

NGOs and humanitarian aid

by Gianni Rufini*

The 1990s have been the decade of humanitarian aid. Never - in the history of this century - have the populations of great parts of the globe been affected by wars and natural catastrophes with the same frequency and violence. Ten years ago, humanitarian and emergency aid still represented a relatively marginal sector in international cooperation with developing countries. Most NGOs were reluctant to get involved in this activity, whose techniques, methodology and principles were considered poor relations to the better-acknowledged disciplines such as development aid, human rights and environmental protection.

At the end of this difficult decade hundreds of NGOs with roots in more traditional domains are increasingly devoting their resources to assisting people affected by conflicts and natural disasters. A conspicuous effort is being made to link these actions with a broader developmental approach, through the principles of the continuum of Relief-Rehabilitation-Development.

This radical change is rooted in two major factors: the enormous growth in number, intensity and cruelty of wars after 1989 and the increased re-occurrence of natural catastrophes (by 900% in 40 years). Underdevelopment is now an unsustainable tragedy.

Too often these events have wiped out serious efforts and important investments. This is as much the case for Angola, Mozambique and Central America as for West Africa, Bangladesh and Indonesia. In some cases, development programmes have been steadily replaced by permanent humanitarian actions as in Somalia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Iraq.

On the donor side, the already low development aid is being gradually diverted towards

humanitarian aid, which is more politically rewarding and appeals to public opinion.

Europe and humanitarian aid

The European Union developed a sound humanitarian policy as late as 1992, when ECHO was established. Nonetheless, in a few years Europe has become a major player, today the biggest donor and best performer in humanitarian aid.

The strategic choice of providing direct assistance through the non-governmental system has strengthened citizens' support while ensuring flexibility and cost-effectiveness. The adoption of special administrative tools like fast financing procedures and the Framework Partnership Agreement (FPA) has allowed prompt response to crises. In a few years, the ECHO-NGO partnership has become the human face of European aid: disinterested, impartial, based on needs and rights.

NGOs

On their side, NGOs have adopted a reluctant approach to humanitarianism: few specialised agencies used to work in this field in the early 80s. During the 90s, more and more organisations expanded their activities and developed new skills. At the end of the decade ECHO had 170 NGO partners, while 400 more requested to sign the FPA.

One easy explanation of such a trend is the increased funds available for humanitarian response, but the determining factor is that there is nothing we can do for development as long as wars and natural catastrophes systematically delete all progress in our work. We are no longer able to draw political attention to poverty eradication as long as peace and stability remain the

first concern for the international community. Funding for development has decreased by 25% in seven years, while many developing countries are dragged decades backward by conflicts and devastating events. This situation has become unbearable and NGOs face new responsibilities.

The collapse of Somalia and West Africa, the Iraqi war and the genocide in the Great Lakes were just the first shock: the Balkan crisis brought the war to our doorstep and generated a strong solidarity among citizens to whom a response had to be given. This meant adopting a new framework for action: no more long and careful planning or participatory appraisal, with little space for capacity building; new methods and techniques were learnt and even ethical issues had to be reviewed.

Today, almost two-thirds of European humanitarian aid is delivered by NGOs, who also raise one-third of overall funding through citizens' donations.

The end of a decade

Despite all efforts, the balance between increased engagement and relief capacity remains dramatically negative and the limits of humanitarianism as a response to world crises becomes evident. In the last couple of years, two main

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events have been particularly relevant for this process: Hurricane Mitch and the Kosovo war.

The Kosovo crisis has uncovered the major weaknesses of our discipline, the lack of coherence within the international community, the absence of a European Union

foreign policy and the inadequacy of the existing structures for emergency response. Not only has the crisis not been prevented (although probably it could have been), but all manner of contradictions and polemics have emerged in its management, determining a relatively late and confused

Remind you
of someone you know?
A young member of the
Kosovo Liberation
Army patrols the
streets of Prizren.
Kosovo, 1999

response. The reconstruction process might also be going along the same lines.

Hurricane Mitch struck a region that for decades has represented a major working field for development NGOs and international organisations. The disaster has reopened the debate about the definition of development in the region: the role of the traditional economy, security, democratisation, human rights, the debt, defence of minorities and vulnerable groups, participation and capacity building have all been integrated by

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NGOs in the design of strategies to face the crisis and plan the reconstruction. This ongoing exercise will certainly lead to more coordinated action in all sectors of international aid in the region. Still, shortsighted policies miss the chance for a major shift towards prevention, the only sound approach.

Shifting to prevention

A structural approach to natural disaster prevention implies reducing vulnerability. This is essentially a development challenge. It is appropriate therefore that preparedness in recent years has shifted away from the humanitarian actors and is being given greater consideration in the development community. Nonetheless, the expertise acquired through a decade of humanitarian operations is also fundamental to address sound preparedness/prevention strategies. The know-how is there, the main problem is the lack of policies. Prevention is a quiet, long-term activity that does not attract media attention, consensus or donations.

The conflict-prevention side is no clearer. Kosovo has been paradigmatic also in this sense: for 10 years the UN and NGOs have warned the international community about the level of tension and the worsening social and political situation, warning of the risk of imminent conflict. We know the result.

The international community remains essentially **reactive** and not **proactive**, incapable of promoting long term programmes to build structural stability.

EC - NGO relationship

Whatever change occurs in policies, humanitarian aid is likely to increase as the problems of global unbalance, poverty and rights keep the world unstable. For the humanitarian community the issues are quantity and quality: the size of international response is still miserable compared to the size of crises, and their effectiveness is far from adequate. While we work on techniques, methodology, training and coordination, a serious effort must be made to improve strategies and financing.

Donor/Agency partnerships

At European level, one of the main issues is how to upgrade the partnership between donors and agencies, going beyond the financial relationships towards more qualitative ones. After a difficult start, ECHO and NGOs are cautiously testing a higher level of partnership by increasing common strategic planning, efficiency and cost effectiveness, and discussing major problems. Should this method work, it would benefit operations and victims.

This does not happen easily and there is still a cultural resistance against a full acknowledgement of the role of NGOs. We can say that we are all working in the right direction but still have a long way to go.

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