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## Humanitarianism and peace: On the (im-)possible inclusion of humanitarian assistance into peacebuilding efforts

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**P 01 – 306**

**Humanitarianism and Peace**

**On the (im-)possible inclusion of humanitarian  
assistance into peacebuilding efforts**

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Als Reaktion auf innerstaatliche Konflikte und den in diesem Umfeld oft zu beobachtenden Missbrauch humanitärer Hilfe nach Ende des Kalten Krieges entstand die Forderung nach einer Einbindung humanitärer Hilfe in Peacebuilding-Strategien. Die bisherige Diskussion um solch ein synergetisches Vorgehen hat die Charakteristika humanitärer Organisationen dabei jedoch weitgehend ignoriert. Dieser Artikel geht der Frage nach, inwiefern eine Koalition aus humanitärer Hilfe und Peacebuilding machbar erscheint angesichts der Spezifika von Hilfsorganisationen. Ausgehend vom Konzept des Peacebuilding werden drei, für eine mögliche Einbindung humanitärer Hilfe in Peacebuilding wesentliche Faktoren diskutiert: Erstens, die Vereinbarkeit der Ziele und Motivationen von humanitärer Hilfe und Peacebuilding, zweitens, die von Hilfsorganisationen vorgenommene Positionierung der eigenen Arbeit in Bezug zu politischen Akteuren und zum politischen Umfeld und drittens, die Fähigkeit zur Analyse des politischen Umfelds humanitärer Hilfe. Diese Diskussion macht zum einen die Heterogenität humanitärer Akteure deutlich und kommt insgesamt zu dem Ergebnis, dass eine Einbindung humanitärer Hilfe in Peacebuilding nur äußerst begrenzt möglich ist.

## **Abstract**

The nature of intra-state conflicts and the political manipulation of humanitarian aid in the 1990s has led to the popular postulate that humanitarianism has to be included as an instrument for peacebuilding efforts. So far, the debate surrounding such a linkage has largely ignored the nature and behaviour of aid agencies. This paper focuses on the feasibility of including humanitarian action into peacebuilding strategies by taking a closer look at the reality of humanitarian organisations. Based upon the concept of peacebuilding, three sets of prerequisites for successfully combining humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts will be discussed: the compatibility of the objectives pursued in humanitarianism and peacebuilding, the perception of politics by aid agencies, and their capacity to analyse the political context of aid. The analysis highlights the heterogeneity of humanitarian actors and concludes that their contribution to peacebuilding can only be very limited.

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of academic reflection on humanitarian aid, the debate has focused on the relation between humanitarianism and politics. Further discussing this connection, however, has become redundant. As Nicholas Leader states (2000:15): “Saying that humanitarian action is political is like saying orange is a colour, true, but not very illuminating”.

The basic assumption that humanitarian aid has an impact on the political context in which it is being given has led to the postulate of embedding humanitarianism in peacebuilding strategies. Such a strategy has been advocated by two sides. First, intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union have argued in favour of linking humanitarian assistance to peacebuilding efforts (Boutros-Ghali 1992, European Commission 1996), by pointing to the necessity of co-ordinating peacebuilding efforts in intra-state conflicts in the post-Cold War era. It is argued that humanitarian organisations, especially NGOs, have a significant part to play in the peacebuilding process considering their specific “comparative advantages”, such as local expertise, close links to local actors, better geographical access and the respect for impartiality (Egeland, 1999:77). These are valuable characteristics which political and government institutions do hardly have.

Secondly, the linkage of humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding has been postulated by scholars as a reaction to the increasing criticism of humanitarian aid in the 1990s, blaming aid to support war instead of peace (see, for example, De Waal, 1997). The nature of armed conflicts in the post-Cold War era entails that humanitarian aid is given in a highly politicised context in which aid agencies are vulnerable to abuse and manipulation. Therefore, if aid agencies wish to “do no harm”, they have to focus on developing “capacities for peace” (Anderson, 1996, 1999).

Hence, the issue of linking humanitarianism to peacebuilding strategies has been analysed and proposed mainly by governmental actors and academic observers. The nature and behaviour of aid agencies, however, is largely ignored in this predominantly normative debate. Thus, our question is not whether humanitarian aid *should* be linked to peace but whether it *can* fulfil this task provided the characteristics of relief organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of this paper has been presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Pan-European International Relations Conference, 8-10 September 2001, University of Kent at Canterbury.



Three sets of prerequisites for successfully embedding humanitarianism in peacebuilding are identified and discussed with regard to the reality of aid agencies. This will lead us to the overall conclusion that humanitarian organisations can play an important role in civilising processes; their contribution to peacebuilding efforts, however, can only be very limited.

## **2. Prerequisites for a humanitarianism/peacebuilding coalition**

In order to measure the contribution humanitarian assistance can potentially make to peacebuilding strategies we need to take a closer look at the concept of peacebuilding.

Originally, the term was part of a three-pronged theory of peace - elaborated by Johan Galtung and later reaffirmed by then UN General Secretary Boutros-Ghali (1992) - that distinguishes between peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding (Galtung, 1976). The distinctive features of this theory were concerned with the objective, the procedure, the target groups and the actors involved.

As opposed to peacemaking and peacekeeping, which aim to establish *negative* peace (i.e. the absence of war), the objective of peacebuilding is *positive* peace built “around such ideas as ‘harmony’, ‘co-operation’ and ‘integration’” (Galtung, 1985:145). Using Galtung’s terms, negative peace is the absence of *direct* violence whereas positive peace as the overall objective of peacebuilding efforts means the absence of *structural* violence (Galtung, 1976: 297). In short, peacebuilding seeks “to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war” (UN 2000: 3). In addition, peacebuilding is not limited to post-conflict scenarios but also aims at the prevention of violence (Cockell, 1998:206).

As for the procedure, the more classical approach of peacekeeping is basically dissociative aiming at keeping the antagonists of a conflict away from each other. Peacebuilding, by contrast, is an associative approach that addresses the root causes of a conflict and tries to promote dialogue, mutual trust, and integration (see Galtung, 1976:297-304). It follows from this that peacebuilding “involves a shift of focus away from the warriors, with whom peacekeepers are mainly concerned, to the attitudes and socioeconomic circumstances of ordinary people” (Ryan, 1990:61). Finally, whereas in peacekeeping and peacemaking external actors

are the main players involved, the success of peacebuilding as a self-supporting conflict resolution largely depends on the involvement of internal actors.

These characteristics of peacebuilding lead us to identify three sets of prerequisites for successfully combining humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts: the compatibility of the objectives pursued by humanitarian agencies and peacebuilding missions, the perception of politics by aid agencies, and their capacity to analyse the political context of aid.

The first set of prerequisites concerns an aid agency's primary objectives. Peacebuilding addresses the underlying causes of a conflict, namely "economic despair, social injustice, and political oppression" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992, paragraph 15). Accordingly, peacebuilding tools include economic rehabilitation, the provision of equal access to basic goods, and the abolition of dominance. Peacebuilding to a certain extent means democratisation, since democracy "not only opens the space for nonviolent political competition, but also helps to sustain the balanced distribution of power that underpins the peace process" (Boyce, 2000:373-374; also see Galtung, 1976:300). Humanitarianism has to share these goals if it is to play a significant peacebuilding role. With regard to the nature of peacebuilding, aid agencies must be willing to undertake long-term projects addressing the root causes of violence by aiming at structural changes. In more concrete terms, aid agencies should be willing and able to get involved in the (re-)construction of the socioeconomic framework of war-torn societies.

The second set of prerequisites derives from the definition of peacebuilding as a political exercise involving a wide range of actors. Even if we assume that long-term rehabilitation and development projects are constitutive elements of peacebuilding strategies, it is important to note that "peacebuilding should not be confused with regular, longer-term development programs" (Cockell, 1998:206). Development aid addresses issues that can be seen as being apolitical such as poverty, resource scarcity, unemployment and so forth. Peacebuilding, by contrast, focuses on the distribution of scarce resources and the equal access to goods, i.e. issues "that are fundamentally *political* in nature, even if there are aspects of the conflict (such as land tenure, water-sharing) which do not initially admit of overtly political character" (Cockell, 1998:207; emphasis in original). Since peacebuilding, as noted above, addresses recognition and governance issues, it is by its very nature a political exercise. Aid has an economic as well as political impact in war-torn societies and is therefore seen as an important actor in this political exercise. Boyce (2000:367) argues:

“(...) aid affects not only the size of the economic pie and how it is sliced, but also the balance of power among competing actors and the rules of the game by which they compete. (...) the political impacts of aid can help to decide whether the peace endures or war resumes.”

Therefore, we have to discuss in how far humanitarian organisations can be part of such a political strategy by identifying, first, their willingness to co-operate with political and governmental actors and, second, by taking a closer look at to how humanitarian agencies perceive their relation with politics.

Finally, peacebuilding can be described as “a comprehensive learning process” (Paffenholz, 2001:535), since “there are no set patterns or models applicable to every conflict” (Rupesinghe, 1998:139). Any actor involved in peacebuilding efforts has to shape its engagement according to the specific conflict situation. Hartzell, Hoddie, and Rothchild (2001), for instance, argue that any peacebuilding engagement requires a three-fold analysis that focuses on the characteristics of the country, the conflict itself, and the settlement arrangements. Beside such an ad-hoc analysis the evaluation of past experience largely determines an actor’s peacebuilding capacity. In short, an aid agency’s capacity and willingness to analyse and to learn is the third set of prerequisites crucial for estimating the impact of humanitarian aid to peacebuilding efforts.

We will now discuss how well humanitarian organisations pass these three hurdles: the compatibility of their objectives with the goals pursued in peacebuilding, the perception of politics by aid agencies, and their capacity to analyse the political context of aid.

### 3. Objectives

Integrating a humanitarian organisation into peacebuilding efforts requires, first, that the organisation think of its humanitarian work as being related to the abolition of structural violence in the economic, social, and political sphere. Secondly, due to the nature of peacebuilding, an aid agency has to be willing to pursue long-term goals and structural change.

#### 3.1 Ethical framework

The ethical framework of an aid agency is complex and hard to define. A distinction, however, can be made between organisations that “locate their core values firmly in the struggle against poverty” as opposed to those who seek “the amelioration and restraint of war” (Slim/McConnan, 1998:3). According to Slim and McConnan, there is no causal link between an agency’s ethical framework and its original area of intervention. Leader (2000), on the other hand, distinguishes between aid agencies dedicated specifically to humanitarian work in the context of war and those who initially confined their mandate to emergency work in response to natural disasters. Without determining the exact relation between an aid agency’s ethical framework and its original field of activity, it is obvious that different ethical frameworks go along with different sets of objectives concerning humanitarian action. Slim and McConnan (1998:4) identify

“(…) a fundamental rub between the value of social justice (...) and humanitarianism. The former usually seeks the re-ordering of society into a new society while the latter seeks the restraint of the existing society in war. The (...) goal of political and social *change* is thus more essentially structural than the more interim ethic of political and military *restraint* of humanitarianism” (emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup>

With regard to their ethical framework aid agencies clearly do not share a common set of values which each other. Moreover, the classical humanitarian objective to help the victims of war according to the principles of International Humanitarian Law is *per se* more difficult to include in peacebuilding strategies than a welfare conception adhered to by a number of aid agencies.

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<sup>2</sup> In spite of these ethical differences that, according to Slim and McConnan (1998), only qualify one type of aid agencies as “humanitarian“, we will use the term “humanitarian“ and “aid“ organisation synonymously for describing organisations that provide food, water, shelter and/or medical care.

### 3.2 Long-term goals and structural change

In order to be a capable actor in peacebuilding strategies, an aid agency must be willing to achieve long-term goals and structural change. Mary B. Anderson (1999:146) states that “aid workers should try to identify local capacities for peace and connectors and design their aid programs to support and reinforce them.” As successful cases she mentions food for work programmes, educational projects, and rehabilitation programmes in agriculture, health, education, and water as well as the dissemination of International Humanitarian Law in a number of countries (Anderson, 1999). This short list already illustrates the fundamental problem that lies in peacebuilding as a humanitarian objective: supporting “capacities for peace” means the pursuit of long-term projects including rehabilitation and development programmes. Yet, such a field of activity collides with the classical understanding of humanitarian action as a means to provide short-term emergency relief in order to save human lives (see, for example, Brauman, 1995; Slim, 2001; Eberwein, 2001a).<sup>3</sup> Evidently, the discussion on humanitarianism and peacebuilding is closely related to the debate on linking relief, rehabilitation, and development (see European Commission, 1996).

In examining the reality of humanitarian work, no clear distinction between relief, rehabilitation, and development can be made that allows one to clearly assign one field of activity to a certain type of organisation. Doctors Without Borders (MSF), for instance, is usually named a “classical” relief agency. In the year 2000, however, the French section of MSF spent a considerable portion of its operational expenditures (about 38%) on mid- and long-term missions (support of health facilities, psychological assistance, projects for street children).<sup>3</sup> Yet the assumption that every humanitarian organisation is *per se* willing to undertake long-term projects and to seek structural change is misleading. Aid agencies are active in different sectors depending on the situational context. In North Korea, for instance, MSF failed to establish emergency relief programmes and therefore decided to leave the country. MSF now criticises the NGOs still present in the country not for providing aid to the population of North Korea (mostly agricultural rehabilitation projects). What MSF criticises is that these organisations call their aid “humanitarian”. This term is, in the MSF perspective, reserved for short-term emergency aid.

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<sup>3</sup> The geographical spread shows that mid- and long-term projects are merely undertaken in countries where either no emergency situation can be detected (e.g. Cambodia, China or Peru) or where this kind of project goes along with emergency relief (South Sudan). Médecins Sans Frontières (2001): *Rapport financier. Comptes 2000*. Paris: Médecins Sans Frontières.

The North Korea experience illustrates that - however artificial the distinction between relief, rehabilitation, and development might be - the activity in one sector or another reflects each agency's ethical framework. This ethical framework may or may not be compatible with peacebuilding. Therefore, the willingness to provide societal change through long-term projects as an important prerequisite for peacebuilding, cannot be taken for granted.

It is noteworthy that the willingness to provide structural and societal change seems to coincide with an ethical framework that opposes poverty to welfare but not war to peace. On the other hand, the humanitarian ethic that derives from war is related to short-term relief objectives. Thus, so far it seems that the more development oriented group of aid agencies fulfils the first set of prerequisites for being an effective actor in peacebuilding initiatives.

## **4. The perception of politics**

As noted earlier, peacebuilding is a fundamentally political exercise implemented by a wide range of external and internal actors. Under these conditions the question to pose is how far are humanitarian organisations willing to co-operate with political and governmental actors. We will now take a closer look at their perception of humanitarian work in relation to politics.

### **4.1 Conceptualisation of neutrality**

Aid cannot promote peace on its own but has to be part of a wider strategy including political and governmental actors. As Donini (1998:94) states: "We cannot wait for peace in order to start reconstruction. We must take conflict for granted and integrate humanitarian action and development with politics." Thus, the inclusion of humanitarian action in peacebuilding efforts requires that humanitarian agencies be willing to co-operate with those actors traditionally involved in peacebuilding - political and governmental actors.

Authors who argue in favour of the humanitarianism/peacebuilding coalition identify the lack of co-ordination between NGOs and governmental actors as "the greatest obstacle" (Egeland, 1999:77). An agency's willingness to co-operate with political actors is primarily determined by their understanding of neutrality as a classical principle of humanitarian action.

Their perception of their own neutrality defines an aid agency's position towards politics and political actors.

Neutrality has been a highly contested issue among scholars as well as among aid agencies. Leader states that "the most significant discussions, disagreements, confusions and conceptual developments have been around the idea of neutrality" (2000: 19). He distinguishes between the classical conception of neutrality as a necessary means to protect the rights of non-combatants ("neutrality elevated") and an explicitly political humanitarianism that contributes to political objectives ("neutrality abandoned"). The third concept he describes is a "Third-way humanitarianism" which involves initiating constructive social change while upholding the imperative of not taking sides (Leader, 2000:20, 21).

The main point to be made here is that the willingness to co-operate with political actors for peacebuilding objectives appears incompatible with the traditional concept of neutral humanitarianism. The classical understanding of neutrality sees any subordination to political goals and institutions as a risk to the main task, which is the alleviation of suffering (see, among others, Götze, 1999; Eberwein, 2001a). In this vision, peace is regarded as an ultimate goal and a universal ideal. Peacebuilding by contrast, as defined above, has to be understood as the promotion of "a particular peace" (Slim/McConnan, 1998:22) that deals with political alliances and political interests. Thus, in the perspective of "neutrality elevated", peacebuilding is seen as a political goal that should be achieved by others than humanitarian actors. In short, agencies adhering to the classical concept of neutrality "see humanitarian aid as for the relief of suffering only rather than also having a developmental or peacebuilding role" (Leader, 2000:20).

In North Korea, for instance, the promotion of peace as an objective by humanitarian NGOs is highly contested among the aid agencies involved. In spite of South Korean NGOs claiming to include the terms "reconciliation" and "peace" in the final report of an international NGO meeting, no such passage is to be found in the final draft.<sup>4</sup> Western NGOs successfully argued that these terms imply a political engagement which has to be kept off from humanitarian action.

The second concept, the abandonment of neutrality in favour of an explicitly political humanitarianism can be neglected here, since it stems from academic concepts and donor in-

terests (see Leader, 2000) rather than reflecting the conceptual background of aid agencies, which is the focus of this study. The third type of neutrality, however, finds some support among humanitarian NGOs which seem to be more open to co-operation with political actors, has to be discussed in greater detail.

“Third-way humanitarianism” does not regard neutrality as an obligation to stay away from political goals and strategies. In this perspective neutrality simply means that aid workers should refrain from taking sides in a conflict. The principle of neutrality is still upheld but more importance is attached to a common strategy and to co-operative efforts with political and governmental actors. As noted above, these categorisations are ideal types that cannot necessarily be applied one-to-one to the reality of aid agencies. Nevertheless, even if one ignores the alleged incompatibility of the “Do-no-harm”-approach with the principle of neutrality - seen as outmoded by some, regarded as indispensable by others - still one question remains unanswered. Does the willingness to co-operate with politics go along with a political consciousness that situates humanitarian action as being part of a wider, political strategy? “The conceptualisation of politics in this position is the hardest to pin down”, according to Leader (2000:21). Duffield adds that “development relief has a different understanding of conflict; in a sense it has no understanding at all” (1998:70). After having discussed the willingness to co-operate we now have to focus on the political consciousness of humanitarian organisations.

#### **4.2 The political/non-political divide**

As noted above, an agency’s definition of neutrality determines its position on co-operation with political actors. It is, however, not necessarily related to an agency’s conception of its own role towards politics. A peacebuilding role is, at heart, a political role, consequently, a humanitarian organisation has to think of its work as being interlinked to the political environment of a humanitarian crisis.

As noted earlier, saying that humanitarian work has political consequences and, thus, is political, is redundant. Aid agencies, however, do not describe their work as being political, nor do they openly claim to be political actors. This is illustrated by Jean Pictet’s often quoted description of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) that “like a swimmer, is

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<sup>4</sup> See *Report of the Third International NGO Conference on Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea. Cooperative Efforts beyond Food Aid. Final Report*. 20 June 2001. Yong In (Republic of Korea).



in politics up to its neck. Also like the swimmer, who advances in the water but who drowns if he swallows it, the ICRC must reckon with politics without becoming a part of it” (quoted in Minear, 1999a:66). It may be counterproductive to the objectives of a humanitarian organisation to assert that it is political. “The trick then is not to believe one’s own propaganda”, as Leader adds, even though aid organisations do “believe their own propaganda and continue to think of themselves as in some ways non-political” (Leader, 2000:50).

Nevertheless, some considerable differences concerning aid agencies’ political self-conception become evident when it comes to the delicate issue of speaking out about human rights violation witnessed by aid workers. Often discussed in relation to the principle of neutrality (see Minear, 1999a) this issue illustrates to a certain extent how far a humanitarian actor thinks of himself as non-political, i.e. as working in a sphere that is distinct from politics. In fact, the practice of not denouncing human rights violations is often justified by an agency’s conviction that humanitarian work is non-political, carried out by non-political actors who’s function is to provide help to the needy without getting involved with politics. In such a perspective, public denunciation of human rights violation is a task that has to be fulfilled by others. Consequently, aid agencies that do not share this conviction are often criticised for being a human rights organisation rather than a humanitarian agency.

The willingness to closely co-operate with political actors and an aid agency’s perception of humanitarian action as a political activity have been identified as important prerequisites of successfully embedding humanitarianism in peacebuilding efforts. In both respects, considerable differences between aid agencies are obvious. The classical understanding of neutrality derived from war sees humanitarianism as intertwined with politics but puts strong emphasis on the principle of independence from it. This hinders close co-operation between aid and politics. By contrast, a more recent and flexible conceptualisation of neutrality, theoretically allows co-operation with politics but is linked to the perception of humanitarian action as being outside the political sphere. Therefore, the willingness to co-operate with political actors goes along with the conviction of being non-political.

Taking into account the differences with regard to the first set of prerequisites - the ethical framework and the willingness to provide longer-term structural change – it has to be added that the preparedness to provide structural change is related to a flexible understanding of

of neutrality and a self-understanding of being a non-political actor. In other words, the more an organisation is willing to reckon with politics, the less prepared it is to provide structural change in collaboration with political institutions.

The conviction of being a non-political actor - often criticised and put on a par with political naivety (see, for a summary, Leader, 2000:20) - clearly inhibits the inclusion of humanitarian action in the political strategy of peacebuilding. The term of political naivety points at an issue that is often described as a weak point of humanitarianism: the capacity to analyse the political context of aid.

## **5. Learning processes**

As noted earlier, aid agencies have to understand the political environment in which they act in order to address the problems and obstacles they are confronted with in their humanitarian work. Political naivety on the part of aid agencies leaves them open to manipulation and makes it difficult to include humanitarianism in the essentially political strategy of peacebuilding. Without identifying the causes of a conflict it is impossible to pave the way to peace. More precisely, relief agencies “should be aware of socio-economic disparities and gender-related issues; understand the prevailing disparities and security environment; and be able to analyze and build upon local strengths and coping mechanisms” (Smillie. 1998:54).

### **5.1 Capacity to learn**

The capacity to analyse the political context of a humanitarian crisis is closely related to the willingness to learn from past experiences. However, most case studies that focus on relief activities conclude that aid agencies lack the capacity to learn. More than 20 years ago Taylor and Cuny wrote: “Deliberate and conscious learning from experience is not part of the non-profit welfare tradition” (1979:37). Essentially, this finding does not seem to have lost much of its validity (see Shawcross, 1984; Van Brabant/Killick, 1999; Terry, 2000; Schloms, 2000).

NGOs seem to deny the necessity to learn by arguing that every crisis is unique. To a certain extent, this point is legitimate. However, each crisis involves a similar set of aid institutions (United Nations, Red Cross, NGOs) that have to deal with a similar set of problems

and obstacles, i.e. denial of access, manipulation of aid, etc. In some cases, the parallels between situations are particularly striking. As Minear (1999b:310) observes: “The manipulation of belligerent and criminal elements of the refugee camps in eastern Zaire in 1994 was a rerun of problems unaddressed in Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai border years before.” Generally speaking, the dilemma of humanitarian action reoccurs whenever aid is being given in a highly politicised environment. Ignoring similar precedent cases means that aid agencies have to reinvent the wheel over and over again.

The “overemphasis on the idiosyncratic” (Minear, 1999b:310) does not, however, give fruit to an operational approach designed to cope with the particular necessities of every crisis. A certain inappropriateness of aid projects is often identified in evaluation programmes. Smillie, for instance, states (1998:53): “Inappropriate blueprint-type reconstruction and rehabilitation programs continue to abound, in part because of the absence of institutional learning.” In short, a lack of learning processes has been detected as a striking feature among aid agencies by various authors. So, what are the organisational characteristics of humanitarian organisations that seem to thwart learning processes?

Two basic observations can be made. Firstly, it is the very nature of humanitarianism to be *reactive*. Unlike a private company selling a specific product and being able to *actively* influence the demand through marketing strategies or technological innovations, giving aid is purely responsive to the needs of a population. Therefore, humanitarian staff has to cope with fast-evolving ad hoc situations that hardly leave time for reflection. This “hyperactive pace” (Minear, 1999b:310), stemming from the very nature of humanitarianism, evidently limits the capacity to learn from own experience.

Secondly, high staff turnover is a characteristic of the vast majority of aid organisations. Usually, expatriate staff is employed only for a certain period of time in a given mission. A study on major French humanitarian NGOs, for instance, estimates that 40 percent to 70% of the personnel leaves the organisation after having worked as an expatriate on one project (Davis, 1999). It is hard to find senior aid workers who have spent all their work life in one single organisation. It seems to be common use to try out agencies until one finds the organisation that best suits one’s own expectations. Consequently, for those who have a critical view on an agency’s approach it is more convenient to leave the organisation than it is to try to achieve some change within the agency. It goes without saying that both factors - the high

staff turnover as well as the loss of unsatisfied and critical personnel - have a negative impact upon an organisation's learning capacity.

Is the lack of learning processes intrinsic to humanitarianism? If we assume that humanitarianism as a response to temporary needs is a stressful job that does not allow to take a step back and to reflect and that necessarily requires the short-term employment of staff, then the absence of institutional learning has to be taken for granted, has to be accepted as a *force majeure*. Learning from the past, as outlined above, is closely linked to the capacity to analyse the political context in which humanitarian aid is being given, a capacity which, in turn, is an essential prerequisite for playing a peacebuilding role. In order to determine whether some remedies to the constraints to learning can be detected, organisational learning theory provides some helpful insight.

## 5.2 Willingness to learn

According to a classical definition, organisational learning describes the process of “responding to changes in the internal and external environments of the organization by detecting and correcting errors in organizational theory-in-use, and embedding the results (...) in private images and shared maps of the organization” (Argyris/Schön, 1978:29). We describe “results” as “information” and the process of “embedding the results” in images and maps as “knowledge”. In other words, organisational learning comprises, first, the acquisition of knowledge by a group of individuals, second, its diffusion to the organisational level and third, the storage in an institutional memory from where it can be distributed again to individual members of the organisation (“phase model”)<sup>5</sup>.

Analysing the acquisition of knowledge by the individual aid worker is largely a psychological task that goes beyond the scope of this paper. We will discuss the second and third phase, i.e. the diffusion and storage of knowledge, since these phases relate to the organisational level.

The diffusion of knowledge is essentially a matter of communication between the individual and the organisation. However, this communication seems to be highly problematic

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<sup>5</sup> The phase model has been criticised by authors who regard learning processes as part of working processes in which innovation plays a key role (see, for an overview on the debate, Berthoin Antal, 1998; Berthoin Antal/Dierkes, 2000). For the purpose of this paper, however, the phase model seems to be an appropriate concept to describe the characteristics of aid agencies.

inside humanitarian organisations. This is in part due to the unique organisational structure of humanitarian agencies. They usually consist of a stable, organised, and more or less hierarchical headquarters that controls and co-ordinates remote groups of staff in the field which are composed for a limited period of time. Evidently, this ever changing twin-structure (see Davis, 1999) hampers communication and the transfer of knowledge, particularly during the course of a project. Thus, the diffusion of knowledge from the individual to the organisational level and *vice versa* is facilitated whenever both levels directly communicate with each other. These opportunities (briefing and debriefing of expatriate staff), however, are rarely used. Usually, aid workers report that they have not been sufficiently prepared for their missions and complain that headquarters shows little interest in the gained experiences once an individual term has ended. Thus, institutionalised diffusion of knowledge is rarely found (see Bronner, 1999, Davis, 1999).

The third phase, the storage of knowledge on an organisational level, is another weak point of humanitarian organisations. Documentation centers or research units inside humanitarian NGOs that gather, evaluate, and diffuse gained experiences are rare. Providing and educating staff for learning processes is expensive. Furthermore, according to the prevailing humanitarian logic, all available money should be spent on the direct alleviation of human suffering. Finally, aid agencies depend on private donations and public funds that are received by pointing out needs on one side, and the agency's ability to fulfil those needs on the other. The capacity to learn, by contrast, has no marketing appeal. On the contrary, minimal administrative costs are seen as a big plus among donors and thus, among aid organisations as well. In a case study on humanitarian action in Afghanistan, for instance, Van Brabant and Killick (1999:6) state:

“Greater emphasis on finer conflict analysis, on more sophisticated forms of interaction with conflict entrepreneurs, on skillful negotiations, on strategic coordination, on local peacebuilding and the like, requires not only highly qualified staff but is also intensive in staff time investment. Yet budget considerations remain inspired by a now outmoded ‘commodity logic’ that allocates staff expenses to ‘overhead’ and seeks to keep ‘overhead’ to the absolute minimum.”

The lack of learning processes is thus, not only related to the nature of humanitarian work. A certain reluctance to dedicate financial resources to develop learning mechanisms and institutional memory is obvious. Therefore, the lack of learning processes cannot be totally ascribed to the specific activity and structure of aid agencies as a *force majeure*. The absence of learn-

ing processes cannot be entirely blamed on a structural lack of capacity; a lack of willingness, too, seems to play a role. The unwillingness to dedicate financial resources in order to store and diffuse knowledge – at least in part out of respect for donors – gives a hint as to the fundamental obstacle to learning processes inside humanitarianism: the perception of responsibility.

With regard to the general characteristics of humanitarianism much has been written on the “defensiveness toward criticism” (Minear, 1999b:311), a “fear of, and a consequent aversion to, evaluation” (Smillie, 1998:53) reflecting a “culture of justification” which is due to a “logic of institutional preservation” (Terry, 2000). In fact, openly questioning the success of an aid project means to put future funds at risk. Any doubt that is expressed with regard to a certain practice or approach potentially weakens an agency’s position towards donors. Unlike private companies that are obliged, first and foremost, to meet the demands of their clients, the survival of aid agencies does not depend on the decision of their beneficiaries. The capacity to learn from past experience is decisive to the survival of a business company. The same incentive cannot be found in humanitarianism. At least not in the short-run. In the first place, humanitarian organisations see responsibility as accountability to their donors.

As a result, the inclusion of humanitarian work into peacebuilding strategies depends to a certain extent on the establishment of new procedures of accountability in order to strengthen learning mechanisms (also see Eberwein, 2001b). A recent trend towards the evaluation of humanitarian assistance can be observed. This proliferation of “lessons learned units”, however, does not go along with a new understanding of accountability. On the contrary, this development – largely originated from donor pressure after the experience in the Great Lakes region – has led to further strengthening humanitarianism’s accountability to the donor side. The idea of establishing an ombudsman for the beneficiaries in a humanitarian mission, as developed by a consortium of British NGOs (see Doane, 1999), finds only few support. Moreover, the lack of institutional learning mechanisms, as outlined above, is not addressed by these evaluation studies, since these studies are mainly executed by external agencies. In some cases this might be helpful, the establishment of learning mechanisms inside the organisations, however, is not achieved. Thus, Minear and Weiss conclude: “The rush to create lessons learned units is not to be confused with the learning of lessons. To the extent that many of the so-called lessons remain relegated to file drawers, the idea is a perversion of the concept of learning” (quoted in Smillie, 1998:56).

Finally, beside the question *how* organisations learn, the question *what* they learn is equally crucial. Evaluations so far analyse the experience made in the field and tend to ignore organisational frameworks and procedures of aid agencies (see Wood, Apthorpe and Borton, 2001:210). Moreover, most of the evaluation efforts focus on the operational, technical side of humanitarian work. In other words, information is gathered without creating knowledge (see Smillie, 1998:56). Knowledge in the sense of “embedding the results in private images and shared maps of the organization” means to analyse the operational experience in relation to the normative framework of an aid agency, to the principles of action.

In fact, some agencies do discuss and question their principles of action on the basis of past experience. In his analysis of the willingness of aid agencies to discuss issues of principles, Leader observed that some agencies “were on the whole more interested in, and articulate about, issues of humanitarian principles and often took the lead in the development of the mechanisms under discussion”; others “were less concerned with, or interested in, the mechanisms” (2000:42). Again, discussing the prerequisites for including humanitarianism in peacebuilding strategies has revealed considerable differences among humanitarian actors.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The debate surrounding humanitarianism as a player in peacebuilding is largely of a normative nature, which focuses on the desirability of a common approach for the benefit of durable peace. Questioning the feasibility of such a common strategy, however, has identified numerous obstacles related to the very nature of humanitarian organisations. Three major conditions have been discussed that aid agencies theoretically have to fulfil in order to support peacebuilding:

1. The **objectives** of humanitarian action need to include the abolition of structural violence and the promotion of positive peace by means of mid- and long-term rehabilitation.
2. Aid agencies must be willing to co-operate with political and governmental actors. This is based upon a perception of humanitarian aid as being closely interlinked to the political context in which it is being given (**perception of politics**).

3. Humanitarian organisations need to be **willing and capable to analyse the political context** of a humanitarian crisis and to learn from past experience.

The analysis of the nature and behaviour of aid agencies has led to two main findings. First, considerable differences among humanitarian organisations have been revealed that concern each of the criteria mentioned above. Humanitarian NGOs are often referred to as a “community” suggesting a homogenous group sharing the same approaches and principles. But the perception of the sense, the environment, and the history of humanitarian action differs to an extent that does not allow to speak of a common identity. Heterogeneity, however, seems to be the striking feature among aid agencies reflecting “cultures that never meet” (Leader, 2000: 42). It is noteworthy that the academic discourse – including the discussion on the humanitarianism/peacebuilding coalition – largely ignores this heterogeneity, whereas aid agencies themselves seem to highlight, not to say exaggerate, these differences.<sup>6</sup> It goes without saying that the heterogeneity characterising humanitarian organisations renders it difficult to identify a common conceptual basis, allowing for a systematic linkage between humanitarianism and peacebuilding.

Secondly and even more importantly, the prerequisites for including humanitarian action in peacebuilding contravene the reality of humanitarianism. An aid agency that primarily seeks to restrain violence and to promote peace, that is willing to provide structural and societal change, prepared to co-operate with governmental and political actors for the benefit of a common political strategy, and that, finally, is willing and able to analyse the political context of its action, is an illusion. If an agency fulfils some of these conditions it will very likely not satisfy others. Political consciousness seems to be linked to a strict conceptualisation of neutrality hindering any institutional co-operation with governmental actors. The goal of structural change does not coincide with a political consciousness and a sufficient capacity to analyse the political context of a crisis.

Leader (2000) distinguishes “food agencies” from “health agencies”, thus describing the activity profile as the main distinctive feature. Others argue that the heterogeneity is primarily based on differing philosophical backgrounds, opposing a charity or philanthropy based hu-

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<sup>6</sup> See Slim/McConnan (1998:19): “In most maps, agencies tended to identify themselves with an inner core of like-minded agencies. They then produced very definite periphery of acceptable but significantly different agencies and then a small clutch of two or three who were frequently anathematised and dismissed into the outer darkness!”



humanitarianism to a more rights-based approach (see, for example, Slim, 2001). It surely matters whether humanitarian aid derives from an act of charity or whether it is seen as a duty out of respect for human rights. Trying to understand whether these different value sets determine the divergent set of objectives, perceptions of politics, and the differences in learning processes goes beyond the scope of this paper. The main point to be made here is that humanitarianism cannot play a peacebuilding role if one considers the nature and behaviour of humanitarian organisations.

Under these conditions, peacebuilding strategies designed by international donors have to be questioned. Empirical evidence shows many peacebuilding strategies to be inappropriate because they put “disproportionate emphasis on infrastructure as opposed to peace implementation” (Boyce, 2000:370). We have to add that the overemphasis of the aid component (infrastructure, economic transition) within these peacebuilding packages is not only harmful to the people it is intended to help (see Forman/Patrick, 2000), but can also do damage to the integrity of humanitarianism.

As a result, one should be more modest about the influence aid can exercise on violence and conflict. Aid cannot stop war nor can it build peace. Humanitarianism can hardly influence whether competing actors deploy violence or not, but it does have an impact on the rules by which they compete. And it can insist, at every stage of a conflict, on the distribution of aid according to the humanitarian logic only. Therefore, humanitarianism *per se* - through its presence, its work and its principles - facilitates civilising processes in war-torn societies. Claiming a peacebuilding coalition consisting of aid and politics, however, ignores the very nature of humanitarian organisations.

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