

## Why we need to look hard at the NGOs' flaws



No one could deny that the mushrooming NGO sector does good work in providing on-the-ground humanitarian relief. But **Robert Glasser**, Secretary General of CARE International, says that evaluations of their effectiveness “have been patchy at best”

When disaster strikes, non-governmental organisations are among the first on the scene. It's a pattern that has become increasingly familiar. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates there are now more than 37,000 international NGOs following the surge in their numbers in the 1990s when major donors started to rely on them more and more.

Inevitably there have been problems. Both the Rwandan genocide in 1994 and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami saw chaotic competition between hundreds of NGOs as they all scrambled to help. Yet there have also been landmark victories. More than

1,400 NGOs operating in 90 countries were able to exert sufficient political pressure to get 123 countries to ratify the treaty banning land mines; it earned the campaign organisers the Nobel peace prize. It's not just the number of NGOs that is making a difference, but also the trend towards trans-national alliances to achieve common goals collectively. But the sheer scale of this disaster relief “industry” – plus the longer-term development efforts of NGOs – is raising serious issues about how to measure their performance.

The public are not alone in asking these questions. Major donors and even the NGOs themselves also to learn lessons, quantify

outcomes and understand the long-term effects of their actions. Aid beneficiaries need to know whether or not outside interventions have been useful. In the last few years, the leading development and humanitarian NGOs have devoted much energy to investigating their own impact in crises ranging from droughts and floods in Africa to the tsunami.

Among the questions being asked by NGOs and by UN and national donors, has been how to prevent past mistakes from being repeated. There are few clearly defined international rules on what an NGO actually is. Flexibility allows NGOs to be innovative in ways that organisations like the UN often cannot. But the same lack of control also leads to unpredictable consequences. In one recent case in Chad, the French NGO L'Arche de Zoé tried to smuggle children out of the country without obtaining permission from either their parents or the government. Less dramatic, but potentially more serious, are occasions when an inexperienced group leaps into a situation which it is unable to handle.

The wake-up call for most NGOs came after the Rwandan genocide, when hundreds of small organisations tried to set up ad hoc operations in refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Tanzania. As they jostled for space, some camps turned into staging posts for armed factions. In the ensuing chaos, an estimated 50,000 refugees died from cholera. Many attempts to provide relief proved either redundant or ineffective. There was also mayhem in the relief efforts that followed the Indian Ocean tsunami. At one point,

# COMMENTARY

By Michael Hammer

## That's right! If the NGOs don't embrace reform, outsiders will force it on them

Robert Glasser reveals the growing awareness amongst NGOs that they need to come to grips with their impact on international aid and policymaking. Yet to many NGOs his demands will be uncomfortable; he's asking them to shed the halo of the do-gooder who is beyond reproach, to move from their sphere of unquestioned support to become subject to scrutiny, and to engage pro-actively with critics who are often unconvinced by NGOs' performances and claims to legitimacy.

The push that Glasser tries to give from the inside is important; lack of accountability can do very real damage to the people that NGOs are seeking to help. NGOs must wake up to the fact that they work alongside other actors in global governance, of which aid delivery is just a part, who stand in direct competition with them, and in many ways are ahead in the game of stakeholder accountability. In addition to Glasser's welcome drive for more accountability within the sector, NGOs must give up their understanding that they form an exclusive category of actors who can work to special rules different to those valid for others.

Today, organisations from all sectors – inter-governmental, non-governmental and corporate business – provide global public services ranging from safe water to health care and security for millions of people, and

more than 400 NGOs were on the ground in Aceh, Indonesia, competing for resources, personnel and funding. Many of the lessons that had been learned during the Rwandan crisis were forgotten or simply ignored. The confusion was caused mostly by smaller NGOs with little or no experience in dealing with disasters.

The relief community did eventually take on board lessons from both Rwanda and the tsunami. The situation in Indonesia led the UN to adopt a new "cluster" system to improve coordination. And after a review of the Rwandan debacle, 400 NGOs and UN organisations working in 80 countries got together in the Sphere Project to develop a common humanitarian mandate and a

handbook of standards. This outlines the minimum performance required of any NGO working in a disaster zone. At the same time, leading NGOs created the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action, known as ALNAP, to exchange the latest ideas on accountability. It was followed by the Humanitarian Accountability Project, which evolved into the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership-International. This currently includes 18 NGOs as full members and focuses on reporting back to the people who have been directly affected by a disaster and who received humanitarian aid.

As the number of post-intervention reviews increased, some of the biggest NGOs appointed full time staff to improve the effectiveness of their evaluations. Seven of the largest NGOs have also joined forces in the Emergency Capacity Building Project, funded by the Gates Foundation, to explore inter-agency collaboration on assessments and "after action" reviews. This has helped create a rudimentary framework for evaluating the impact of NGOs' humanitarian work, but there is still considerable debate over what really needs to be evaluated, and how.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a major shift in the focus of NGO evaluations. Rather than simply looking at project inputs and outputs, the emphasis has turned towards measuring the overall impact of an operation. The basic idea is to find out if the lives of the people on the receiving end were changed for the better in any sustained way. More and more donors are also insisting that NGOs provide measurable proof that they make

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a difference. While this sounds fine in theory, in practice there are drawbacks. By demanding quantifiable results, donors may force programme managers to choose easily achieved targets in preference to actions which – though less measurable – accord with sound humanitarian principles. Or reporting of aid programmes may be skewed to keep donor funds flowing. The greatest danger is that humanitarian relief will be tailored to meet the demands of donors, rather than being dictated by the type of aid that is needed on the ground.

There are other pressures on NGOs too. If they take too much account of the demands of local beneficiaries, they may lose sight of the bigger picture. For instance, food aid may prevent an immediate famine, but it can also undercut local farmers and so contribute to future starvation. Thus NGOs would rather reduce the emphasis on measuring results of their programmes in favour of a more balanced mixture of evaluation methods.

Still, there is no doubt that, until recently, the record on evaluating responses to humanitarian emergencies has been patchy at best. There are many reasons for this. CARE, as both a relief and development agency, can take a long-term approach to disasters, matching emergency relief with a rehabilitation and recovery phase. But this is not an option for NGOs which focus only on emergency responses. Once their allotted time is up – or their funds run out – they tend to pack up and leave. Even for those NGOs that stick around, determining the impact of their relief efforts in the middle of a crisis is either difficult

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many are involved in policy formulation and evaluation. We are thus witnessing a rise in cross-sector integration of service delivery, policy development and decision-making, yet this has not yet been matched by emergence of common accountability principles.

The problems of providing relief in the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami have provoked calls for new standards and new methods of certification for organisations involved in humanitarian efforts. The longer NGOs delay in themselves developing new or better standards of accountability to their stakeholders, the louder will be the calls for vigorous outside regulation. This threat stems directly from a failure of many NGO to pro-actively engage in the accountability debate and move beyond fixed assumptions of established privileges they previously enjoyed. Glasser is right to push the NGOs on this.

There are also some very strong incentives for the NGOs to engage more with the other aid actors across all sectors. In our Global Accountability Report we at the One World Trust analyse every year the capabilities of 30 powerful organisations from a viewpoint of stakeholder accountability. We look at four key dimensions of accountability: transparency, participation, evaluation and complaints & responses. The NGOs rate best in terms of participation, but their transparency and complaints-handling capabilities are often much less developed than those of other organisations in other sectors. And both intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations lag behind transnational corporations when it comes to handling complaints. Often maligned for excessive

or well-nigh impossible. Emergencies are chaotic; staff and resources are stretched, and the local population is very unlikely to be able to provide meaningful feedback. Even if you manage to conduct an on-the-spot assessment, you're unlikely to be able to gather much pre-crisis baseline data, so comparisons are complicated. And, all too often, events move too quickly to be measured accurately. Also, until recently, donors who were willing to pay for relief were less likely to finance follow-up evaluations.

The result is that emergency relief evaluations often rely on little more than

guesswork and assumptions. A 2004 report by the Humanitarian Policy Group cited a survey carried out in Ethiopia after UN agencies said that widespread famine had been averted in 2000 by humanitarian efforts. The claim sounded credible until the subsequent survey showed that the crude mortality rate in the area had actually risen to six times the normal base rate. Most of the deaths were from communicable diseases which malnourished people may well have contracted after crowding into feeding centres.

The HPG therefore recommended very long-term monitoring of humanitarian

## MATTERS OF OPINION

### What Europeans think of development aid

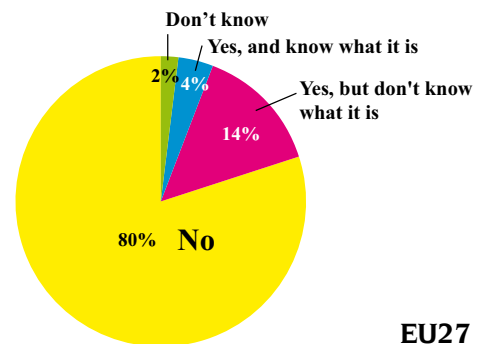
According to a Europe-wide survey of public attitudes towards development aid, the two main motivations for rich countries to provide overseas aid are: self-interest (believing that it will increase trade with poorer countries) and a desire to contribute to global stability,

The Eurobarometer survey highlighted the fact that few EU citizens appear to be aware of multilateral aid initiatives and policies, even though Europe – the EU and member states combined - is the largest provider of aid on the planet, providing 57% of total world aid in 2006.

Questioned early in 2007, halfway to the deadline for the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), set by the international community to reduce poverty and disease in the poorest countries of the world by 2015, only four out of 100 Europeans knew what the MDGs were. An overwhelming 80% had never heard of them.

And while 28% said that the main added value of the EU providing aid - compared to their own national government – was that the EU could be active in co-operation programmes covering practically all developing countries, a similar number of people found it difficult to form an opinion on the issue. Five percent saw no added value at all.

### WHO HAS HEARD OF THE UN'S MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS?



Source: Eurobarometer 2007

responses in future, and said that success or failure should be judged in a broad context rather than by a narrow focus on a specific project. Many people who survive an earthquake or a flood, for instance, may soon face another crisis if the disaster also destroys their only means of earning a living. New and more sophisticated analytical tools are needed to understand these long-term effects, along with sufficient training to make sure that new methods are applied properly in the field. A recent innovation has been the Coping Strategy Index, devised by the World Food Programme and CARE, which analyses the way people cope with short-term food crises while also taking into account their future vulnerability to hunger.

NGOs are now able to get closer than ever to local communities and offer a voice to some of the most disenfranchised people on earth. These NGOs also operate in politically sensitive environments that are closed to more formal institutions. The world's leading NGOs advise the UN and help to shape its current reform efforts; they are also on hand whenever the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme and other international donors need to feed thousands of refugees.

NGOs do the lion's share of the world's humanitarian work, so some mistakes are certainly made along the way. But as we deepen our experience of humanitarian relief and development, we learn the lessons of the past and understand how much more there is to know. □

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bureaucracy, inter-governmental organisations frequently have the best transparency policies and management systems.

The most important lesson is that everyone can learn from others. For NGOs, there is no reason to shy away from experience gained by others outside their own sector. The more NGOs lock themselves in their own world of evaluation, with standards that apply only to themselves, the greater the outside pressure will be to regulate and force more openness. This would be a waste of the innovative and creative capacities of a sector that has a vital contribution to make a more accountable global governance. □

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