

♣ **Not breaking the rules, Not playing the game** ♥
♦ **International Assistance to Countries at War** ♠

There are similarities between assistance and violence, as is evidenced by NGOs campaigns to fight poverty or hunger. Both have political and psychological elements and both have a shaky track-record in terms of their straightforward achievements. Violence and assistance are rallied to fight oppression – and both are hampered by it. Both justify themselves with reference to motivation and expected returns – but what violence and assistance actually *achieve* is generally more interesting – particularly for people on the receiving end.

Many questions are asked about why violence happens – what causes it? Not so many are asked about why assistance happens. Violence gives assistance its *raison d'être* – it provides victims and a moral foil: it seems to make assistance necessary. At the same time it makes assistance unlikely – it makes the working conditions very difficult for aid organisations.

Humanitarian organisations based in northern countries and delivering assistance in countries in Africa espouse broadly similar objectives. The terminology of humanitarian principles and human rights has been sanctioned by various international bodies and has spawned a huge number of related aspirations. Nonetheless, these objectives, aims and aspirations are not fulfilled in reality – there are not the mechanisms in place to deliver assistance in accordance with humanitarian principles or in a way that fulfils human rights.

Why it is that humanitarian principles, human rights and other aims espoused by aid organisations apparently fail to influence the reality of assistance delivery, whilst the reality does not dent these objectives? This central enquiry is addressed with reference to two questions that are investigated empirically: *who gets assistance, and why?* and, *how and why is assistance sustained in spite of its failure to provide in accordance with human rights and humanitarian principles?*

In approaching these questions, I make use of the concept of cognitive dissonance. Theorists discuss dissonance principally in psychological terms, arguing that discomfort arises when somebody has two cognitions (which can be pieces of information or attitudes) that are inconsistent. Festinger, whose work is seminal in cognitive dissonance theory, argues that the incompatible pieces of evidence motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance they experience, including by avoiding situations and information that is likely to increase the dissonance.¹

Festinger proposes that there are three responses to cognitive dissonance: changing a behavioural element, changing an environmental cognitive element, or by adding new cognitive elements. These responses reduce the distance between the two cognitive elements. I use this as a framework for examining to what extent aid organisations change their behaviour, or environment or the extent to which they add cognitive elements by making things up.

This links with the work of two other psychologists: James Gilligan and Stanley Cohen. Gilligan argues that there is only one cause of violence – shame.² When people are shamed they attempt to restore their dignity through destroying the source of the shame or the person in whose eyes they feel shame. I investigate this with reference to the rules espoused by aid organisations and the possibility that, rather than guiding what happens, they are actually rather provocative.

¹ Festinger, L. (1962). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*, Tavistock Publications.

² Gilligan, J. (1999). *Violence: reflections on our deadliest epidemic*. London, Jessica Kingsley.

Cohen's work relates to denial and the way in which bits of the story are air-brushed out and other bits are made up.³ The creation of fantasy is an extreme form of denial. Examining the work of aid organisations I find that accountability is so lax in environments in which information is easily monopolised and manipulated that aid organisations can claim what they want – this opens the possibility of denial – in terms of leaving bits out and adding bits on.

The evidence comes from research into DFID allocations, and into the work of NGOs operating in Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Congo and southern Sudan. I interviewed more than 150 aid agency office and implementation staff, and conducted around three hundred interviews with people in the countries I visited. These included people who were receiving assistance, others who were destitute and were not receiving assistance, and a host of other people connected with the process of aid including politicians, people living in camps and others who were displaced, militias, and demobilised fighters. This research was carried out between 1999 and 2002.

DFID was established in 1997 and immediately formulated policy based on a 'new humanitarianism' – one which was founded on human rights. Tracing where DFID allocations were made allows comparisons to be made between policy and practice and across the four countries under investigation. The evidence is that there is little linking the rhetoric to operations; most starkly, DFID allocations to Sierra Leone and Rwanda were considerably higher than to Congo and Sudan. This is despite the fact that the extent of the destitution was higher in Congo and Sudan, as was the number of people affected. Whilst the rhetoric did not guide the operations that DFID made, there are political achievements for DFID in terms of defining what is deemed 'good' and fulfilling targets; these achievements are made despite some significant weaknesses in how assistance is given.

With regard to the work of NGOs, evidence is brought from three locations in each country to examine to what extent NGOs are guided by the humanitarian principles and human rights discourse. In all countries NGOs assist some people and not others. How are the decisions about whom to assist taken, and how are they justified? With regard to Sierra Leone and Rwanda, assistance was given that was credibly helpful to some people: those who are in or near the capital and near the main road. Assistance in Sierra Leone was concentrated in government-held areas; the rest of the country (where need was greatest) was described as inaccessible, so as not to compromise the claim of impartiality. In Rwanda, NGOs worked closely to the government's development agenda, describing this in neutral terms despite the forced displacement it involved.

In Congo and southern Sudan, assistance was much patchier. The political and technical obstacles were not convincingly tackled by NGOs, and that whilst assistance is expensive, there are few incentives for NGOs to get involved (or for donors to fund them). The result was that assistance was unguided and not very helpful to people who were suffering as a result of war. The official line was rescued by shifting responsibility for the short-comings of assistance onto the supposed beneficiaries – justifications such as the quest for 'sustainability' were applied to withdrawal, or to the donor's – NGOs claimed a lobbying role. Whilst there is something practical in this, none of the adjustments led to assistance that was more in line with the espoused principles or rights and none of it implied any frailty on the part of the NGOs.

As the 'rules' of assistance do not guide DFID or the NGOs, what is their function? Do they provide strategic leverage over others? This possibility is explored with reference to the negotiations between aid organisations and political leaders in the countries in which assistance was being given. The results are that, rather than establishing moral authority, appeal to rights and principles was often counterproductive and inflammatory. Taken alongside the work of Gilligan,

³ Cohen, S. (2001). *States of denial: knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA, Polity; Blackwell Publishers.

this is not entirely surprising, as the discourse has a tendency to diminish people as being illegitimate or irrelevant.

Assistance is delivered alongside ‘rules’ based on human rights and humanitarian principles, but these rules are not constantly adhered to by any party. On occasions when the rules are invoked, their function is to claim legitimacy for interventions, and to discredit people who obstruct them. On other occasions, violations are overlooked. When assistance does not provide for people, its discourse ignores, excuses or disguises weaknesses in implementation. This has two consequences, firstly: no change for people suffering from destitution caused by violence, and secondly: no impact on the description of suffering or the formulation of assistance.

As the investigations show, the principles and rights are not used to guide aid organisations or to provide strategic leverage over others. What is more, the liberty to control the way that suffering was portrayed, the response to it and the description of the outcome led, on numerous occasions to forms of denial and fantasy on the part of the aid organisations; this is in line with Cohen’s work. This enabled the aid organisations to ease the discomfort caused by the cognitive dissonance between their claimed objectives and the reality of assistance. The observation that others – and particularly those in the countries in which aid is given – are breaking the rules is less significant than that the aid organisations and their financial and ideological funders are playing a game. What, then, are they using the rules for? Why are they constantly invoked, even at the expense of laying NGOs open to the charges of naivety and political imbecility?

There is an ‘assistance game’. Central to this game is a politically functional morality that provides a rationale for rich countries to engage in countries considered to be of marginal political or strategic significance. Assistance is recreational in that it is not of a quantity or quality that could genuinely be expected to relieve suffering caused by war, and in that this is known by the people and organisations that provide it.

The conclusions are that aid organisations need to enquire further and accept different kinds of information, as standardised discourse obscures details that would make assistance more effective. A more far-reaching agenda is also set: as there is reason to believe that aid organisations would achieve more for people in countries at war if they did not restate the ‘rules’ dictated by the dominant donor agenda, the real urgency is to break the ‘game’ that characterises international assistance.

This work is published as a book:

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