

Does the world of international aid need a watchdog?

by Asmita Naik

Five years on from the scandal of sexual exploitation of West African refugee children by humanitarians, has enough been done to ensure that the system of international humanitarian assistance really does the good it is intended for?

In 2002 the humanitarian community was shaken out of a complacent acceptance that international aid 'does good' into a recognition that it can also 'do harm'. The West Africa sex-for-aid scandal exposed an entrenched pattern of sexual exploitation of refugee children by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers, graphically illustrating how even such meagre aid supplies as biscuits, soap or tarpaulins can be used as a tool for oppressing the most vulnerable victims of conflict. The case represented a failure of accountability at all levels: a gross misuse of donor aid on the one hand and a heinous abuse of beneficiaries on the other.

The allegations in the UNHCR/Save the Children report spawned a flurry of activity. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse was promptly set up as a forum for UN agencies and NGOs to jointly tackle the problem. The UN Secretary-General issued a bulletin

on 'Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse'¹, in-country focal points and networks were established and training, guidance and support are now available to help stamp out such abuses. Much has been achieved at the policy level by genuinely committed individuals. Some of the most radical ideas – such as routine DNA testing of humanitarian workers and compensation for victims – have come from humanitarian insiders.

Despite all this, progress on the ground remains achingly slow. A Save the Children report in 2006 found little had changed and that sex between underage girls and humanitarian workers/peacekeepers continued openly in the refugee communities of Liberia². Similar allegations have been made in Nepal, DRC, Sudan and Haiti, raising real questions about the international community's commitment to enforcing these policies at the grassroots.

Symptomatic of wider failures?

There is little doubt that the culture of evaluation has become more ingrained. A proliferation of initiatives have emerged dedicated to increased accountability and improved performance in the development world. These include: the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), Coordination Sud/Synergie Qualité, the Emergency Capacity Building Project, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), InterAction, Management Accounting for Non-Governmental Organisations (MANGO), One World Trust's Global Accountability Project (GAP), the People In Aid Code of Good Practice and the Sphere Project – to name but a few.

In view of this explosion of interest and activity in improving performance, it is disappointing to find age-old criticisms being made about aid operations in the two major inter-agency tsunami evaluations. Both the Clinton-led NGO Impact Initiative³ and the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition⁴ noted duplication, waste and a lack of accountability and

Relief supplies from around the world pour into the airport at Banda Aceh, Indonesia, following the tsunami.



professionalism as key concerns, critiques very similar to those made in the 1996 evaluation of the humanitarian response in Rwanda.

Clearly, an accountability gap remains and international organisations continue to operate in something of a vacuum, far from the scrutiny of their countries of origin and in places with weak democratic and legal systems. Accountability to those they serve (beneficiaries) and to those who pay (the developed world's taxpayers and individual donors) is very weak compared to recourse available to users of publicly or privately funded services in developed countries. Service users in the developed world who receive poor treatment from public institutions (for example, if they suffer abuse/neglect at the hands of service providers) can sue through the courts for negligence, file a criminal case, lobby parliamentarians, raise public awareness through campaign groups or the media, complain to regulatory bodies or call for public enquiries or inspections. These remedies may be imperfect but mechanisms do at least exist. None of these options are open to the beneficiaries of aid. They live in countries which simply do not have these kinds of democratic and legal processes and international organisations have not provided them with adequate substitutes. The plethora of existing training and capacity-building initiatives, self-regulatory measures or evaluations cannot make up for these deficits.

Accountability with bite

There is an increased energy and enthusiasm for improved performance which must be welcome. Efforts aimed at self-regulation, certification, training, learning and capacity building all have a central role to play in moving the agenda forward. However, they alone are not enough and external pressures are needed. This can only come from an independent international watchdog/ombudsman mandated to carry out independent investigations and evaluations. Internal mechanisms can never be completely impartial – even when they bring in external consultants – as long as they are managed by the very organisations they are set up to evaluate. Only an independent body can systematically and transparently

investigate abuses which currently only surface in an ad hoc, chaotic way.

Such an institution could instigate legal action against organisations and their officials either in countries of incorporation or operation for liability in negligence. Aid agencies are required to exercise a duty of care that is reasonable in the given circumstances to avert damage that can reasonably be foreseen but are rarely held to account for this in law. More can be expected from them. Organisations often fail to make a distinction between what they can and cannot change, focusing on wider societal problems instead of matters under their control – their own ability to educate, monitor and discipline staff about sexual exploitation, for instance, or their responsibility to coordinate with other agencies effectively and selflessly to avoid waste of donor funds. Clearly, international agencies are working in difficult circumstances. They cannot be held absolutely liable but they can be required to do their best.

The office of an ombudsman could establish a league table of agencies based on measures of accountability, efficiency and effectiveness, drawing on lessons learned from initiatives such as the American Institute of Philanthropy's charity rating guide⁵ or the One World Trust's Global Accountability Index.⁶ This would help ensure beneficiaries receive the assistance they need by enabling money to go to organisations able to deliver quality services. Taxpayers and individual donors would have greater confidence that their money is being used wisely. Institutional donors would be able to make decisions based on objective criteria, thus opening up the possibility of genuine competition between agencies based on the quality of their work.

The idea of an independent 'ombudsman' was mooted following the humanitarian response to the genocide in Rwanda but an organisation with the types of functions suggested above has not been trialled. It is a vital and missing piece of the accountability armoury which would serve to boost and promote other efforts aimed at self-regulation and learning. The idea appears to be gathering

momentum among some donors through whom a significant amount of international funding is channelled.

We need to do more to increase accountability. Maybe we should look to create an independent body to report on the performance and effectiveness of the humanitarian system.

Hilary Benn, former UK Secretary for International Development⁷

Obligations to donors and beneficiaries are often presented as polar opposites pulling in different directions but they need not be. Donors and beneficiaries have a common interest in effective, efficient programmes in which they have a say, especially given that billions of dollars are at stake.⁸ The onus is on donor governments and foundations as trustees of monies held by them to call for greater accountability for beneficiaries and taxpayers alike rather than using aid funding for political leverage. While they must drive the setting up of an international watchdog, the body must be completely independent of them and they themselves must be subject to its scrutiny.

Images of aid agency inefficiency and non-transparency can only serve to undermine and detract from the good and dedicated work that does take place. If humanitarian organisations are to be effective standard-bearers leading the way for better government and corporate behaviour, they need to do the utmost to retain the high moral ground themselves. The time has come to raise the stakes and to finally give accountability some bite.

Asmita Naik (asmita99@yahoo.co.uk) is an independent consultant.

1. <http://ochaonline.un.org/OchaLinkClick.aspx?link=ocha&DocId=1001083>

2. BBC, 'Liberia sex-for-aid widespread', 8 May 2006 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4983440.stm>

3. www.refugeesinternational.org/content/publication/detail/9607

4. www.tsunami-evaluation.org

5. www.charitywatch.org/aboutaip.html

6. www.oneworldtrust.org/?display=index_home

7. *Guardian*, 'Benn to attack UN over disaster response', 23 January 2006

8. A 2002 estimate of the operating expenditures of non-profits in 37 countries was \$1.6 trillion (equivalent to being the fifth largest economy in the world): *Newsweek*, 'Where the money is', 5 September 2005; \$13 billion Tsunami donations were made – US\$5 billion from private sources according to the NGO Impact Initiative, 2006, *ibid*.