principles at the heart of humanitarian action. As Slim has outlined, different players have different concepts of these core "humanitarian principles" — humanity, neutrality, impartiality and solidarity.[6] Many organizations and their staff lack a thorough understanding of them, or apply them inconsistently.[7] This has significant consequences for their operational choices in the field on issues such as the willingness to accept armed military escorts, or restrictions imposed by a party to a conflict. Divergent and inconsistent interpretations of principles by humanitarian players create uncertainty among partners in the field who do not know how other organizations will behave. Simultaneously, different interpretations of humanitarian principles by the various organizations may influence their relationships with donor governments, as well as their communication strategies with the general public.

4 See Hugh Williamson, "Under attack: Development and cooperation," April 2005, at <http://www.inwent.org/E+Z/content/archive-eng/04-2005/tribune_art1.html>, (last visited on 22 September 2005).

5 The authors would like to thank Steve O'Malley, who formulated many of the initial ideas presented in this section.

6 Hugo Slim, "Relief agencies and moral standing in war: Principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and solidarity," *Development in Practice*, Vol. 4, 1997, pp. 344-345.

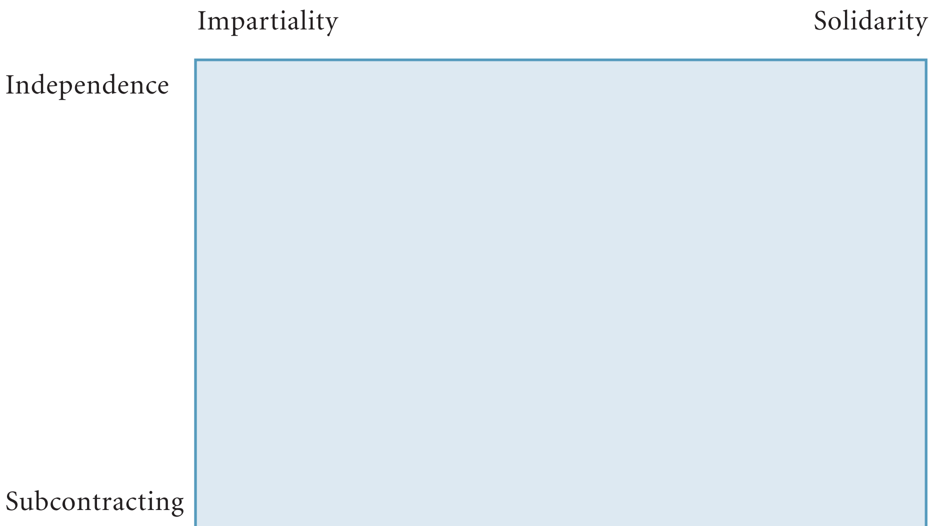
7 *Ibid*.

The problem of creating and sustaining common humanitarian action has resulted in a voluminous literature on coordination.[8] A complementary way of attempting to analyse this problem is to look more closely at this diverse community of "humanitarians" by formulating a typology of organizations, which will serve as a tentative expression of the "mental maps" that those of us involved in humanitarian aid carry in our minds to "position" other humanitarian organizations. For example, a head of mission for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) expects different operational positions and approaches from his or her counterparts at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Action Contre la Faim (ACF) or Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere(CARE).

This attempt to position organizations relative to other organizations allows us to study the respective public information policies of humanitarian organizations in order to discern the differences between the strategies of humanitarian organizations towards the general public, donor governments and specific target groups.

Our typology has two axes. The horizontal axis positions an organization on the basis of its relationship to the victims of conflict and runs from "Impartiality" to "Solidarity." The vertical axis positions the organization in relationship to States, in particular through the relationship to the main donor in its "home" country, and runs from "Independence" to "Subcontracting"

Figure 1 Mental Map



8 See, for example, Antonio Donini, *The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan, Mozambique and Rwanda*, Occasional Paper No. 22, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI, 1996; and Marc Sommers, *The Dynamics of Coordination*, Occasional Paper No. 22, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Providence, RI, 2000.

Impartiality

The horizontal axis reflects a deliberate choice of impartiality rather than neutrality as the starting point. In humanitarian action, neutrality can only be properly understood in the context of the ICRC. The ICRC recognizes that it refers to neutrality — not taking sides on the political grounds of a conflict — as an "operational principle" to gain access and provide aid, rather than as an abstract idea. While a number of other humanitarian organizations claim to be neutral or include references to neutrality in their literature, Slim is certainly correct when he suggests that most are just repeating a slogan. Many humanitarian organizations — and scholars — should think through more clearly their use of these terms and their applicability to their actions. For example, the charter of MSF refers to the organization as "neutral." Understandably, the exact interpretation of this concept has been the subject of an ongoing debate within MSF over the past few years.[9]

Hence, we consider impartiality to be a more useful term. An impartial organization delivers humanitarian assistance on the basis of need, with no discrimination on the basis of race, religion or other classifications. Respecting the principle of impartiality, which is centred on providing assistance to people rather than to States or rebel movements, forces an organization to avoid thinking of groups of people as "good" or "bad" victims. Impartiality allows a certain amount of flexibility with regard to the public stance of an organization. Some may opt to apply this principle quietly; others may choose to exercise what Slim has referred to as "active impartiality."[10] An active stance allows the organization to criticize the actions of the parties, without denying assistance to the people under their authority. Impartial organizations are most often found working on both sides of the front line and include, most notably, the ICRC and MSF. But MSF is a stronger proponent of active impartiality.

Solidarity

Solidarity is at the opposite end of the spectrum. For the purposes of this paper, solidarity is defined as an explicit choice to side with a group of people and their political cause. It should be noted that an alternative definition of "solidarity" is often used by MSF and other organizations to indicate a willingness to share the suffering of the population and to be physically present with them. While both definitions of solidarity have a political element, it is useful to make a distinction between solidarity that connotes shared suffering among the population and those seeking to assist them through the physical presence of the humanitarian organization (the way MSF often does), and, on the other hand, an explicit choice to work only with one side in a conflict .

9 See, for example, Terry Fiona, *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2002.

10 Slim, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 349.

Two examples that illustrate solidarity as defined for this paper are the actions of Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) in southern Sudan and of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Sierra Leone. NPA was always clear in its support for the southerners' right to self-determination. It did not work in government-controlled territory. Consequently its level of cooperation with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement was closer and higher than that of other organizations. In Sierra Leone, after the restoration of the Kabbah government in 1998, CRS made an explicit decision not to work in the territories controlled by Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Solidarity can have positive and negative aspects: the decision to work with one group implies a decision not to work with another. Certain victims are thus worthy of assistance, while others are not because of those who have authority over them.[11]

Independence

The vertical axis looks at an organization's independence of action. How "non-governmental" is the organization? The definition of independence includes financial and political elements. The financial element is more tangible. An independent organization receives a significant amount of funding from non-governmental sources and is able to set up and run operations that are not supported by its major institutional donors. However, the political element is less tangible and more prone to subjective interpretation. It contains aspects of attitude and action. For the purposes of this article, independence is defined as a stance that positions the organization as separate from its constituencies (e.g. home State or traditional supporters) and capable of holding and publicly expressing views that are different from that of the State. There should be limited crossover between the staff and board of the organization and the State.

Subcontracting

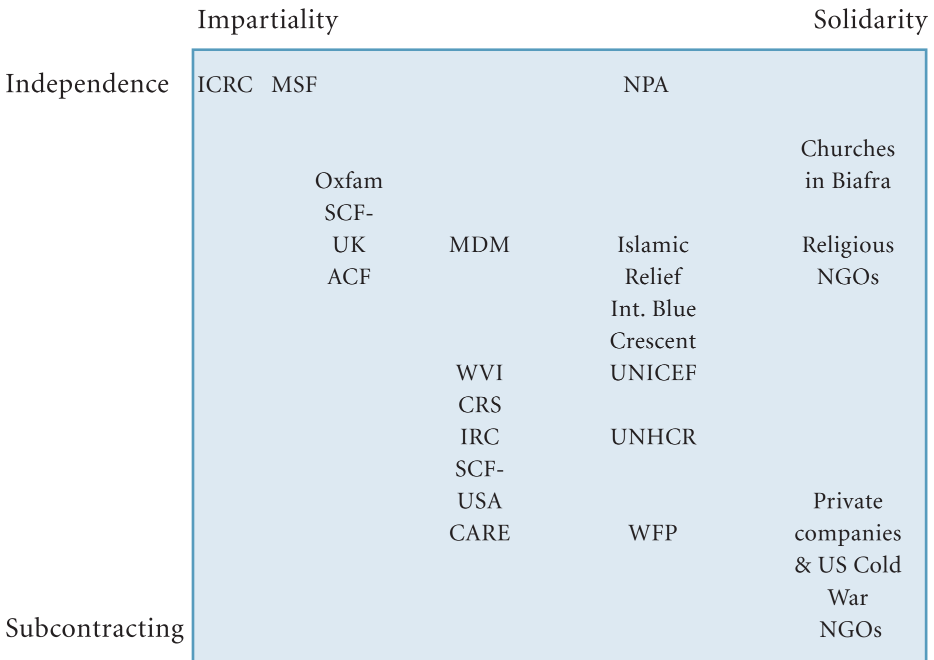
On the other end of the spectrum are the "subcontractors". This term is deliberately chosen and refers to a class of organizations that make their living executing contracts for donor governments and, to a lesser extent, multilateral institutions.[12] In general, the subcontractors carry out the foreign policy objectives of a State and the State shapes and determines the programmes they undertake. Subcontractors thus bid on projects developed by the State. This approach is more prevalent in the US, where USAID often asks organizations to bid on providing specific sets of services. An example of it is the US government's Sudan Transitional Assistance for Rehabilitation (STAR) programme in southern Sudan: in 1998 USAID, as part of the government's broader strategy in Sudan,

11 Of course, if the authority makes principled humanitarian work impossible, organizations may choose to withdraw or refuse to start programs.

12 The bilateral organizations that provide aid to populations in need fall outside the scope of this article.

asked a group of NGOs to bid on the said programme, aimed at developing civil society in western Equatoria. CRS, which is not a subcontractor in the formal definition of the term, won the contract. Traditional subcontractors do not express political views that are at odds with policies of their national governments.

Figure 2 Mental Map of Large International Humanitarian Organizations



Description of the organizations and their public communication strategies

This section summarizes the thinking behind the location of several large humanitarian organizations on this "map", and their public communication strategies.

ICRC

The ICRC has a unique position as a key player in humanitarian action and as the guardian of international humanitarian law. Although it is largely dependent on States for its funding, it meticulously safeguards its independence. States

provide funding to the ICRC with the expectation that it will carry out its unique mandate in an independent and impartial manner. Hence, an essential difference between the ICRC and most other humanitarian organizations is that the ICRC has less need to use public communications and its media profile to raise funds from the general public.

This independence is strongly reflected in the ICRC's public communication policy, which is based on the guiding communication principles of credibility, identity and impact. As an international public player, the ICRC has established a public policy framework for the development of its communication activities, which is composed of clearly defined communication strategies at local, regional and global levels to shape its image and present its activities. According to its official communication policy, the ICRC seeks to provide information to priority audiences — political and military authorities, opinion leaders, the media, donors, other humanitarian organizations and people affected by war — and raise their awareness on humanitarian law and humanitarian assistance.

The ICRC also conceives its communication strategies as an essential part of its overall efforts to promote international humanitarian law (IHL), in particular to ensure that IHL is incorporated into the training of armed and security forces.[13] It regularly supervises the effectiveness of its public communication strategies and activities.[14] Yet no results of this supervision are currently publicly available.

Within its communication framework, the ICRC promotes a dialogue with parties that can influence armed conflicts, with the aim of engaging their support for achieving its objectives, while safeguarding the confidential nature of certain kinds of information to ensure that vulnerable persons, such as prisoners of war, are protected and that the ICRC obtains access to them.[15] Thus the ICRC, contrary to many other humanitarian organizations, usually works rather independently of the media in war zones and often prefers to remain outside the media limelight. It consequently often refrains from making public statements, so is traditionally regarded as a relatively discreet organization.[16]

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

MSF is close to the ICRC in its interpretation of the humanitarian principles. Although it does not share the ICRC's specific international legal identity, it is

13 Communication is furthermore systemically included in its other operational activities. Nowadays, the ICRC as an organization wants to go beyond one-way communication and step up efforts to listen to and engage in dialogue with its priority audiences. To this end, the ICRC uses mass communication tools, such as its website, electronic media, radio, television and printed media, that enable it to reach vast audiences.

14 "Public communication: Policy, guiding principles and priority audiences" (internal document), ICRC, Geneva, 2005.

15 *Ibid*.

16 Jakob Kellenberger, "Speaking out or remaining silent in humanitarian work," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 86, No. 855, September 2004, pp. 593-609.

in many ways both impartial and independent. At the same time its NGO status sometimes provides more leeway, in comparison with the ICRC, to operate independently from States. It generally works on both sides of the front line and targets beneficiaries on the basis of need. It is financially independent and positions itself against States (for example, as in MSF France's long campaign to have the French government investigate its role in the Srebrenica massacre). During the Kosovo bombing campaign, it refused to accept donor funds from NATO member States.

Similarly to the ICRC, MSF also carefully manages its public presence and seeks to disseminate information to the general public. However, it is more outspoken in its advocacy than the ICRC.[17] Regarding its core values, MSF states that it has a moral responsibility to increase awareness of human rights abuses or neglected crises; it tries to act as a witness, for which it uses the term "*témoignage*" — a French expression that includes MSF's commitment to advocacy and testimony while working with people in need.[18] Advocacy is normally directed at governments to effect policy change. Its main strategies include lobbying, statements, press articles, publications and mobilization by means of campaigns.[19]

Oxfam and Save the Children Fund UK (SCF-UK) are also grouped alongside each other in this quadrant. However, both agencies are placed slightly further from the independent pole because of their historic links to the British establishment. Action Contre la Faim (ACF) operates in the French tradition of independence of action but without the same degree of financial independence as MSF.

Oxfam

Oxfam — a federation of twelve independent international organizations — works in both emergency relief and development. Similar to SCF-UK, Oxfam strategically focuses on the areas of media management, campaigning and lobbying.[20] Although the members of the Oxfam family concentrate on different activities, the organization has developed a common communication strategy. When Oxfam staff feel that particular issues need to be brought to the public's attention, they primarily rely on media advocacy, demonstrations and witnessing.[21] Event management, marketing and communication initiatives are also regularly discussed within its board of country directors.[22] While public

17 In this respect, MSF protests more openly against the violation of human rights. Occasionally, it publicly criticizes the behaviour of other agencies. It did so, for instance, when the UN signed a memorandum of understanding in May 1998 with the Taliban regime. See MSF press release, 21 July 1998.

18 Marc Lindenberg & Coralie Bryant, *Going Global: Transforming Relief and Development NGOs*, Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, 2001, pp. 185-186.

19 Abby Stoddard, "Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and Trends," Humanitarian Policy Group Briefing, July 2002, pp. 1-4.

20 Oxfam, "Towards global equity: Strategic Plan 2001-2004". Available at: <http://www.oxfam.org/eng/pdfs/strat_plan.pdf> (last visited on 21 August 2005).

21 Lindenberg & Bryant, *op. cit.* (note 18), p. 165.

22 Jörg Kalinski, personal communication, 2005.

communication plays a growing role at the strategic level, Oxfam has also incorporated public communication into its operational activities at field level. It has increasingly become a global campaigning force in recent years.[23]

Interestingly, the organization also campaigns in alliance with other associations to increase its impact. This is the case with the advocacy campaign on small arms control, which is carried out jointly with Amnesty International and IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms).[24] On the Niger food crisis, Oxfam Great Britain works closely with NOVIB — the Dutch Oxfam branch.[25] Moreover, Oxfam builds strategic partnerships and alliances; for example, it maintains a relationship with Northern Foods and the Cooperative Bank. Such partnerships, however, carry a risk, if the partner's image becomes tainted or if the partner's actions constrain Oxfam's independence.[26]

In addition to Oxfam's campaigning activities, the organization supports national media by its ad hoc media working groups. Oxfam Germany, for example, provides logistical services for investigative journalism and publishes regular press releases on such topics as cotton wool in Mali or European Union agricultural subsidies in relation to Kosovo.[27] And Oxfam America regularly analyses press coverage to show the impact of its poverty reduction campaign. As for advocacy, the organization employed almost 70 advocacy staff members, while CARE USA and World Vision worked with only eleven and four staff members respectively in 2001.[28] Finally, public relations constitute a last element of Oxfam's communication strategy, for example with regular newsletters to stakeholders and donors, photo exhibitions and video reports.

Save the Children Fund

Save the Children Fund UK takes a similar approach. The British organization seeks to increase attention to children in emergencies and considers such communication as an indispensable part of its activities. This is reflected in the strategies and programmes developed by SCF-UK that try, *inter alia*, to identify and prevent abuse of children and to improve their living conditions.[29] It also integrates child protection into all its emergency response programmes, through advocacy, volunteer involvement and campaigning.

In the middle of our map, slightly towards the subcontracting end, comes a group of US NGOs that receive considerable support from the US government.

23 Oxfam International, "How and why Oxfam campaigns," available at: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_you_can_do/campaign/whyoxfamcampaigns.htm>, (last visited on 17 September 2005).
24 Oxfam International, "Oxfam International Annual Report," available at: <http://www.oxfam.org/eng/pdfs/annual_report_2004.pdf>, (last visited on 11 August 2005).
25 Kalinski, *op. cit.* (note 22).
26 Lindenberg & Bryant, *op. cit.* (note 18), p. 182.
27 This service was offered, for example, to Deutsche Welle, Germany's international broadcasting station, and to the German newspapers *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Rundschau*.
28 Lindenberg & Bryant, *op. cit.* (note 18).
29 Save the Children, "Protecting children in emergencies," available at: <http://www.savethechildren.org/advocacy/images/policy_brief_final.pdf>, (last visited on 12 August 2005).

They tend to either have ties to the US foreign policy establishment through their boards or rely on US government funding (IRC, CARE USA, World Vision International). In general, these organizations are more comfortable in a closer relationship with the State.[30]

Two prominent representatives of that quadrant are World Vision International (WVI) and CARE International. Although both organizations are relief and development organizations, they differ from each other in their *Weltanschauung*. While CARE defines itself as a non-political and non-religious international confederation of twelve member organizations, World Vision perceives itself as an ecumenical Christian relief and development family of country organizations with a focus on children.

CARE

CARE is similar to Oxfam in that it is involved in both emergency relief and development issues. In terms of communication, however, CARE maintains a lower profile than Oxfam, an approach reflected in the limited information on its public communication policies. Perhaps this is a result of its relatively large reliance on US government funds and its role in food aid, which can constrain its independence.

Like Oxfam, CARE has built up strategic partnerships and alliances. To increase its impact and to create a positive image, the organization works together with selected corporations. For example, CARE USA established an alliance in 1992 with the Starbucks Coffee Company to assist communities in coffee-producing countries,[31] and Motorola Inc. is providing radio communications technologies for CARE projects and produces marketing material.[32] While these partnerships and alliances reduce dependence on the government(s), such links can also, as with Oxfam, potentially impede the independence of the organization.

World Vision

In contrast to CARE, World Vision describes itself as one of the largest Christian relief and development organizations in the world. It operates as a partnership of 54 national offices,[33] all of which follow a common mission statement. As an ecumenical organization, World Vision participates in strategic initiatives with Christian leaders. The major current initiatives concern HIV/AIDS and orphans and vulnerable children.

Like other humanitarian organizations, World Vision International disseminates information to the general public. It considers "witnessing for Christ"

30 Abby Stoddard, "Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and Trends" in Joanna Macrae (ed.), *Humanitarian Action and the Global War on Terror*, Humanitarian Policy Group Report 30, 2002, pp. 25-35.

31 CARE, "Starbucks and CARE". Available at: <http://www.careusa.org/partnerships/starbucks/projects.asp>, (last visited on 21 August 2005).

32 CARE, *op. cit*. (note 31).

33 World Vision International, "World Vision International Annual Review 2004," available at: <http://www.wvi.org/wvi/pdf/2004%20Annual%20Review.pdf>, (last visited on 11 October 2005).

a basic part of its overall strategy. This conviction is reflected in the organization's public communication strategy, which demands that the dignity of suffering children and families be protected, and raises public awareness by giving explanations of the causes and consequences of both poverty and war, as well as about its own organizational responses. World Vision also includes public communication in its operational activities. It has a differentiated marketing strategy to tap the full potential of child sponsorship, as well as donations.[34]

United Nations humanitarian organizations

The UN humanitarian organizations are generally not as independent as the humanitarian NGOs, because they need to follow UN policies as established by member States in such bodies as the Security Council, the General Assembly and their executive boards.

Nevertheless, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) raises considerable funds and carries out strong public communication on its own through its national committees, press centre and media team,[35] and well-known movie stars who become its "ambassadors." It capitalizes on its focus on children, which are probably the most effective public communication tool in humanitarian assistance. This enables UNICEF to obtain a higher degree of financial independence, which it uses for both its humanitarian and development activities, than most UN organizations.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has, in this respect, a tougher time to fulfil its treaty-based mandate in favour of refugees and relies heavily on State contributions and support. Somewhat similar to CARE, WFP emphasizes food aid and is consequently more dependent on donor governments, in particular the US. Recently, European States fiercely criticized WFP after it published an advertisement in the Financial Times on food aid that was seen as supporting the US point of view during the world trade talks in Hong Kong.[36]

Solidarity organizations

In the upper right quadrant are organizations that emphasize solidarity and have the resources to act independently. These organizations make an explicit choice to assist specific groups. As noted above, Norwegian People's Aid specifically chose to assist the people of southern Sudan. It made clear in its public communications that it worked with the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association, the humanitarian wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). A second example would be the humanitarian assistance channelled

34 *Ibid*.

35 The media team creates tools for journalists, including web videos, regular videos, news feeds, audio resources (e.g., radio programs, pod casts), downloadable photos of UNICEF spokespersons, calendar of upcoming events, publications and speeches. See for example <http://www.unicef.org>, (last visited on 20 January 2006).

36 See <http://europa.eu.int/comm/trade/issues/newround/doha_da/pr131205_en.htm>, (last visited on 25 January 2006).

through churches in Biafra during the Nigerian civil war. These organizations generally promote such solidarity in their public communication activities. For churches such solidarity can also find its expression in sermons and church collections.

Islamic NGOs

The large Islamic humanitarian organizations are currently the most difficult organizations to place on our map because they are developing so rapidly. In addition, they have not been studied as often as most other organizations included in this article.[37] While they originate from a sense of solidarity with their fellow brethren, they are increasingly addressing the needs of victims of all religious backgrounds and cooperating more and more with non-Islamic organizations. At the same time, some observers state that their public communication towards their Islamic target groups differs from that towards their Western target groups. It is likely that organizations such as Islamic Relief and the International Blue Crescent will professionalize further and increasingly mirror organizations like World Vision International.

The remaining corner in the bottom right concerns organizations that operate in solidarity and as subcontractors. Their public communication strategies are either mainly based on propaganda or they maintain a low profile. Best examples were the US Cold War NGOs that identified with the position of the US government and carried out its policies to assist specific groups. They took a strong pro-American (or Western) position in their activities.

After the end of the Cold War, it became more difficult to find NGOs that fit in this quadrant. However, the "war on terror" and its consequences in Iraq and Afghanistan may change this and further divide the amorphous humanitarian community. In Iraq, humanitarian organizations have faced increasing forms of competition from private companies as public service contractors.[38] Briefly, large US conglomerates with links to the Republican Administration, such as Halliburton and Bechtel, have carried out rebuilding and humanitarian tasks. Moreover, since the Cold War ended the US military has established a higher degree of control over humanitarian organizations than ever before. In June 2003, President George W. Bush "informed American NGO leaders that they were in fact 'an arm' of the U.S. Government — and that they had an important job to promote U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, NGOs receiving funding from the U.S. Government were not to speak to reporters or publicly express critical opinions of

37 See for example Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, "Helping the 'brothers': The medic, the militant and the fighter," in Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent*, I.B Tauris, New York, 2003, and Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire: Enquête sur les ONG islamiques*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002.

38 In addition, the US military is relying increasingly on security firms that carry out tasks normally assigned to military or peacekeeping forces. See David Barstow, "Security companies: Shadow soldiers in Iraq," *New York Times*, available at: <http://www.nyt.com>, (last visited on 19 April 2004).

U.S. foreign policy."[39] As a result, humanitarian organizations, especially US ones, have been confronted with new, competitive organizations and restrictive communication policies. The US-led interventions also aroused strong local armed resistance, which sharply increased security risks for humanitarian organizations.

In general, American humanitarian organizations have publicly protested against these military and funding policies and have continued to raise their own funds, but the future will tell whether and to what extent they will be able to protect their independence.[40] If not, organizations could become more closely associated with their donor governments involved in crises severely restricting their independence and placing them in the lower quadrant of Figure 2 (above). As a result, their public communication strategies could either become more circumscribed or increasingly echo donor government propaganda.

Differences within organizations

Many of the humanitarian organizations mentioned in this paper are actually federations or "families." In some, there is considerable variation between the policies and programming of different national units. For example, Oxfam GB is a very different organization in the field from Oxfam America, while the Dutch branch NOVIB started out as a development organization rooted in the Dutch labour and socialist movements and only later linked up with Oxfam.

Organizational structures also vary widely, as does the degree to which each is centrally governed. Some of these organizations, for example Save the Children Fund, have a clear centralized structure with clear decision-making rules. Others do not have a clear hierarchy in which a central headquarters office dominates the other offices or a central ruling body exercises power over others.[41] For example, Oxfam is relatively decentralized, with operational branches in various countries and liaison offices in Brussels and New York.[42]

The growth of these federations is predominantly a phenomenon of the 1990s. Many of the new offices were started as vehicles for increased media relations, lobbying, fundraising and staff recruitment. Coherence is generally assured through executive and board control from the parent organization and shared norms and values. The evolving nature of the federation's membership may well have effects on its positioning in our chart over time, and lead to a further diversification of their communication strategies.

39 Jim Igoe & Tim Kelsall, "Introduction," p. 5, in Jim Igoe & Tim Kelsall (eds), *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: African NGOs, Donors and the State*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, N.C.

40 See Patricia M. Diskett *et al.*, "Civil military relations in humanitarian assistance: Where next in the aftermath of 11 September?" in Dennis Dijkzeul (ed.), *Between Force and Mercy: Military Action and Humanitarian Aid* (Bochumer Schriften zur Friedenssicherung und zum Humanitären Völkerrecht), Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, Berlin, 2004, pp. 323-326.

41 Lindenberg & Bryant, *op. cit.* (note 18), p. 35.

42 Kalinski, *op. cit.* (note 22).

Differences between US and European NGOs

There are differences, as well as crucial similarities, in the relationships between the US and European NGOs and their "home" publics. This is particularly important because funding from the general public makes many humanitarian organizations less reliant on government funding, so they can safeguard their independence better. Funding and other forms of support by the general public can also open up opportunities to exert a direct influence on policy and decision-making in political circles responsible for foreign policy, funding and military deployment.

On both sides of the Atlantic, direct mail, e-marketing and campaigning are the preferred methods of fundraising. For example, one in seven Dutch adults has donated to MSF Holland at one time or another, which allows MSF to debate whether to have "a network rule of thumb of no more than 15 percent of revenue from government sources"[43] to protect its independence.

US organizations do not reach the same levels of penetration. In 2001, Lindenberg and Bryant observed that while "overall private giving in the United States as a proportion of GDP has remained stable since the 1960s, in the past seven years, the proportion of total giving designated for international purposes has doubled from 1 percent to 2 percent. This has been accompanied by the rise of a new ideology in which both politicians and many private citizens see voluntarism as part of the solution to global problems. It is now considered regular practice for large national newspapers to carry long lists of NGOs and their addresses to encourage citizen contributions during times of civil violence or natural disasters."[44] The power of private fundraising through direct mail and e-marketing — a growing market — is also attractive to organizations that have traditionally relied heavily on government funding, as it enhances their independence of action and speed of response.[45]

In more general terms, there are differences between European and US humanitarian organizations with regard to their proximity to the donor governments, their relationships with the military, and their interaction with the general public. The Europeans generally prefer to keep a greater distance from the military and criticize their governments more readily; this is reflected in their public communication policies. At the same time, many humanitarian organizations in both Europe and the United States cooperate pragmatically with the military at the field level, partly because they need donor funding, partly because they want to address the needs of the local population.[46] In this

43 Lindenberg & Bryant, *op. cit.* (note 18), p. 39.

44 *Ibid*., pp. 11-12.

45 Nevertheless, private funding can also be volatile. Stoddard notes that "after 11 September, private donations to US NGOs dramatically declined as Americans focused on domestic recovery and support for the victims of the attacks. At the same time, however, other factors, notably recession and the plummeting stock market, appear to have been more important in the long run. Thus, in 2000-2001 direct mail was generating half as much revenue for many NGOs than in the previous year." Stoddard, *op. cit*, (note 30), p. 29.

46 See Dijkzeul, *op. cit.* (note 40).

respect, humanitarian organizations are caught between their principles and their own need for organizational survival. They are not in full control of their own agenda, but working with the general public may allow greater independence through fundraising and public support.

Field-level scenarios

The war on terrorism and the concomitant invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq could lead to at least two possible scenarios for the public communication of humanitarian organizations at field level: on the one hand a scenario that emphasizes political control by donor governments and their military forces, in particular by the US forces, but in a situation of high insecurity; on the other a scenario that assumes that donor governments refrain from establishing a higher degree of control, in which case the security situation may be less acute.

Scenario One: Insecurity for humanitarian organizations

Such a scenario is likely to occur with the continuation of the "war on terror" by the Bush Administration.[47] The first problem with the war on terror was that the humanitarian organizations were confronted with a higher degree of political and military control than during the 1990s. As a result, this scenario initially resembled the mental map of the Cold War, with some humanitarian organizations staying close to their respective governments and others upholding the traditional humanitarian principles. Certain NGOs safeguarded their independence, others, especially in the United States, worked — either reluctantly or willingly — more closely with "their" administration. Several French NGOs decided not to enter Iraq. These divergent positions also hampered inter-organizational coordination of the humanitarian organizations in crisis zones, as well as their ability to criticize donor governments in public.[48]

The accompanying high level of insecurity on the ground in both Afghanistan and Iraq, however, currently poses an even greater challenge for the humanitarian organizations present there. They are increasingly unable to operate well in certain areas. ICRC and UN offices have been bombed and staff members of several organizations have been killed, and the UN presence in both Afghanistan and Iraq has been more closely circumscribed than in many other recent crises. Thus humanitarian organizations attempt to avoid military control and simultaneously become the object of local attacks that severely

47 See Chris Johnson, "Afghanistan and the war on terror," in Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer (eds.), *Humanitarian Policy Group Report*, No. 14, July 2003, pp. 49-62, and Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise*, Kumarian, Bloomfield, CT, 2002, pp. 189 ff. (on terrorism and humanitarian action).

48 On the integration of politics and humanitarian action see in particular Nicolas de Torrente, "Humanitarian action under attack: Reflections on the Iraq war," *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, Vol. 17, 2004, pp. 1-29 (warning of the dangers of co-opting humanitarian action by States), and Paul O'Brian, "Politicized humanitarianism: A response to Nicolas de Torrente," *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, Vol. 17, 2004, pp. 31-37, who has doubts about the apolitical character of humanitarian action.

curtail their operations. They display their emblems less prominently or not at all, strengthen the protection of their compounds and often restrict their operations to capitals or safe areas. Many of them have withdrawn their expatriate staff, who now enter the country only for short supervisory visits. Their local staff face heavy pressure from local armed groups. Protecting staff has thus become an overriding concern, sometimes to such an extent that humanitarian assistance is not or is only infrequently delivered. As a result, the mental map empties; humanitarian organizations either cut back on their operations or leave, and consequently no longer apply humanitarian principles consistently.

These tendencies influence fundraising and broader public communication. When international security concerns determine aid priorities, humanitarian organizations are induced "to stimulate other forms of funding and to confront donors regarding funding policies."[49] A higher degree of military and political control will also limit the room for manoeuvre of humanitarian organizations in terms of advocacy and funding. At the same time, "a major gap (…) was the absence [in Iraq] of advocacy and public information campaigns and a communication strategy in local languages to explain the objectives of the UN and wider assistance community (…) as well as the lack of Iraqi media to broadcast such messages."[50] For those organizations still present, such advocacy at field level to explain humanitarian principles, foster local cooperation and increase staff security has gained in importance. But public communications alone will not be enough to relieve the squeeze between political and military control on the one hand and a high level of local insecurity on the other. It seems likely that the violence, especially in extremist forms, will usher in a Somalia-like situation.

Scenario two: Traditional humanitarian action

The second scenario depends very much on how the security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan evolves. Even if military operations do establish sufficiently stable situations there, the risks and usefulness of military control and military invasions in general will nevertheless be subject to more reflection by governing elites.[51] Scaling down such military control would mean a return to a situation similar to that of the mid-1990s, with stronger multilateral action and generally more independent humanitarian organizations, which in turn facilitates more independent public communication strategies.

49 Olga Bornemisza & Tim Poletti, "The war in Iraq: Challenges to neutrality, impartiality and independence," in Dijkzeul, *op. cit.* (note 40), pp. 363-379.

50 Antonio Donini, "The future of humanitarian action. Implications of Iraq and other recent crises (report of an international mapping exercise)," Paper by Feinstein International Famine Center, Friedman School of Nutrition and Policy, Tufts University, Curtis St. Medford, January 2004, p. 9.

51 Yet a full military withdrawal from Iraq would probably embolden terrorists and other extremists elsewhere to carry out acts of violence against humanitarian organizations and their staff. The withdrawal of American troops from Somalia after the killing of American soldiers gave the Rwandan *génocidaires* an incentive to kill Belgian UN soldiers in order to make the Belgian contingent leave.

If insecurity then decreases — which is in many ways a moot question — traditional humanitarian principles will then also be more easily upheld. Operationally, expatriate staff will probably remain more often in crisis zones, but humanitarian organizations may still want to work more with local staff because they cost less, know the cultural habits and customs and speak the local languages. Similarly, the long-term trend towards working with local NGOs, for instance Islamic ones, will continue, but at a slower pace. Greater respect will probably be shown for humanitarian emblems and compounds, but improved local public communication will still be useful, including advocacy both of the goals and principles of humanitarian assistance and to promote staff security.

Scenario three: Mid-way situation

It is possible that both scenarios may occur simultaneously. In high-profile crises the first scenario may come to dominate; in more silent emergencies the second scenario may take over, with donor governments and their military forces perhaps playing only a limited role or none at all. This combined scenario amounts to a two-tier system of humanitarian assistance, in which different mental maps will be used depending on the type of crisis and the level of insecurity. Humanitarian organizations will then have to fight hard to raise public attention for silent emergencies.

Regardless of the scenario chosen, it is clear that when international security concerns dominate the humanitarian agenda, it is even more challenging to uphold the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Humanitarian public communication then becomes much more difficult.

Conclusion

It is ironic that humanitarian organizations should still need to communicate more transparently about their own public communication strategies and outcomes. Care should therefore be taken in drawing conclusions about humanitarian public communication policies and their effectiveness, for many organizations provide only limited information about their communication activities and impact. It is nevertheless useful to distinguish between field-level, federation and central communication policies, as well as to understand the main US-European differences. All in all, humanitarian organizations seem to be professionalizing their public communication management.

This article reinforces the argument that humanitarian organizations and their staff members must understand the meaning of the basic principles of humanitarian action, be able to articulate which of these principles govern their activities, and act accordingly. Public communication strategies can play an important part in this respect both at "home" and in the field.

Just as organizations differ in the practical application of their principles, they also differ in their public communication policies. The ICRC and

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW of the Red Cross

MSF tend to protect their independence and are not likely to establish official alliances with other humanitarian organizations, let alone private enterprises, with their public campaigns. Other organizations, such as Oxfam and CARE, are more likely to work jointly on such campaigns or form partnerships with private enterprises. Interestingly, these are also the organizations that do more developmental work. UN organizations cannot be as independent as NGOs because they need to follow official UN policies. In particular, Security Council resolutions can constrain them. Finally, religious organizations range from the sectarian to large professionalized organizations. They tend to cluster towards the solidarity pole, but once they grow and professionalize more, they tend to stress impartiality and independence more strongly. This is currently happening with the larger Islamic humanitarian organizations.

One of the central organizational and public communication issues is the extent to which organizations can gain or protect their independence from donor governments and the military. Usually, the ICRC and MSF carefully preserve their independence by keeping away from other players, but with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan this has become a fundamental strategic issue for many humanitarian organizations, especially for those based in the United States. In addition, food aid organizations have a harder time protecting their independence than medical relief organizations because the cost of providing large-scale food aid makes them more dependent on donor resources.

Importantly, growing insecurity at field level also necessitates better structured local communication policies and activities to distinguish humanitarian organizations from the military and private subcontractors, and to explain the humanitarian principles and activities in more detail. This constitutes one of the main humanitarian public communication challenges of the near future.

In the final analysis, it is essential for humanitarian organizations to perceive communication as a strategic management function. Adopting a coherent approach in public communication is the best way to put over the complexity of emergencies and conflicts, gain support for the victims of conflict, address insecurity and protect organizational independence. This is particularly important against a backdrop of growing scrutiny by media and other players, and of the misinformation and rumours that are common in wars. Of course, much will depend on the scenarios chosen by donor governments, for they steer humanitarian action with their funding requirements, their military deployment and their policies towards multilateral institutions. Nonetheless, humanitarian organizations can enhance their room to manoeuvre, as the ICRC and MSF examples show. They can attempt to influence government decisions to some extent by engaging in campaigns, advocacy and public fundraising. When organizations achieve, in particular, better communication with other stakeholders and the general public, they will be better able to safeguard their independence and reach the victims of conflict.