

DIALOGUES N°3 **FRAGILE STATES**

TWO SPEAKERS, TWO STATEMENTS, TWO RESPONSES = *DIALOGUES*

A series of discussions aiming to promote debate on some of the pressing issues facing humanitarian action

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| NEXT



FRAGILE STATES

The term 'fragile', as opposed to 'rogue', implies weakness and the need for assistance. It suggests that a humanitarian intervention might be appropriate for an abused or neglected population.

- But what are humanitarian NGOs' responsibilities?
- Should they temporarily fill gaps in infrastructure, or should they also work to rebuild and improve that infrastructure?
- How closely should NGOs' work be linked to 'western' governmental agendas?

In this discussion Zoe Marriage argues that NGOs have become part of the political scene, and should therefore proceed with extreme caution. Christian Captier maintains that taking too monolithic an approach carries risks and that NGOs working outside the political sphere have an essential role to play.

There are many 'fragile' states and the question of how 'western' NGOs should respond is not about to go away.

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PREVIOUS | NEXT

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Dr Zoe Marriage

Lecturer - Department of Development Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

Zoe is a Lecturer in the Development Studies Department of SOAS where she teaches on the MSc Political Economy of Violence, Conflict and Development. Her work investigates the political and psychological aspects of international NGO responses in countries at war, and she has conducted research in Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo and southern Sudan. More recently she has started research on the relationship between security and development, with particular reference to the Democratic Republic of Congo. She is the author of *“Not Breaking the Rules, Not playing the game. International Assistance to Countries at War”* (Hurst & Co, 2006).



Christian Captier

Executive Director, MSF Switzerland

A graduate of the Grenoble business school, Christian was Head of Mission for the NGO Action Contre La Faim (Action Against Hunger) in Sierra Leone, Somalia and Bosnia- Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. After an MA in War Studies at King’s College London, he headed AAH’s Conflict Analysis Unit in the UK, went on to become AAH’s Director of Operations and was elected Vice-President of AAH’s board in 2002. An expert on security and violence issues, Christian has lectured extensively and published several articles on humanitarian aid. He has been executive director of MSF-CH since 2004.



All views expressed in **Dialogues** are those of the authors, and are not necessarily representative of the organisations for which they work. We have asked the authors to give their personal perspectives, respond to one another and thus begin a debate.

Most of the issues discussed in this initial series of publications were first explored at the discussion evenings arranged by MSF London in the spring of 2006. They cover matters of continuing concern to the humanitarian community and prompt questions to which there are no easy answers.

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

ZOE MARRIAGE SAYS:

Since the mid-1990s, there has been debate among aid actors and analysts concerning fragile states. What does it mean for a state to be fragile, and what are the implications for humanitarian organisations?

From the example of the Democratic Republic of Congo, it can be seen that states described in terms of failure or fragility have other sorts of strengths, which can bring important political and commercial returns to major powers. NGOs that are based in northern countries and work in fragile or failing states are therefore in a contradictory position if they demand privileged access to these countries without acknowledging their own position in the hierarchy and their responsibility for the outcomes of the assistance they give.

What are fragile states?

All states have both international and internal roles. Internationally the state system is defined by respect for sovereignty; internally the minimal functions of a state relate to protection of its territory, authority and population. The principle of sovereignty dates from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, but at the end of the Cold War, it encountered a major assault. According to Boutros Boutros-Ghali, then Secretary General of the UN, the time of absolute sovereignty was over. Concerns about humanity challenge those of sovereignty: if a government abuses its population, intervention may be appropriate.

This tempering suggested that sovereignty was to be earned. Politicians and analysts started to categorise states as failing, collapsed, rogue, pariah or fragile, indicating that some states were not fulfilling their required functions. There is subjectivity in the terms: 'rogue' and 'pariah' imply the strongest condemnation, 'fragile' – conversely – implies a weakness and the need for assistance either to the government or to its population. These gradations of statehood opened the door to profoundly interventionary policies, pertaining to governance, economic arrangements, types and timing of elections and the isolation or removal of leaders who were deemed inappropriate.

The majority of fragile or failing states are in Africa: Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo are amongst the most extreme examples; Afghanistan is comparable. Fragility is strongly linked to violent conflict at home, and – particularly since the attacks on the USA in September 2001 – fragile states have also been perceived as dangerous to stronger powers. At the same time, fragile states can be economically significant, and indeed the pursuit of foreign political and commercial interests has often contributed to the erosion of state functions. Fragile states pose threats to major powers but also offer them opportunities.

1/5

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo is often referred to as a failing or fragile state. It has failed to protect its citizens. There has been massive suffering caused by years of predatory rule followed by fighting and displacement. It has also failed to provide for its citizens: for decades there has been paltry investment in roads or communications, health or education. What infrastructure exists is commonly provided by private funds or overseas money, rather than by the government. It has failed to maintain its territorial integrity. There was a huge breach of sovereignty during the war from 1998 to 2003, and even now, the effective reach of the state is severely limited.

Congo has, though, been robust in serving other agendas, particularly in establishing enduring systems of patronage and mineral extraction. The extreme disruption and informalisation of service industries and mining since the 1970s has facilitated heavy-handed manipulation of the political and economic sectors by foreign powers. The involvement of Rwanda and Uganda in the wars in Congo was consistent with DFID priorities in the region, helping to keep the development agendas of those countries on track. The Peace now in place can also be counted as a success, to the extent that it conforms to contemporary wisdom, incorporating opposition factions, supporting national institutions, and linking to processes of democratisation, all of which reflect well on the funders.

If these successes are to be guarded, the failures need to be carefully defined. The notion of fragility or failure suggests problems at the level of formal politics and within the country. Simultaneously it draws attention away from the involvement of other forms of politics at international and sub-national levels. A more straightforward appraisal would reveal that the greatest change in the 1990s was not in the style of governance (which had been violent for a long time) but in the strategic significance of Congo to major powers. To turn the terminology around, Congo failed to maintain its significance to the USA and became strategically fragile in the new geopolitical order.

The result of this failure was a dramatic fall in the aid given to the country by the USA and European governments at the end of the Cold War, which in turn inspired further predation by President Mobutu on the population. Whilst Congo's political significance fell, it continued to be economically important, and the relationship between major powers and the leadership of Congo through the 1990s corresponds to commercial opportunities. Laurent Kabila, perceived initially as a reliable business partner, received international backing to remove Mobutu; after that, though, there was a cooling-off of relations following his review of mining licences. Joseph Kabila opened his presidency with an international tour of major powers, but has since done little in developmental terms. However, he continues to accommodate international interests including the recent preoccupation with stability.

2/5

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

Humanitarian organisations in fragile states

According to the Human Development Report for 2005, life expectancy in Congo has fallen from 46 to 43 over the last 30 years and only 1.2% of GDP is spent on health. There are no statistics on infant mortality rates, child immunisation, primary school enrolment or expenditure, or the percentage of the population who live on under \$1 or \$2 per day. In these circumstances it is easy to assume that whatever is achieved by international NGOs can be justified in humanitarian terms; and there are dozens of NGOs operating in the country. The shifting interpretations of sovereignty, alterations in strategic interests and the emergence of security concerns have been accompanied by advances in communications technology and transport. NGOs have extended their scope, increased in number and size and assumed tasks that were previously outside their remit, especially in countries in Africa. What responsibilities attach to these extraordinary privileges and what is the political contribution of NGOs that aver neutrality?

Responsibility

It can appear that the changes of the 1990s have entailed new responsibilities for NGOs. Over the last fifteen years, humanitarian organisations have redefined their professionalism by introducing standards, formalising principles and re-assessing accountability.

Claiming or attributing responsibility for humanitarian action is difficult, though. Credible responsibility requires institutions, and beyond the moral duty or commitment of humanitarian organisations there are no mechanisms for ensuring accountability to recipients of assistance. NGOs are not democratically mandated or institutionally bound.



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In states at war in Africa there is often no functioning legal system. Internationally there is no systematic monitoring of what assistance achieves in technical terms, and there is no mechanism for assessing the extent to which NGOs' input supports regressive agendas at the national or international level.

3/5

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

In the absence of any clear framework of responsibility, we could still ask ‘What is the cost of failure?’ What happens if NGOs do not achieve their stated objectives? Violent conflict often constitutes ‘normal’ working conditions and this presents many genuine obstacles to providing assistance. It also enables humanitarian actors to explain away any failures or frailties on their own part. NGOs do not close down after lousy operations, and indeed funders are scarcely in a position to judge how their money has been spent. NGO workers may be driven by goodwill, but have no reason to draw attention to their shortcomings. Beyond the security of their staff, there are no costs of failure to humanitarian organisations.

Political contribution

The terminology of fragile and failing states determines the political landscape in which NGOs work. Firstly it focuses attention on specific, formal state functions, which, in places such as the Congo are not the most significant dynamic. Secondly it justifies particular responses to these failed or fragile functions – usually, as far as NGOs are concerned, by providing for the population left stranded by them. This is an uncertain process that involves no critique of the set of decisions leading to the definitions of what has failed or is fragile, and what assistance is useful to whom.

NGOs operating in countries at war usually work with the local population rather than with the government of the state. This is a model of gap-filling. However the ‘gap’ in Congo is so enormous that there is no way that NGOs are able to fulfil this apparently technical task. Whom do they reach and whom do they condemn?

Accepting the terminology of fragile and failed states places humanitarian organisations in a contradictory political space. Funded by private or official donors in powerful nations, they demand access and security to deliver assistance. At the same time they disavow connections with the global hierarchy – they claim a non-political agenda, and endeavour to distance themselves from the foreign political and commercial concerns. Without acknowledging their own position and critiquing the terminology, NGOs cannot claim to step outside the ambitions of major powers.

A critique would involve investigating how the assistance that is given interacts with national politics. How does it deal with elements such as the informal nature of economics and politics, and the fact that most power in Congo has been administered violently? How does the assistance interact with international politics? Apart from distancing themselves verbally and diversifying funding lines between a number of northern sources, how do NGOs question or start to defy the aggressive political and commercial interests of the countries that are providing them with money, humanitarian ideology

4/5

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

and international legitimacy? Failing to engage with these questions compromises the kind of assistance that NGOs can deliver, the credibility of assistance as a project and, on occasions, the safety of NGO workers.

Christian Capter responds “But this is where it is getting difficult for a medical humanitarian action-driven organisation like MSF. How to balance direct action and this role of being a global sentinel? How far should we engage in global issues and what is the cost of that commitment in terms of our ability to continue working on the ground?”
See ‘*Christian replies*’

Conclusion

What appeared to be the unprecedented responsibility of NGOs as they grew and took on new roles is in fact unprecedented irresponsibility. Therefore there is reason to be cautious about NGOs interventions – particularly in states that are described as failing or fragile. NGOs are backed by governments and populations in powerful nations who have very real interests in maintaining the status quo. In strategically less significant countries, exploitation has relied on the opportunities offered by non-regulated and violent environments. It is highly problematic to confront or reverse this reality and there is little incentive to do so. What little incentive exists, articulated in weak and non-specific ways through principles of humanitarianism, involves no

responsibility for failure on the part of the humanitarian organisations.

The potential for change that NGOs wield is therefore political in nature, and is situated primarily in northern countries where it can rally democratic processes to challenge the propaganda of the powerful governments and keep those governments in check. The fascination with locating failure or frailty within the countries where the NGOs work distorts the picture. It encourages the view that the solutions also lie in those countries and that continuing to provide humanitarian assistance can ameliorate the situation. The ensuing gap-filling is not monitored and does not probe or alter relationships of power and abuse. As a result, it is shaped by – and risks contributing to – the mainstream political flow. Having acquiesced in the political status quo, NGOs attempt to smooth over the technical difficulties. If only the road were not so bumpy.



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5/5

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

CHRISTIAN CAPTIER SAYS:

Can humanitarian action work effectively in fragile states?

“Principle 9 [of Good Humanitarian Donorship] speaks of the need to link humanitarian action with recovery and development. This is key in light of the Fragile States discussion and in countries such as Sudan where we are working to move forward and consolidate peace and bring together humanitarian action and development.”

Jan Egeland, UN OCHA, January 2006

About Humanitarian action in general and MSF in particular

Before addressing the core of the question, I would like to point out clearly what MSF's focus is. We aim to deliver an adequate medical response to people in need - through an active solidarity with those individuals 'stuck' in conflict situations, such as Sudan or Somalia, and/or 'sacrificed' in the process of building new forms of social organization either by choice or by neglect, as in Niger. It is much more meaningful, operationally speaking, for us to think about fragile people - vulnerable people - irrespective of the context; from 'rich' Switzerland, to Myanmar or stateless Somalia, whatever the level of fragility or strength of these states. What changes is our modus operandi and the constraints under which we have to operate.

I also believe it is important to recall that humanitarian action is about saving lives and doing it following humanitarian principles and medical ethics. In its evolution, MSF has, over the last decade, refocused its action on people and no longer on systems. In other words, instead of analysing and planning our action from the point of view of a system – usually a health system - we tend to privilege the relationship with the patient. Obviously, this approach has its own limitations that we try to balance constantly with a public health dimension. But it is our entry point. We have realised the futility of trying, as a medical humanitarian organisation, to aim for sustainability through cost-recovery. We cannot allow ourselves to be diverted from our responsibility as a medical humanitarian actor into becoming a substitute for the state health service with its ever expanding scope.

Our mission is not to address the causes of suffering. We consider this beyond our ability and responsibility. The only ambition that MSF has developed in this regard is to act responsibly, notably through témoignage, translated loosely as “bearing witness” in English. Through témoignage, we try to articulate our own medical and humanitarian responsibility, and highlight the dilemmas we face. We also try to find a way to force others to assume their own obligations, occasionally through a public confrontation. MSF has a restrictive approach compared to many other

1/6

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

organisations, which are said to be multi-mandate and for whom relief is encompassed in a wider project like reducing poverty, fighting conflict, promoting peace and justice or assisting reconstruction.

About the changing approach to fragile states

I would argue that the approach from the ‘community of states’ (I prefer to use this concept rather than the vague term of ‘international community’) has changed only since the most powerful states realised the complexity of the concept. Fragile states are not simply being defined by the level of suffering of the people living in these countries, but more by the level of threat (e.g. poverty, disease, refugees, instability and terrorism) they present and of the real/potential consequences of these threats, principally to the United States. Here we indeed have a clear sign of globalisation, what the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has called ‘the dark side of globalisation’.

The UK Department for International Development has described this new way of viewing fragile states by stating that: ‘For the International Community to provide effective support to fragile states, it needs to combine aid with diplomacy, security guarantees, human rights monitoring, trade policy and technical assistance.’ This has led to a new matrix, gradually replacing the Cold War approach with the so-called paradigm of human security; replacing the war

against terrorism with the ‘coherence agenda’.

There we have the main ingredients of the changing approach to fragile states.

Providing new opportunities...

One could argue that this new approach should be seen in a positive light. First, it has the merit of recognizing the failure of the previous development model and it acknowledges the scope and complexity of the problem and the need to engage with it in a comprehensive manner. In a sense, I would hope this approach could signal the end of the stupid and



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2/6

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

dangerous dichotomy most western states have used - the relief and development continuum. For example, in Haiti there was not enough of an emergency to trigger sustained humanitarian funds and there was not enough stability to trigger development money. The price that the population has paid for western blindness is unacceptable.

We can also expect to move away from a rigid sustainability agenda. This is a good thing in that aid will no longer be delivered only to the “good pupils” but will really be focused on where needs are greatest. The challenges brought by this change are enormous. It is opening new horizons, such as providing the means to treat HIV/AIDS by defining it as a global emergency. However, this approach, close in some respects to MSF’s approach, is also raising fundamental questions about its impact on the global system of aid. It means more resources will be available and it could change people’s viewpoints. It can make a real difference when associated with a technological revolution such as the Ready-To-Use-Therapeutic Food (RUTF) for treating acute malnutrition. The new approach is certainly opening the doors to more resources, for example scaling-up severe malnutrition treatment in Niger, providing free health care in Congo or funding health workers in a sustained manner through the Global Fund. But it is still falling short of changing the current north-south paradigm which relies on aid rather than on trying to change the terms of economic

exchange to make them more favourable to third-world countries or fragile states.

Finally, this approach has the value, recognised by some, of returning humanitarian action to its rightful place, that is to say recognizing the limited impact of humanitarian action when it is used by donors to intervene in failed states (using NGOs to bypass the constraints of the state). Effective humanitarian action is about saving lives; it cannot address chronic state weakness.

... but also a ‘lethal’ threat for independent humanitarian action?

But all these positives seem to be largely outweighed by the threat posed to humanitarian action by its integration into a wider political framework, as is called for in the ‘fragile’ states discussion. Indeed, the core of the problem is that this approach tends to think of humanitarian action as a modality of aid and to use it as a tool. Humanitarian action is used to bypass the state structure (it is more flexible in its approach and has distinct moral values). If linked to other agendas, of ‘development’, ‘security’ or ‘peace’, humanitarian action runs the risk of serving as a ‘Trojan Horse’. This approach itself carries the risk of embracing the humanitarian principles only to abuse them later, of increasing confusion and of undermining the ability of independent humanitarian actors to carry out their work.

3/6

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

By reducing humanitarian action to a tool, this integrated approach runs the risk of killing it. The integration of humanitarian action into the political framework is an erosion of the respect of core humanitarian values and in the long-term is tantamount to the disintegration of humanitarian values. What we see on the ground is the continuous trend of building up coherence between the humanitarian, development and political/security agendas into what has been called the 'integrated approach' in places such as Afghanistan, DRC, Sierra Leone, etc. over the last decade.

Zoe Marriage responds "What is achieved by taking people out of the systems – the health system, or the political, economic, social and religious systems in which they live and form their understandings and priorities? Most obviously, it allows an NGO to define its victims and diagnose a response". See *'Zoe replies'*

What is happening in the realm of the UN's reforms has taken this to a new level, with the cluster approach and a set of different actors (donors, the UN, the World Bank) trying to make their activities converge with those related to human security and the millennium development goals.

In recent years, there have been ongoing concerted efforts to ensure that the different components of the international response to crisis-affected countries, whether conducted

under the banner of the United Nations or not, are integrated in pursuit of a stated goal of comprehensive, durable and just resolutions of conflict. MSF has expressed repeatedly, in various fora, the danger it saw in this coherence approach, where the principles of independence and impartiality fundamental to humanitarian assistance at times necessarily clash with - and therefore become subservient to - political, economic or military imperatives. Though the UN humanitarian reforms seek to strengthen the role and authority of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) to better defend humanitarian principles and space within the UN structure, one may wonder whether this objective will ever be achieved. Whether our humanitarian UN colleagues like it or not, it seems that they have little room to manoeuvre even though they try. I witnessed them trying recently in Darfur, where they were doing their utmost to distance themselves from this political agenda. What's more, if we take a longer perspective the situation is simply deteriorating.

A few years ago, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in a report entitled 'The Politics of Coherence' stated that the way forward was: '...not necessarily to give priority to one sector [meaning humanitarian action, politics, justice or development], but rather to accept the competing and legitimate demands and manage the inevitable tension'. But today, in 2006 another study by the Tuft University gives a

much clearer – and bleaker – picture when it mentions the need to protect the independence of humanitarian action from ‘instrumentalization’ since ‘coherence and integration have become euphemisms for the subordination of principles to political objectives’.

MSF will continue voicing its concerns and hold agencies to account when we witness poor performance in specific contexts (for instance when UN agencies use sub-standard drugs or do not provide adequate food on time as we saw last year in Niger). Instead of promoting, for the sake of theoretical efficiency, an integrated system, controlled by politics and therefore able to select the populations it wishes to assist, and not always based on impartial needs, I prefer the theory of ‘organized chaos’ where a set of independent actors try to cooperate in a transparent manner, each retaining its specific focus, to achieve its own goals. Let me explain. What characterizes the ‘so-called’ humanitarian spectrum today is the wide range of actors: from UN to NGOs, states, armies and even private contractors. We all have separate mandates (some self given, some granted by law), different objectives (from multi-mandated agencies to medical humanitarian action in its strictest interpretation), varying means and individual *modi operandi*. It is not only unrealistic to imagine that we will be able to bring all those actors under one single banner for the benefit of people

in need, but also probably unhealthy. I would argue to the contrary, that retaining a diversity of actors and particularly retaining the capacity of truly independent humanitarian organisations to reach those on all sides is of greater benefit to populations in need than attempting an all-encompassing coordination.

As for the coordination part of the discussion, no-one who has set foot on the ground at the time of a large “CNN emergency” would argue against the need for some level of coordination between organisations. And when it comes to this, MSF’s approach is and will remain a pragmatic one. We will continue liaising on the ground with all relevant actors and counterparts, while retaining our autonomy of analysis, actions and means in contexts where we intervene. We will seek transparency and cooperation-collaboration **with** others in the interest of populations in need, but not coordination **by** others, whoever they are. MSF must retain a reality-based, action-oriented focus and independence of analysis and means, cooperating with others when necessary, and confronting others when necessary too.

5/6

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

In conclusion...

We do not take a position that is either completely for or completely against this new approach just as we are not against the need for the UN to improve the overall response. However, this must be without us at the strategic level since we consider that attempts to bring all ambitions within one framework leads to the undermining of humanitarian action and also that the presence of diverse and independent actors retains an added value for the population. Don't get me wrong, we are not defending the principle of independence for the sake of it, but because of our experiences, learned consistently during the last decade.

Indeed, examples in the past have too often shown the risk of monolithic approaches, often influenced by political agendas: the population in Revolutionary United Front areas of Sierra Leone in the late nineties were not deemed politically worth supporting; the children of Niger were sacrificed to a longer-term development logic; and thousands of civilians were wounded in the confrontation between the UN and the Haitian National Police on the one hand, and militia on the other. For these people the independent presence of medical humanitarian structures was the difference between life and death, whatever the fragility or strength of the State in question.



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6/6

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

Dear Christian,

Your point is well-made about the political pressures on humanitarian organisations. You argue that in the face of these pressures there is an imperative to provide ‘adequate medical response to people in need’ focusing ‘on people and no longer on systems’. I think this pure form of humanitarianism is problematic as there is little evidence that it works as it claims to; meanwhile there are counter-productive incentives to strive for it.

With regard to the adequacy of response, suffering outstrips the aid supplied. The on-going violence in Darfur, the chronic poverty in parts of Congo, the lack of medical infrastructure across many countries in Africa and elsewhere demonstrate that there is no adequacy of response. NGOs choose who they assist. In light of this, we need to ask: in whose eyes is the response ‘adequate’? In the eyes of NGO staff when assessing a particular project? In the eyes of the people who are receiving aid? In the eyes of people who live far from the clinic? In the eyes of people who become ill after the NGO decides the emergency is over?

Secondly, what about the focus on people and no longer on systems? This appeals to the possibility that war is made up of the suffering of individuals. It is not coincidental, though, that mortality from AIDS and malaria and a host of other diseases is highest in Africa. What is achieved by taking people out of

the systems – the health system, or the political, economic, social and religious systems in which they live and form their understandings and priorities? Most obviously, it allows an NGO to define its victims and diagnose a response.

It can be enlightening to look at humanitarianism from a different angle. History is written by the winners, and contemporary history is being made by the ability to start the camera rolling (metaphorically or literally) when the NGO arrives, then send up the credits at the end. For many people in countries at war, suffering is broader and history is longer. They do not have either the incentive to cut the frame or the power to place themselves centre stage. They know that countries which colonised them and supported often violent leaders through the Cold War now send aid. If history is about winners and losers, the patterns of power are still in place.

The focus on the present and on medical needs appears politically neutral. I have challenged this first by asking what this focus achieves, and found that the adequacy of response does not justify the institution of aid giving. I looked then at what the narrow focus and a short time-frame cuts out, and I found that what is cut out is the history of people’s suffering and the political conditions by which it is perpetuated. This seems to me to be a much more compelling explanation for why we are keen to look only at the present and only at people’s diseases.

1/1

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

Dear Zoe,

First, I think it's important to stress, as Zoe does, that fragile states should not be seen only as threats but also as opportunities. In our international system, where the struggle for resources has to a large extent replaced the ideological battle of the cold war, fragile states have acquired a function; they have also acquired a function in regional games where local and global powers use them as a playground. Even more illustrative than Congo is the case of Somalia. After shifting alliance between the USA and the Soviet Union, Somalia became internationally irrelevant after the end of the cold war and the 'western' state structure, imposed by the Italians, imploded in 1991 amidst total indifference while the first Gulf War was unfolding.

By acquiring a function, fragile states will tend to become permanent features, therefore creating real challenges on how to approach them. The way powerful states express their power has also changed dramatically since the end of the cold war and the start of the globalisation process. There are more private actors in almost every sector - including security - and more use of international organisations and NGOs as tools of governance, as described years ago by Mark Duffied in a paper entitled 'Governing the Borderlands'. It is therefore critical for NGOs, as Zoe points out, '*... to acknowledge*

their position in the hierarchy and their responsibility for the outcomes of the assistance they give'. Increased professionalism in NGOs is certainly a good thing if we look at the failures of the past. But it is largely insufficient if NGOs are unwilling or unable to look more critically at their own achievements, failures, and at their role in an 'aid system' which is being build-up on the basis of increased efficiency and coherence.

For Zoe, one of the roles of '*northern NGOs*' would be to push northern societies to face the realities where they have a direct responsibility and to be a kind of moral counter-weight. Why not? But this is where it is getting difficult for a medical humanitarian action-driven organisation like MSF. How to balance direct action and this role of being a global sentinel? How far should we engage in global issues and what is the cost of that commitment in terms of our ability to continue working on the ground? MSF decided to remain focused on its mission and to use its 'advocacy power' only when the issues are directly connected to its on-the-ground action.

It is critical for the future of NGOs to strike a better balance between continuing to get the support needed to function – i.e. showing the good being done – and informing about

the shortcomings, constraints and failures of their actions, and risking the loss of this support. It is indeed increasingly difficult for NGOs evolving in a sector that is more and more business driven to be critical of themselves and of their 'patrons'. The seeds of failure are planted and it will take an extraordinary energy to change this course for many NGOs that have, de facto or by choice, chosen to be sub-contractors of powerful states. Good will is not enough. It could even be dangerous if not associated with a sharp self-critical capacity.

One condition for this change to happen is an 'associative' dimension within NGOs - their internal democracy, checks-and-balances and efforts to avoid become purely professionals or relief mercenaries. Challenging the status-quo requires not only political skills, but also commitment and an associative, discursive framework within which to express this challenge of opposing vested interests, including those of the NGOs themselves.



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2/2

PREVIOUS | NEXT

About the speakers

Zoe says

Christian says

Zoe replies

Christian replies

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