

# Learning and Evaluation in Humanitarian Action

## 1 Purpose and Scope of This Year's Review of Humanitarian Action

The ALNAP *Review of Humanitarian Action*<sup>1</sup> series aims to advance understanding and practice to support improvement in the performance of humanitarian action. It provides an overview of current trends in humanitarian action through a synthesis of evaluation findings, as well as critical reflection on an area of particular concern – this year field level learning is addressed. It also provides a platform for sharing lessons, identifying common approaches, and building consensus on ways in which to improve learning and accountability.

Over the past four years the *Review of Humanitarian Action* has analysed 183 independent evaluation reports and 20 synthesis reports, all drawn from ALNAP's Evaluative Reports Database. This represents perhaps the most exhaustive analysis of evaluation of humanitarian action (EHA) accomplished to date. Given that the *Review of Humanitarian Action* is one of the best tools the sector has for assessing and reflecting on its performance, it is important that the *Review* continues to monitor the sector in order to provide a cumulative picture of its collective strengths and weaknesses, as well as point to areas where the sector can best focus its collective efforts toward improvement of practice.

In comparison with previous years, this year the *Review of Humanitarian Action* consists of four rather than five chapters. The main difference is that Chapter 4 this year has been written as a stand-alone piece in order to allow the *Review* to consider some of the changes in the humanitarian sector in the 40 years since the Rwanda genocide. These changes are assessed within a number of key themes on which commentators on humanitarian action currently agree (for example, lack of proportionality) and disagree (in particular as to how far the current politicisation of humanitarian action is likely to affect the future of the humanitarian sector). In particular the chapter focuses on the implications of these changes for evaluation and learning – the two areas central to ALNAP's mandate. In place of a concluding chapter, Chapter 4 also integrates the main findings from the remainder of the *Review* so that this year's findings on learning, on Afghanistan and Southern Africa (the focus of the synthesis chapter) and on evaluation quality are contextualised within a broader framework.

The chapter also draws on some of the main findings from the 2004 study of the impact of the 1996 Rwanda evaluation by John Borton and John Eriksson: 'Assessment of the Impact and Influence of the 1996 Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda'.<sup>2</sup> Both the original Rwanda evaluation and its 2004 follow-up are unique events in EHA in terms of their scope and scale, and such a detailed follow-up is particularly unusual in any evaluation sphere.

#### Box 1.1 Objectives and Organisation of the ALNAP *Review of Humanitarian Action*

The ALNAP *Review of Humanitarian Action* has three main objectives:

1. To provide the humanitarian sector with the means to reflect annually on its performance and to identify generic strengths and weaknesses through a synthesis of the principal findings, conclusions and recommendations of EHA made available to ALNAP during the preceding year. The synthesis chapter this year focuses on two high profile emergencies in Afghanistan and Southern Africa which were a focus of recent evaluation reports. **(Chapter 3)**
2. To address each year a central theme of common and current concern to those within the sector. This year, field level learning is addressed. **(Chapter 2)**
3. To monitor and assess the quality of EHA by highlighting good and poor practice through a meta-evaluation of evaluations received the previous year, and to work with ALNAP member agencies to improve the quality of EHA. Details can be found in the meta-evaluation at the end of the *Review*. **(Chapter 4)**

The *Review* series complements other annual publications focusing on the humanitarian sector, such as the *World Disasters Report* (IFRC) and the *World Vulnerability Report* (UNDP).

## 2 Change since Rwanda and Implications for Learning and Evaluation

The humanitarian community is diverse and it is of little surprise that different opinions exist in terms of what has happened in the sector since 1994. These different opinions are brought into stark relief by the ongoing sense of frustration in terms of responding adequately in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Chechnya, among others.

Before addressing the areas about which humanitarians agree and disagree, however, it is worth introducing some of the key changes and themes in the humanitarian sector post-Rwanda. This then provides the context for the subsequent discussion.

Smillie & Minear (2003:2) neatly summarise the key changes in the sector as follows:

Much has changed in the world of humanitarian action since the end of the Cold War. The number of emergencies to which the international humanitarian enterprise has responded has grown dramatically. Conflicts have become more typically internal rather than international, generating massive numbers of displaced people and civilian victims of war. Humanitarian aid has tripled in a decade, mostly at the expense of longer-term development spending, and yet it is still far from adequate. Emergencies are more protracted, and they are no longer restricted to the developing world. National sovereignty has lost much of its sanctity, and sovereign authorities have more widely accepted humanitarian and human rights obligations. There is more discussion about, if not significantly more resources devoted to, the prevention of conflict. Interactions between humanitarian activities and political-military strategies have increased. Effective humanitarian action is now seen variously as a complement to political objectives and as a substitute for political action at the preventive and even the remedial stages of protracted emergencies. ... There are now more players in the field, including military and peacekeeping forces and for-profit contractors.

Another broad theme that has come to the fore post-Rwanda is that humanitarian action is generally reactive, as noted in Chapter 3. Given the speed and complexity of events within the sector what is needed, notes Kent (2004), are organisations that can plan strategically and learn. Findings from the thematic chapter on field level learning, however, are that most humanitarian organisations do not operate in this way.

A further important theme concerns the need to widen the debate on humanitarian action in order to include more perspectives from the 'south'. This will likely provide key lessons for humanitarian action. As Vaux (2004:18) comments: 'We in the West now find ourselves part of a Western form of thinking that is perceived as hegemonistic. To detach Western humanitarianism from Western politics requires a listening rather than a preaching approach. It may even entail a different relationship with partners, allowing them to set the terms of the debate.' Ayoob (2004), in an article on third world perspectives on humanitarian interventions, notes that there are many different views on humanitarianism in what he terms 'post-colonial' countries, but that humanitarian action is often viewed with suspicion given the issues of sovereignty it raises, the lack of proportionality to need, and the fact that it is increasingly seen as a political tool of western states.

This then is the current context within which evaluation and learning in the humanitarian sector has to take place. Within this context on what points do humanitarians agree, where do they differ, and what are the implications for learning and evaluation – especially given the limited space this highly politicised and fluctuating environment leaves for learning and evaluation?

## 2.1 Areas of Agreement

There are a number of areas of agreement among commentators on the past and present state of humanitarian action.

### 2.1.1 Funding and proportionality

Overall levels of humanitarian assistance have been increasing over the last decade as a proportion of ODA as a whole – from 3 per cent between 1970 and 1990, to 10 per cent since 1990 or some US\$5.5 billion a year through DAC countries.<sup>3</sup> If all

funding is taken into account the total amount of humanitarian assistance is some US\$10 billion.

Although measuring proportionality is complex there is broad agreement that proportionality according to need is rarely met. Aid provided is largely dependent on the foreign policy priorities of the major donors, and the UN system (for example, in the CAPs) and NGOs for the most part play along with this. This lack of

Country	Year	US\$
Ethiopia	2000	2
Tajikistan	1999	5
Burundi	2001	5
Mozambique	2000	6
Somalia	1995	9
Afghanistan	2001	12
Honduras	1999	12
Rwanda	1995	19
FYROM-Macedonia	1999	29
Serbia & Montenegro (Kosovo)	1999	47
Bosnia-Herzegovina	1993	116

proportionality clearly indicates that humanitarian assistance is not impartial. Proportionality is likely to become a reality only if there is pressure for this on governments by western publics and/or if UN agencies and NGOs refuse to accept funds disbursed for 'emergencies', such as Kosovo or Iraq, and point out the lack of proportionality in these cases (Rieff, 2002).

Figures from *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2003* illustrate this. In 1999, 62 per cent of the European

Community's humanitarian budget was allocated to the former Yugoslavia and CIS/Eastern Europe, and in every year between 1995 and 2000 a country from SE Europe was the largest recipient of bilateral humanitarian assistance, replaced by Afghanistan in 2001. Table 1.1 illustrates the mismatch between need and allocation of resources, based on assistance per head of population. Further details on funding to Afghanistan vis-à-vis other countries can be found in Chapter 3.

Any attempt to establish a ranking system for disbursement of aid based on need is highly political and technically complex. However, given that many such indices have already been developed, such as UNDP's Human Development Index, methodological issues are unlikely to be the main problem. In this context the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) initiative<sup>4</sup> is potentially important as it re-emphasises the importance of proportionality. Established in 2003 by several donors, it offers the opportunity to develop and pilot a tool that can be used across countries to determine need (see Gignos, 2003). The baseline evaluation of the

Burundi GHD pilot (DFID/OCHA, 2004) however, notes disagreement between HQ and in-country staff over the potential for developing a global needs assessment matrix – the objection of in-country staff being that each emergency country and context is different so that comparison of needs across emergencies may not be feasible.

It is very rare for EHA to cover issues of proportionality, and only one evaluation in the 203 reports included in the ALNAP *Reviews* has included this area in any detail (the evaluation of DEC agencies' responses in Kosovo, DEC, 2000). While the sector is well aware of its failure to meet the requirement of proportionality much remains to be learnt about how to assess – and more importantly understand – needs. Evaluation offices in particular should consider the extent to which they include the issue of proportionality in evaluation frameworks and terms of reference (TOR) in order to keep this item on the international agenda. Given that the direction of humanitarian funds for political purposes is perceived as one of the most cynical elements of the humanitarian sector, evaluation offices should raise this issue at every potential opportunity.

### **2.1.2 Capacity development**

One of the persistent findings of evaluation reports over the last four years is that capacity development has been largely unsuccessful, although there have been pockets of success. This was highlighted in the 2003 ALNAP *Annual Review* as well as a number of other studies examining a longer period (for example, Minear, 2002; Macrae, 2002). The failure to hand decision making and responsibility for humanitarian action to those who appear to do much of the work – national organisations and staff – is an ongoing theme. Surprisingly little is known about what makes for positive capacity development and much more known about what undermines capacity – for example, competition between agencies and in-fighting about control of budgets. Chapter 3 analyses ways in which the Afghan administration and international agencies fought over control of aid to Afghanistan. As Costy (2003:155) notes: 'several humanitarian actors expressed discomfort at the government's insistence that all international aid should be programmed through the CG [consultative groups] process and integrated into the national budget. For NGOs in particular, this implied a serious loss of independence of action.' Much assistance was not therefore channelled as the Afghan authorities requested, with implications for national capacity development.

The sector needs to learn more about what makes for positive capacity development in humanitarian action as even the ‘success’ stories, including those highlighted in some evaluations in the 2003 *Review*, provide sparse details. In addition, and as shown in Chapter 2, promotion of learning is one form of capacity development that is valued by field level workers but is not adequately promoted in many cases. Another point is that evaluation offices and networks such as ALNAP have a responsibility to do their part in capacity development of evaluators from the global south, especially as increasing the pool of suitably qualified evaluators is a potential solution to the main problems currently dogging EHA. Evaluations that have included mixed teams of national and international evaluators, such as those carrying out the Disasters Emergency Committee evaluations, have been consistently rated higher in ALNAP’s meta-evaluation.

### **2.1.3 LRRD remains highly problematic**

Despite the fact that LRRD has been sufficiently addressed in evaluation reports over the last four years there has been limited improvement in practice. Tied closely to the failure to build indigenous capacity, LRRD ‘gaps’ have until recently been perceived as primarily caused by dysfunctional bureaucracies where relief and development departments either do not communicate and / or fight over resources.

Findings from previous *Reviews* show that a significant proportion of funds devoted to humanitarian action are actually used for rehabilitation and development. This is confirmed this year, but with a new twist. LRRD in the context of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan is currently more a political than a bureaucratic issue, with much resting on the definition of what is relief and what is rehabilitation. In Afghanistan, for example, the government has attempted to define aid as rehabilitative rather than as relief so that there is greater government ownership; international agencies have done the opposite, as noted earlier. Smillie & Minear (2004:158) comment: ‘Donors were clearly reluctant to fund reconstruction and development rather than emergency programs, which were less attractive to their publics and required greater involvement by the national Afghan authorities and greater integration into the national development plan. But the regime itself was anxious to move beyond the emergency to reconstruction challenges.’

In the Iraq case it was necessary for international agencies to redefine humanitarian action in order to justify their presence, as observed by the Feinstein International Famine Centre (FIFC) in its consultations with international agencies (2004:8):



There was no consensus among discussants on the nature of the crisis. The starting point was that humanitarian agencies would respond only to humanitarian need. When it became clear that there was no major food or displacement crisis and only pockets of vulnerability among civilians, the issue was fudged for reasons of institutional survival. Aid agencies whose services were not essential at the time found it important to continue to be engaged in Iraq. The stark choice was between cooption and irrelevance: for fear of losing funds and contracts, many agencies found reasons to stay on, regardless of their particular mandate. According to some, the 'fictional' definition of the crisis as 'humanitarian' resulted in the de facto cooption of humanitarian agencies into the OP [Occupying Power] strategy. Certainly the extent and severity of human need in Iraq paled by comparison with other crises of the day.

The LRRD debate and the 'fictional' definition of humanitarian action are not new, but the ways in which humanitarian action is being politicised offers new challenges for evaluators and those attempting to promote learning. If there is no humanitarian crisis but rather 'pockets of vulnerability', as in Iraq, what do field level workers need to learn about? And what should the role of evaluators be in a situation such as Afghanistan where the government and international agencies are at odds as to what constitutes humanitarian action?

One of the findings of the synthesis of the 14 Afghanistan evaluations in Chapter 3 is that, for the most part, evaluations have not adequately covered the issue of conflict between international agencies and the national administration, perhaps because of the level of politicisation. In comparison the Southern Africa evaluations address this issue much more comprehensively – perhaps because LRRD in this context is of a more 'traditional' kind (the link between food aid and livelihoods, for instance).<sup>5</sup> It is complex for evaluators to determine the level of resources devoted to relief and rehabilitation at the best of times, often because of the lack of adequate financial tracking systems. Designing or using appropriate indicators to assess the results of interventions – a central evaluation function – thus becomes problematic. This problem is magnified when the line between relief and rehabilitation is further blurred for political reasons as in Iraq, where using standard indicators such as numbers of lives saved may miss the actual focus of longer term interventions.

#### **2.1.4 Lack of understanding of culture and context**

Over the last decade increasing attention has been given to the development of needs assessments to improve aid effectiveness and impact. The creation of an Emergency Needs Assessment Unit at WFP, joint vulnerability mapping exercises, and the Capacity and Vulnerability Analyses of the Red Cross/Crescent and as part of the CAP workshops are all elements of this. But, as argued in Chapter 2, needs assessments are quite different to needs understanding and it is the latter that is highlighted as a gap in evaluation reports and studies of humanitarian action. While policies concerning livelihoods and needs (for example, WFP, 2003a) may have advanced, learning from the affected population remains a major stumbling block to improved humanitarian action. As Vaux (2004:3) notes: ‘agencies should position themselves to convey the voice of affected people to Western governments rather than to be emissaries of Western politicised humanitarianism.’

While all levels of learning need to be strengthened, the lack of learning about and from affected populations when all agencies in their policies strive for a participatory approach seriously undermines the credibility of humanitarian action. And while we may know more about livelihoods than 10 years ago, the mechanisms for translating this knowledge into practice are still underdeveloped (Hofmann *et al*, 2004). Part of the issue is a conceptual one, as learning from communities is unlikely to take place when ‘experts’ are expatriates with a ‘we know best’ attitude (Kent, 2004). At the same time there are several institutions that have taken learning from communities as a central feature of their work – for example, the Disaster Mitigation Institute in India, Groupe URD (including through its work on the ALNAP Global Study on Participation by Crisis-affected Populations in Humanitarian Action), and the Tufts University project on livelihoods in Afghanistan (Lautze *et al*, 2002, etc). Constraints to learning from affected populations should not be underestimated, particularly in complex emergencies. Security considerations may make access difficult and curfews may keep contact brief. On the other hand, even in relatively stable situations such as refugee camps learning from primary stakeholders is often limited.

One of the most significant areas in relation to the sector’s inability to take local context into account, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3, is the targeting of food aid. Generally evaluation reports note a discrepancy between *agency practice* of ‘community based targeting’ where the most vulnerable are intended as food aid recipients, and *community practice* once food aid is received, where blanket coverage

appears to be common and in line with local cultural norms. The implications of this mismatch are not well understood, including the longer term impact on cultural norms such as those relating to gender or wealth distribution. Barriers to change that prevent food aid targeting from building on local practice include the issue of limited quantities of food aid, which leads to the need for vulnerability targeting, and the justification that humanitarian action is directed towards the poorest/most vulnerable. This is not so much a lack of learning, as the issue has been, and continues to be, well covered in evaluations. Rather it constitutes a failure to apply what has been learnt in order to change agency practice.

Evaluators also have an opportunity to promote greater understanding of local context through more participatory evaluations. Unfortunately the record in this area is poor: as noted in the meta-evaluation in relation to consultation with primary stakeholders, over the last four years 28 per cent of the evaluation reports have been rated as unsatisfactory, and 52 per cent as poor. Yet triangulation – for example, comparison between the views of primary stakeholders and agency staff – is recognised as central to effective and credible evaluation. For this reason the meta-evaluation highlights the Danida Mine Action evaluation (June 2003) which includes what may be the first systematic canvassing of the views and perspectives of mine threatened populations.

### **2.1.5 The importance of (national) staff**

Interviews carried out for Chapter 2 and a number of evaluation reports synthesised this year point to the importance of national staff in effective humanitarian action. In Afghanistan, the role of national staff was given prominence because of the evacuation of international staff during the US-led bombing campaign, where national staff were left for two months to run offices. However, interviews carried out for Chapter 2 suggested that the knowledge and insight held by national staff was undervalued and often bypassed. Cultural differences, not only between different nationalities but also between development staff and incoming emergency personnel, may be partly responsible for the undervaluing of knowledge held by national staff. People in Aid (2004:36) notes that even basic details about national staff are not documented: ‘The first and most significant problem which arises in trying to analyse nationally recruited staff is that very little is known about them. The literature is very sparse, but even more surprisingly the agencies themselves often do not know basic information about their own staff.’

One of the areas covered recently by commentators on humanitarian action has been the increasing vulnerability of staff, both national and international, as a result of the politicisation of aid. FIFC (2004:9) comments:

The extraordinary nature of this risk when the UN and the wider aid community are seen as ‘taking sides’ does not seem to have been internalized by the system; national staff are often seen as ‘expendable’ whether in terms of job or personal security. In an implicitly two-tiered organization of personnel, the continuity of programming in major crises increasingly rests with national staff, who are often taken for granted. Standard claims that UN programs were never interrupted by the departure of international staff often understate the nature of national staff vulnerability and courage. This stance only adds to the perception of a Northern-controlled humanitarian enterprise.

Vaux (2004:14) adds to this analysis: ‘If aid workers are seen to be agents of an illegitimate Western interventionism they may be at greater risk. They may be willing to face such risks if they are absolutely certain about the justice of their (and their agency’s) position. But they will be reluctant to put their lives as well as their deepest beliefs on the line to ensure that Bush and Blair are re-elected or that their agency maintains its market share.’

As discussed in Chapter 2, evaluations need to pay closer attention to staffing issues which in turn should lead into recommendations as to how to support staff, including staff learning. Although evaluation of human resource issues is one of the strengths of EHA there is scope to pay greater attention to briefing pre- and post-operations, training, and intra-office relations. Evaluators here are missing an important opportunity to contribute to an understanding of how staff can be better supported. However, as noted in the meta-evaluation, it may be difficult to include some sensitive areas related to staffing in written evaluation reports.

### **2.1.6 Coordination and national/agency flag-flying**

The central finding from evaluations over the last four years, as well as much other literature (for example, Minear, 2002; Rieff, 2002) is that the priorities of individual donors and agencies take precedence over a coordinated response, with subsequent loss of effectiveness. Thus the overall situation is little improved since 1994.

Despite this, Borton & Eriksson (2004) do note improvements in coordination in the UN system: the creation of OCHA in 1997; the Humanitarian Coordinator system; UN country teams; the work of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and its various Working Groups; increased use of inter-agency missions and teams; and the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and its more recent component the Consolidated Humanitarian Action Plan (CHAP). While such measures are generally judged to have improved field level coordination, challenges remain in filling the gaps between mandates, capacities, and broader systemwide problems. A recent external review of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (OCHA, December 2003:iii-iv) concluded: ‘These [coordination] tools are significantly more developed than they were five years ago. There is evidence that field level coordination has improved, at least among the UN system of agencies and with a sub-set of the major international NGOs.’ However it also found ‘much less evidence of progress on solving perennial problems of mandate gaps, capacity gaps, or system-wide problems [or] in handling such issues as the “transition from relief-to-development”, IDPs, the military-humanitarian interface, etc.’ Chapter 3 this year highlights good coordination practice cases, for example the JEFAP and RIASCO in Southern Africa, while the UN Mine Action Service was discussed in the 2003 *Annual Review*.

EHA’s assessment of coordination is reasonable, as evidenced by 69 per cent of evaluation reports this year rating as satisfactory or better in this area. However with little change in the rush of agencies to high profile emergencies, coordination will continue to be a central area for EHA to highlight – especially as the structure of the humanitarian system means that prospects for change toward a more coordinated system are significantly constrained. Evaluators are thus faced with the prospect of making recommendations that have been made many times in the past but with little chance that recommendations will be carried through. As well as calling for ‘improved coordination’ in general, therefore, this may be one area where evaluators should make specific, time-bound recommendations that agencies can realistically accomplish.

At the same time interviews carried out for Chapter 2 revealed that, despite agency competition for spotlight and resources, there is extensive but informal coordination among field workers in terms of sharing tacit knowledge<sup>6</sup> – for example, on the fringes of official coordination meetings, in bars and in other social settings. The quality of such information, and who is included or excluded because of the location for sharing (such as women or national staff) is not well understood. This area has

gone unnoticed in EHA to date, but the evaluation of coordination should perhaps move beyond its current focus on formal mechanisms and in future analyse the informal mechanisms on which many field level workers rely.

## 2.2 Areas of Disagreement in Humanitarian Action

### 2.2.1 The politicisation of humanitarian action

Much has been written in the last decade about the lack of coherence between humanitarian action, and political and military interventions. The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR) found that humanitarian action in Rwanda was used as a substitute for, rather than alongside, political and military action. Subsequently Borton & Eriksson (2004), among others, have found a similar lack of political will for intervention among western states in the cases of Darfur and the DRC, with appalling consequences. They conclude (ibid:62):

Whilst robust intervention by the international community seems to be the order of the day in other parts of the world, in central Africa 'robust' is a very relative term. A central conclusion drawn by General Dallaire from his experience as head of UNAMIR during the genocide was that human beings in central Africa were valued differently from human beings in other parts of the world ... There is no reason to believe that this situation has changed over the last ten years.

Hampered by the need to compete for government funding and with publics misinformed by the media (Rieff, 2002) humanitarian agencies themselves have been unable to advocate successfully around the issue of lack of political will of their host governments. This is in contrast, for example, to the more successful advocacy work on debt and trade.

The key question is whether the level of politicisation of humanitarian action is increasing and does this threaten the future of humanitarian action?

Evaluation reports reviewed this year cover two specific cases of politicisation, discussed in Chapter 3: tied food aid in the case of Afghanistan and genetically engineered (GE) food aid in the case Southern Africa. But there is also currently a

broader political discourse around humanitarian action vis-à-vis humanitarian interventions being perceived as ‘one weapon in the war on terror’, as in Iraq and Afghanistan. As noted by a field worker interviewed for Chapter 2: ‘The Iraq situation polarised internally every organisation I’ve seen’ and the sector is deeply divided as to whether it should be involved in these countries. Many humanitarians are also well aware that those on which war has been declared are often the creation of western, in particular US, foreign policy, as for example in Afghanistan (see Smillie & Minear, 2004; Donini *et al*, 2003). When historians look back on the period of the American empire their conclusion may well be that its foreign policy was one of the main drivers of humanitarian emergencies – something about which many humanitarian commentators agree.

In respect of the above many commentators also acknowledge that much if not most humanitarian action is taking place outside Afghanistan and Iraq, and that these higher profile ‘emergencies’ are distracting attention from equally serious conflicts, for example, in the DRC. Despite the recent high profile interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the day-to-day work of humanitarian field level workers remains much the same, if not in a more dangerous environment; and, despite disproportionate levels of funding to these two countries, much humanitarian action elsewhere appears to be continuing as it has for the last decade – seriously hampered by political realities and western foreign policy priorities, but still providing significant relief within this context.

As to the politicisation of humanitarian action in higher profile emergencies, there are two camps – both of which agree that humanitarian action is highly politicised but disagree as to the implications of this. Some commentators have argued that Kosovo marked the end of an independent humanitarianism, a trend that had been growing throughout the 1990s (Rieff, 2002; Duffield & Macrae, 2004). From this perspective humanitarian action has become an integral part of, or substitute for, western foreign policy. As Woodward comments (2004:334): ‘The NATO bombing operation “Allied Force” against Yugoslavia in March–June 1999 represents the final disappearance of the narrowing divide between humanitarianism and politics: a war initiated and justified on humanitarian grounds.’ Similarly, Duffield & Macrae (2004:295) point out in a discussion of coherence: ‘In their promotion of an integrated approach to peace, it is assumed that the objectives of aid, diplomacy, military and trade policies are necessarily compatible. By eliding these objectives into a single policy framework, the assumption is that foreign policy is humanitarian,

and by extension that humanitarian action serves a foreign policy function.’ This elision has gone hand in hand with increasing bilateralisation of the humanitarian response, by which the authors mean the increasing proximity of donor organisations to humanitarian operations (ibid).

Current crises in Iraq and Afghanistan are also seen to have compromised humanitarians’ neutrality and impartiality in a fundamental but also in a new way. As FIFC (2004:4-5) points out:

Many in the humanitarian community view the present quandaries regarding humanitarian action in Iraq as indicative of a serious, and deeper, illness within the humanitarian enterprise. They feel that humanitarian action has been politicized to an extent rarely seen and tainted by its association with the Coalition intervention: it has become a partisan action. Coming shortly after the Afghanistan and Kosovo crises, the Iraq issues are seen as deeply troubling ... [M]any in the community believe that the Iraq crisis represents a new level of intrusiveness into, and instrumentalization of, the humanitarian enterprise, differing not only in degree but also in kind from its predecessors. Key differences cited are the lack of a UN imprimatur on the Iraq war, the extent to which interactions should be pursued with an Occupying Power whom many in the region and beyond view as illegitimate, and the short leash on which operational agencies are being held by some donor governments.

Duffield *et al* (2004:269) similarly note that the relationship between humanitarian aid and politics is increasingly becoming a central part of Western governments’ geo-political strategies: ‘This changing role of humanitarian aid is frequently called the “new humanitarianism”, and has characterised the international response to many recent conflicts. The current war in Afghanistan is the most recent illustration of the convergence between humanitarian action and politics. The presence of a co-ordinated, well-publicised humanitarian effort alongside the military effort in Afghanistan highlights the extent to which politics has encroached upon humanitarian space.’ Hansen (2004:35) comments in similar fashion in relation to UN humanitarian agencies’ independence:

Without precedent, in October 2001 UN humanitarian agencies co-located staff members within the military headquarters of a belligerent force in an



active conflict occurring outside of UN auspices ... the presence of UN staff nevertheless implied UN endorsement of coalition military operations, and undermined the perceived independence and neutrality of UN humanitarian operations and staff by suggesting that the UN was the humanitarian instrument of a belligerent force. Co-location with the US-led coalition also suggested that UN agencies practice different standards of independence and neutrality from belligerent to belligerent, particularly because – whether justified or not – UN agencies had suspended contact with the other set of combatants in both Afghanistan and Iraq soon after hostilities began.

This can be contrasted to the situation in Kosovo in 1999 where UNHCR was perceived as having deliberately kept at arms length from NATO in an attempt to preserve independence (UNHCR, 2000).

An alternative view is that humanitarian action has always operated in extreme political environments, as noted by Slim (2004:5) who suggests that arguments of cooptation of humanitarianism principles are ahistorical:

The question of belligerent donors seems to be a particular worry at the moment because for so many leading humanitarians – especially those in the USA and UK – they are ‘our belligerents’. But we must not forget that these same western governments were very active belligerents (albeit less directly sometimes) throughout the five decades of the Cold War. Often the same governments that gave humanitarian aid were simultaneously devising, supplying and advising the insurgency or counter-insurgency warfare that created the need for aid in so many parts of Central America, Africa and Asia. What is different about belligerent funding in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2004 compared to belligerent funding in Guatemala, Mozambique and Afghanistan (again) in the 1980s? The problem of military-humanitarian blurring is also an old one. Today’s joint civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan are tiny compared to the massive ‘pacification’ programmes led by USAID in Vietnam with military and CIA support.

Slim goes on (ibid:6): ‘Outright rejection, politicisation, co-option, belligerent funding and blurring are not new. Neither are they necessarily catastrophic problems for humanitarianism. Instead they are our perennial problems as humanitarians. They

are always with us. For what other reasons have humanitarians not always been able to save every life that they have wanted to save[;]... human suffering and humanitarian action in war exist in highly politicized and militarized environments. Where else would you expect to be as a humanitarian worker?’ From this perspective little has changed since the Cold War or indeed the origins of humanitarian action, and agencies must learn to adapt to their political environment in the best way that they can.

Vaux (2004) usefully discusses the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality in relation to interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. He divides humanitarian actors into two main categories:<sup>7</sup>

1. A first group that accepts the ‘western national interest’ argument in relation to humanitarian action and principles, but is uneasy because it senses that the personal objectives of politicians rather than national interest are driving decisions.
2. A second that asserts the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, but has found it difficult to avoid the distorting influence of donor governments and funding.

Not only the sector but individual agencies are likely to be divided along these various perspectives, or to be somewhere along the spectrum from a belief in ‘pure’ neutrality and impartiality to a belief that humanitarian actors must necessarily compromise with powerful political and military realities. What are the implications of this spectrum for evaluation and learning?

The politicisation of humanitarian action is likely to decrease the space and opportunities for field level learning. As noted in Chapter 2, there needs to be a culture of transparency and trust, flexible organisations, a belief in common goals and objectives, and time and resources devoted to learning in order for field level learning to take place. There also needs to be considerable value placed on staff. The more political the environment, the more likely it is that there will be a culture of opaqueness and distrust, rigid hierarchies, blame rather than openness, potentially poor office relations and, as pointed out in Chapter 2, less value placed on staff. Ongoing politicisation of humanitarian action will thus likely work directly against field level learning.

In terms of evaluation, evaluation managers who often sit in independent or semi-independent offices within agencies and commission external evaluations have a clear responsibility to evaluate the implications of the politicisation of humanitarian action. First, as noted above, they need to investigate questions of proportionality, in particular in the case of Iraq. Why were humanitarian actors even in Iraq? Second, evaluations need to consider the evaluative criteria of coherence and coordination, in particular coherence between military and humanitarian policies and principles and relations between the military and humanitarians. Failure to address the question of coherence will constitute an ethical failure on the part of the evaluation community in that it would in effect condone a practice of increasing belligerent-humanitarian contact. Third, evaluation managers need to consider questions of impartiality and neutrality; in particular, have these criteria been met and how relevant are they to each context?

The Southern Africa and Afghanistan cases analysed in Chapter 3 offer a telling contrast to the ways in which EHA deals with politics and human rights. In the former case human rights issues, in particular in the relation to Zimbabwe, are consistently raised, although the evaluations provide contradictory evidence about politicisation of aid and its impact. In the Afghanistan case only one of the 14 evaluations, by MSF-H, raised human rights and protection issues, a failure similar to evaluations of Kosovo interventions (ALNAP, 2004) where the MSF-H evaluation was again the only report to raise these issues.<sup>8</sup> This is despite the fact that there were serious human rights violations taking place during the period of the humanitarian intervention, some of which were apparently committed by coalition Afghan partners. One explanation is a desire by agencies not to criticise governments who are their main funders, even if they are belligerents. But this blind spot to human rights issues in Afghanistan clearly raises issues as to how far evaluations and evaluation offices can be considered independent.

The meta-evaluation this year finds that coherence remains the most problematic of the DAC criteria mainly because it is the most political of the criteria. The single sector, single agency evaluations which dominate in EHA do not tend to ask questions about coherence; rather they focus on more technical issues which means that questions of protection, rights and coherence are missed. This may explain why the JEEAR has been the only major joint evaluation in EHA's history – despite the fact that major responses to Hurricane Mitch, Kosovo, the Gujarat and Turkey earthquakes, and now Afghanistan could all have been evaluated jointly.<sup>9</sup> Of course,

the resources and time needed for joint evaluations are enormous in comparison to most EHA. However it may also be that the kinds of political questions about coherence that were asked and answered in JEEAR are not popular with Executive Boards and donors. Heads of evaluation offices, with their intuitive sense of what will or will not fly in their agency, may not consider it worthwhile to ask such questions given the likely political opposition and ensuing high levels of stress and negotiation.

### **2.2.2 The responsibility of the evaluator**

This gets to the heart of one of the key questions for EHA: what is the responsibility of the evaluation office and the evaluator? The American Evaluation Association Task Force on Guiding Principles for Evaluators<sup>40</sup> makes it clear that evaluators have a responsibility to address wider political issues when the public interest is involved:

Evaluators have obligations that encompass the public interest and good. These obligations are especially important when evaluators are supported by publicly-generated funds; but clear threats to the public good should never be ignored in any evaluation. Because the public interest and good are rarely the same as the interests of any particular group (including those of the client or funding agency), evaluators will usually have to go beyond an analysis of particular stakeholder interests when considering the welfare of society as a whole.

The implications for evaluation methods, direction and findings, and of values which evaluators bring to evaluations has been a subject of much analysis in the evaluation literature over the last decade. Duffield (2001) has suggested that the increased emphasis on performance measurement of humanitarian action is part of an effort by donor states to gain greater control over aid. Current thinking is that no evaluation can be 'value-free', and that values should always be made explicit. House & Howe (1999), for example, extol the need for a 'moral political direction' to evaluation in the context of what they term 'deliberative democratic evaluation'. This places politics at the heart of evaluation and recognises that 'Some of the biggest threats to evaluation are power imbalances' (ibid:98) such that 'evaluation is as good or bad as the value framework that constrains it' (ibid:137). House & Howe challenge current evaluation practice and its tendency to evacuate itself of values and politics. Two ways of overcoming this problem are to declare the 'value

framework’ – that is, the politics – of any evaluation, and to ensure that evaluation practice is participatory. This latter point has come up time and again over the past four years of the *Annual Review*, particularly with regard to properly involving primary stakeholders in evaluation practice.

In light of the above and as humanitarian action becomes more politicised – or at least maintains past levels of politicisation – evaluation offices and individual evaluators need to take on board political issues if they are to act as independent promoters of accountability and learning. MSF-H apart, evaluation offices currently uphold their traditional foci on technical issues. While this may change as agencies attempt to balance more equally the lesson learning and accountability functions of evaluation – for example, through use of more participatory and learning approaches such as RTE – if RTE or other similar more participatory methods are viewed by Executive Boards as challenging the status quo there may be increasing opposition to their use.

### **2.2.3 Is humanitarian action successful?**

Many factors that determine whether humanitarian action is successful or not are largely outside the control of humanitarians – for example, international politics and foreign policy priorities of key western actors as well as the priorities of parties in conflict, levels of funding, access and security. Neither is there any consensus as to what humanitarian action should constitute, and therefore no means of determining whether the sector succeeds in what it wants to achieve. We return here as well to the issue of definition of a crisis which continues to plague the sector.

In particular there is a disjunct between those who believe that humanitarian action is about a ‘traditional’ humanitarian response – that is feeding hungry people, providing them with basic healthcare, water and shelter, while respecting the norms of impartiality and neutrality – and those who believe that this version is humanitarian ‘lite’ and humanitarian action must also be about protection, human rights and gender equality (Rieff, 2002). There is a further tension between those who have shorter term and longer term visions of humanitarian action, the former believing that saving lives is what matters and the latter thinking that humanitarian action needs to establish a bridge between relief and development. The tension between these two positions can be found in planning documents for the Southern Africa intervention of 2002–2003 which tended to include joint objectives related to

both short term needs such as avoiding starvation, and longer term needs such as supporting livelihoods.

From the former perspective of saving lives and feeding the hungry, and according to the 203 evaluation and synthesis reports analysed in the four ALNAP *Reviews* since 2001, humanitarian action is a resounding success, perhaps one of the main successes of the aid world. Findings from Chapter 3 on Afghanistan and Southern Africa also support this argument. It is difficult to think of other development related initiatives which have met objectives so successfully given the obstacles, in this case providing basic needs to millions in conflict situations and/or soon after natural disasters have hit.<sup>14</sup>

Borton & Eriksson (2004a) also note some improvement in NGO performance since 1996. They comment that:

Many agencies have increased their investment in training, staff development and more rigorous recruitment procedures and the technical knowledge and calibre of personnel appears to have improved in many agencies. Perhaps the most critical development in the sector was the Sphere Project to develop minimum technical standards in relation to: water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion; food security, nutrition and food aid; shelter settlement and non-food items; and health services. Widely translated and disseminated, incorporated into training and increasingly integrated into monitoring and evaluation systems by donor organisations and UN agencies as well as by NGOs, the Sphere standards have become an important part of the vocabulary of performance and accountability in the humanitarian sector. Many observers agree that the NGO sector has made significant improvements in the areas of professionalism, standards and accountability mechanisms since 1996 and some see this as the area where the Joint Evaluation has had the greatest impact.

From an alternative perspective, humanitarian action has been a resounding failure. There is the school of thought – which stemmed partly from those responsible for the Rwanda genocide monopolising aid in refugee camps – that humanitarian action has significant negative impacts. Even though it may have saved lives and fed the hungry it has also been subverted for military ends (Duffield *et al*, 2004:274): ‘The criticism that humanitarian aid can prolong or exacerbate war and can help sustain

war economies fuelled calls for humanitarian action to be subject to risk assessments that weigh up short and long-term levels of risk associated with it. Whereas humanitarian action used to be seen as a duty-based act that was right in itself, the negative effects debate has rendered humanitarian assistance ambiguous.<sup>42</sup> In addition, livelihoods have not in general been promoted, as evidenced by the Southern Africa and Afghanistan evaluations examined in Chapter 3, and LRRD remains the same unresolved issue it was a decade ago. Protection has barely made inroads – clear from both the Kosovo evaluations analysed in the 2001 *Review* and those on Afghanistan this year. Attention to gender equality has been poor, partly because there is little consensus or guidance as to what the promotion of gender equality means in a humanitarian situation, despite significant advances at the policy level in agencies such as WFP. Participation of the affected population may have improved, but there is no systematic evidence concerning this over the decade.<sup>43</sup> And capacity development has been a marked failure, as noted earlier.

### 3 Conclusion

Depending on one's perspective humanitarian action is thus following the historical pattern of being linked to the political goals of western states, a reality with which agencies have learned to live and at times subvert, or has entered new ground and is unlikely ever to return to former levels of neutrality and impartiality. Furthermore humanitarian action is either highly successful in meeting its goals or is failing to fulfil human rights objectives or to link with rehabilitation and development, thus continuously addressing the symptoms rather than the causes.

That there are such divergent perspectives within such a complex arena is not surprising. Rather the key point is that much humanitarian action continues as it has always done in environments that are *insufficiently* politicised in the sense that they fade in and out of the political radar screens of western governments and their publics, the western media, and the UN Security Council – as is currently the case with Sudan. It is in environments where humanitarian action is a substitute for political action that humanitarians continue to 'successfully' provide relief to millions

of otherwise invisible primary stakeholders. The sector must therefore be careful about the conclusions it draws for learning in the current high profile contexts such that there is unlikely to be a universal model for agencies to follow.

In this respect it is important to determine the space offered by different contexts for turning learning into positive change. Three points here:

1. Lessons have been learnt but politics, and in particular the foreign policy priorities of western countries, makes it difficult to change practice. For example, the importance of coordinated operations is understood by many actors but coordination in a system where there is competition for profile and resources has been difficult to promote; equally, the need for a transition to rehabilitation and development has been learnt, but is difficult to achieve where bureaucracies do not communicate and where the definition as to what is relief is politicised.
2. Lessons have been learnt and there is potential for change, for example, in relation to targeting of food aid at vulnerable households and individuals.
3. Lessons remain to be learnt, for example, in housing design and in the establishment of permanent settlements using emergency funds.

Clearly it will be in the latter two areas, which may be more technical than political, where there is greater scope for promoting improved practice through learning.

### 3.1 Main Findings

It is clear that the sector needs to continue to learn about its strengths and weaknesses, and the *ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action* as well as global reviews such as those undertaken by Smillie & Minear (2004), Minear (2002) and Vaux (2004) are one way of promoting this learning. Other syntheses (for example, van den Berg & Dabelstein, 2003) are also useful. The sector as a whole needs to become more proactive and to plan for major changes brought about, for example, by HIV/AIDS and civilian–military linkages. And Chapter 2 establishes that the sector is not currently good at promoting learning for field level workers who are often left to rely on their peers and informal networks.



In terms of EHA promoting learning there have been three encouraging trends over the last five years which have been in line with the general evaluation field. Moreover, ALNAP's training courses and meta-evaluation have been one of the factors contributing to new and improved evaluation approaches. These are:

1. A move toward more experimental and participatory evaluation approaches, manifested mainly in RTE and now being used in different ways by UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, the Disasters Emergency Committee and Groupe URD. ECHO's move towards 'auto-evaluation' is a similar approach.
2. A better balance between accountability and lesson learning, the focus in the past having been largely on accountability. This has been helped by the move to more participatory evaluation.
3. Also linked with the move to more participatory evaluation, many agencies have increased their focus on evaluation use stemming from dissatisfaction with lack of follow-up and interest in evaluations.

While the recent move toward more participatory approaches such as RTE and greater emphasis on the use of evaluations may promote greater learning in the sector, the overall record in terms of improvement of EHA has been mixed. Higher quality application of the DAC criteria appears to be taking place, although coherence and efficiency continue to be the two criteria causing problems for evaluators; and attention to protection has improved, while evaluation of human resources remains a relative strength. Problematic areas remain. These include opaqueness of evaluation methodologies; failure to meet good practice standards in the use of methodologies; lack of systematic consultation with primary stakeholders; and failure to use agency policy to assess interventions. Insufficient attention to evaluation use and users remains common.

All of these areas need to be monitored and reassessed on an ongoing basis if the credibility of EHA is to be improved and learning through evaluation promoted. In terms of how evaluation processes impact on EHA quality, the most important determinant of evaluation quality and hence of promotion of either accountability or learning is the make-up the evaluation team. Yet as discussed in the meta-evaluation the current organisation of EHA into a set of 'elite' agencies with access to evaluators – who consistently produce good quality evaluations – and the 'rest' works against improvement of EHA as a whole.

One of the implications of the lack of consensus about the purpose of humanitarian action is that evaluators need to be clear about what they are evaluating. In particular they need to evaluate against agency policy as well as agency practice because in agency policy is located its principles and goals. At present EHA does poorly in terms of evaluation against policy; the assessment in the meta-evaluation this year found that 68 per cent of evaluations rated unsatisfactory or worse in this area.

Finally, the last four years of the ALNAP *Annual Review* have highlighted the need for evaluation offices and evaluators to make the value framework from which they are operating transparent. Linked to this is the need to take on political issues even in situations where funders may find this uncomfortable. The values of the evaluator and evaluation offices always effect the choice of method and findings, for example, through choice of subject area and the tendency toward single agency, single sector evaluations in EHA. And the ways in which human rights issues were or were not dealt with in Southern Africa as opposed to Kosovo and Afghanistan suggest that evaluation offices are still not matching independence with responsibility.

## Notes

- 1 Formerly the ALNAP *Annual Review*.
- 2 For a draft of this paper see [www.alnap.org](http://www.alnap.org).
- 3 All figures are taken from <http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/ghafr1.htm>
- 4 See <http://www.sida.se/Sida/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=2742&a=21882>.
- 5 The author would like to thank Larry Minear for pointing out the importance of this area.
- 6 See Chapter 2 for an explanation of tacit (and explicit) knowledge.
- 7 Vaux's analysis includes a third category of faith-based agencies, not discussed here for reasons of space. The history of this division is discussed in Rieff (2002).
- 8 The history of MSF 'bearing witness' is analysed in Rieff (2002).
- 9 Five donors (Denmark, Sweden, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands) are currently undertaking a joint evaluation of their Afghanistan interventions, with a focus on IDPs.
- 10 <http://www.eval.org/EvaluationDocuments/aeaprin6.html>. The Guiding Principles were adopted in 1994.
- 11 Previous *Reviews* have raised the issue of the credibility of evaluations, given their generally weak methodologies and other issues identified through the meta-evaluation. However, given the large sample covered and the fact that of the 203 reports included in the sample about one quarter could be considered as generally rigorous, it is probably safe to conclude that humanitarian action largely meets its short term objectives.
- 12 There was no scope in this chapter to include debates around the concept of 'Do No Harm'.

- 13 For details of the ALNAP sponsored five-country study on participation by the affected population, see <http://www.alnap.org/alnappubs.html>.

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