

Cool Ground for Aid Providers: Towards Better Security Management in Aid Agencies¹

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Although full statistics are lacking, there is an impression that aid personnel are increasingly at risk from random, criminal and even at times targeted violence. The argument here is that the current tendency to reduce an agency's vulnerability mainly through the use of protective procedures and devices may be necessary but is insufficient. Better practice in the management of security is an urgent need. Reducing vulnerability to attack is only one approach; deterring the threat of violence by counter-threat, or seeking increased acceptance for the agency's work and presence are two other approaches. Major skill development is required in the areas of conflict analysis and monitoring, threat assessment and incident analysis, since together these form the basis for appropriate security management. Improved analysis can then inform a conscious choice about which mixture of approaches is most appropriate in a specific context. The paper explores in some detail the factors that influence acceptance, but not the methods and basic principles in the use of counter-threat.

Key words: aid and security, aid workers and violence, aid workers and vulnerability.

Introduction

Security has become a serious concern among aid agencies working in conflict, particularly since a recent series of targeted killings of aid workers. This paper partially builds on the author's own experience. Its proposals for better practice come from collaborative work with aid workers, policy-makers and military analysts and from an involvement in a number of initiatives to collect and analyse data, formulate policy and provide training on security.

Increased risk for aid workers

Few statistics are available and those that do exist, from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the UN, may be based on different definitions of incidents and include different categories of people (for example, only international staff or national and international staff). Notably absent are statistics related to international NGOs (INGOs) and national organisations such as Red Cross Societies, civil defence

cadres and national NGOs, whose employees constitute the largest population of aid workers. Equally underdeveloped is an analysis of the type of incidents and of their probable causes which could help to explain the statistics.² The impression remains however that there is both increased risk to aid workers and a potential trend towards the increased targeting of aid workers (see also de Courten, 1997).

Three key factors that appear to contribute to this trend are an increased exposure of aid personnel to violence, diminished respect for rules for the conduct of war and the perception that humanitarian agencies are not impartial.

Increased exposure If there are more agencies working in conflict situations, and agencies move ever closer to the frontline, it is almost inevitable that there will be more casualties as a consequence of this greater exposure.

No respect for the rules of the conduct of war Many of the conflicts in which aid providers operate today are characterised by armed groups whose members behave in undisciplined though not necessarily irrational ways. In terms of tactics, open battle is often replaced by guerrilla-type strategies of insurgency which evoke counter-insurgency responses (de Waal, 1996). The manipulation of civilian populations and the use of terror are part and parcel of these tactics. Fighting and violence for many is often not ideologically motivated but a means of economic survival. Thus conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone became in significant part resource wars in which the objective is less winning the war than continuing to profit from it (see Atkinson, 1997; Outram, 1997). Here, looting, hostage taking and banditry become 'acceptable' strategies. Even where there is a clearer contest of power with political aims, the protagonists may not be very interested in international recognition. Where they are, they may maintain, in rhetoric and sometimes in practice, 'humanitarian pretensions'.

In Sri Lanka both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are sensitive — up to a point — to international perception and public opinion (Van Brabant, 1998).³ Although both parties have committed human rights abuses against civilians, humanitarian aid workers have been neither threatened nor targeted. The war in Chechnya was also fought with political aims. But neither the Russians nor the Chechen guerrillas had humanitarian pretensions or consideration for international public opinion (Hansen and Seely, 1996: 1–3; White, 1997). Organised crime has also thrived in and around Chechnya, so that the distinction between banditry and acts of war has become blurred.

Humanitarian agencies not seen as impartial Historically the agency most specialised in working in conflict has been the ICRC. The ICRC approach has continued to rely on negotiated access and consent from all warring parties. Negotiated access has remained an approach in, for example, the Joint Relief Operation in northern Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, or Operation Lifeline Sudan and the Special Relief Programme in Angola in the early 1990s (Duffield, 1994). Since the Biafra War, through the Joint Relief Desk operation to Eritrea and Tigray (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994) to the NGOs operating in mujahedin-controlled Afghanistan, NGOs on the basis of the 'humanitarian imperative' or a 'solidarity' position (Baitenmann, 1990) have spear-headed interventionist approaches without waiting for the consent of all parties. In the aftermath of the Gulf War the UN initially followed suit. Specifically INGOs then have not always adopted the same doctrine in recognising neutrality as an operational

principle rather than a moral claim. Notably the ICRC defines 'neutrality' as an operational principle based on international humanitarian law, which imposes duties while also giving rights to warring parties. The 'humanitarian imperative' as moral principle refers more to an ethic of human rights, including the basic right to protection and relief assistance in times of war, whose realisation in principle is not dependent on the consent of warring parties (Slim, 1997: 8).

Multi-mandate agencies, like the UN and a number of NGOs, are further struggling to combine their wish to address humanitarian need, human rights violations, questions of conflict resolution, justice and reconciliation all at the same time (see African Rights, 1994). These different roles however involve different positions and protocols whose contextual mix is confusing at least and can easily generate suspicions about 'hidden agendas'.

Providing humanitarian aid with military protection, and military interventionism on humanitarian grounds, have further undermined the impartial image of aid providers. Calling for military intervention, however justified under the circumstances, projects a new image for aid agencies. Such muscular 'humanitarian intervention' quickly, and quite correctly, is seen as an act of foreign policy by the dominant international powers. Killing aid workers and peace-keeping troops then becomes a way of 'opposing' those interventionist foreign policies. Thus, the targeting of US and UN troops in Mogadishu, Rwanda and Bosnia seems to fit this pattern.

The role and frontline presence of the media in conflicts is another factor: just as aid agencies go global with statements about unmet humanitarian needs or who they see as the obstacle, so violent groups can use the presence of the media as an opportunity for global drama by kidnapping or killing aid workers where diplomats or business people are absent.

Reducing vulnerability: an insufficient security concept

Currently the most common response to these threats is to try and 'harden' the target by defensively reducing the vulnerability of the aid agency through procedures and the use of protective devices. These devices include higher walls, bomb shelters and sandbagged windows, helmets or flakjackets, as well as the prominent display of the agency emblem. Procedures may include the observance of no-go zones and no-go times (curfew), announcing or seeking clearance for movements before making them, ruling that no firearms are allowed in agency vehicles and compounds, driving in convoy and evacuation. It is worth noting that security technology itself can increase rather than reduce the risk. Radio equipment for example is a desirable target. In one night more than 10 mobile radios were stolen from agency vehicles in Ngara, Tanzania.

The few published manuals for aid workers available (for example, Cutts and Dingle, 1995; McGrath, 1994) and security guidelines issued by agency headquarters (for example, MSF, 1996) or used in field offices, almost exclusively deal with security technology and procedures (Van Brabant, 1997). There are some serious shortcomings in current practice and with many guidelines (see Macnair, 1995: 24). The manuals and guidelines are a technical/administrative response to the fact of 'threat' in a generalised, presumably 'global' manner. Normatively formulated, they dramatically fail to offer guidance for more subtle threat analysis.⁴ They also ignore

the fact that threats may be created by how the agency designed or implements its programme, or by behaviour of agency staff that is perceived as provocative.

The articulation or local adaptation of these guidelines is only as good as the one who produces them and many 'authors' of security guidelines lack the skills to analyse threats and develop appropriate measures from that analysis. The security guidelines are generally unsupported by practical training and drill of the aid workers, including case analysis, simulation and role play.⁵ Recommended security measures may be undermined by problems of compliance and discipline among agency staff. The emphasis on reducing vulnerability through procedures and protective devices also reflects a reactive and besieged mentality. This is understandable but begs the question of why the agency has become so 'besieged'? There is therefore an urgent need to improve the management of security within aid agencies which requires from the outset a more encompassing security concept.

A more-encompassing security concept

Reducing the vulnerability of the agency, or in technical jargon 'hardening the target', is one possible approach. Another approach would be to remove or reduce the threat by seeking widespread acceptance for one's presence and work among the populations and from the official and *de facto* authorities. A third approach is to deter one threat by a counter-threat. This ranges from (minatory) legal, economic or political sanction to the counter-threat of defensive or offensive violence by guards, armed escorts or military force.

There is then a range of options ranging from 'soft' to 'hard': seeking acceptance and consent, adopting protective procedures, using protective devices, threatening with sanctions or with counter-violence. In practice various types of threat may exist simultaneously and a combination of these three approaches may be required. What is so far missing from agency practice is a more professional assessment of threats and the resulting selection of an appropriate approach or mix of approaches to deal with them.

Different actors tend to be predisposed to one approach over another: the landing of US troops on the beaches of Mogadishu in 1992 revealed the security concept of the intervention to be one of 'deterrence'. There was no systematic effort to cultivate acceptance, and in time the Somali population who had initially welcomed the intervention, turned against it. In contrast, most NGOs are accustomed to feel accepted. They have difficulty acknowledging that in certain circumstances they have to do more to gain and maintain that acceptance, otherwise armed protection from hired guards or UN troops may be inevitable. The discussions about armed protection are too exclusively influenced by the experience in Somalia. Some agencies in Peshawar, Pakistan had armed guards at their compounds, and Operation Provide Comfort in north Iraq usefully hired Kurdish fighters to discourage snipers (Pilkington, 1997: 22). Here the armed protection did not turn into an extortion racket. Although aid agencies may endorse the basic principle of no armed protection, they could usefully spell out the conditions and minimum criteria under which armed protection could be justified (IFRC/ICRC, 1995).

It would be a mistake however to consider security only at field level and rely on what Prendergast (1996) has aptly called 'frontline diplomacy'. The high insecurity

for aid workers in Chechnya may be a result of the unwillingness of the international community to exercise political and economic pressure on the warring parties (Hansen and Seely, 1996). A more important political agenda dominated the relationships notably with Russia. That implicit ‘signal’ of uninterest reduced the need for the warring parties to exercise restraint, not only in their use of force against civilians but also in their treatment of aid agencies and aid workers. In Liberia on the other hand, the opposite occurred especially after the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General in late 1992. This higher political profile and involvement of the UN put the emphasis of the international effort on the Cotonou peace process. Air attacks by the West African peace-keeping force on civilian, medical and aid agency assets in territory controlled by the National Patriotic Front for Liberia, and the enforced suspension of the cross-border relief operation from Cote d’Ivoire, were not strongly protested by the UN (Scott, 1995: 19–21). Frontline diplomacy needs to be backed up by high-level international pressure on the belligerents — and on their supporters. The political agenda has to support humanitarian action. As the examples show, too exclusive an emphasis on the political agenda, just as too little, can hamper the humanitarian effort and put aid workers at risk.

Towards better practice in security management

This section proposes some practices at field and international level that, when adopted simultaneously, can contribute to improved security.

Within aid agencies

It has been pointed out that the training of today’s aid workers is greatly below that which had been required for colonial district administrators. Quality of personnel is central. To that end agencies individually — or even better collectively — need to invest in training. The following represent key areas in which to develop not only knowledge but also policies and skills.

Improved conflict analysis and monitoring of power dynamics Existing security guidelines tend to reflect a generalised view of conflicts and threats. But conflicts are not identical. There are those with a highly factionalised array of players often in shifting alliances (for example, Afghanistan or Somalia) or those with more centralised structures of command (for example, Sri Lanka). There are conflicts in which the belligerents have certain humanitarian pretensions, and others where they do not. Conflicts also change: there may be changes in military tactics that can have an impact on security, for example, the recruitment of village ‘home guards’ (Guatemala), the use of proxy militias (south Sudan) or the introduction of portable ground-to-air missiles (Afghanistan). There may be changes in the ‘logic’ of the conflict. The original causes of conflict may get lost in personal rivalries between factional leaders (the Kurds in north Iraq) or the conflict may be ‘ethnicised’ by politicians (former Yugoslavia). Finally there will be differences, and changes, in the perceived role and influence of international actors and humanitarian agencies. Generally most reflection on the politics of humanitarian intervention has focused on the macro-level. Relevant as this is, the security of aid agencies is often more influenced by the way their

presence and work influences local-level power dynamics. Different contexts possess different risks. Handling security in Afghanistan is not the same as handling security in Sri Lanka or Bosnia. Generalised and normative security guidelines therefore are insufficient. There is a need for a more sophisticated analysis of conflicts in security terms.

There is a need for agency staff to develop the skill, but also to be given the time to analyse and monitor their environment, to deepen their understanding and to ensure that an institutional memory is built up of both the changes in context and their own role in it. Such analysis may require some familiarity with basic concepts and models of political and social science, anthropology and economics.

Being perceived as a wealthy and soft target invites unwelcome attention from criminals and bandits. Being perceived as naïve and ignorant about the local context and the power dynamics at play may strengthen the belief that agencies can easily be manipulated and intimidated. The ability to show a deep understanding of the subtleties of a conflict to a power broker, and demonstrate an awareness of the arguments and concerns, may at least gain an agency some measure of respect.

More sophisticated threat assessment The ICRC already distinguishes between crime, banditry and acts of war. We may add street violence and terrorism to these categories of threat. Different threats may generate different security measures. The ICRC for example has come to accept that armed protection may be necessary against crime and banditry but should not be used to deal with ‘political’ threats (Dind, pers. comm.).

Relevant knowledge and analytical expertise in some of these areas have been developed by the police and the military. This is not to say that mainstream doctrines in these forces are immediately transferable: the police also have difficulty in dealing with banditry. The military on their side appear not much more effective against unexpected ambush, road-block or kidnapping with which aid agencies are confronted. Peace-keeping forces themselves have to learn how to behave and operate in a way that generates acceptance rather than antagonism. They may usefully learn about ‘community policing’ to add to the military and ‘riot police’ models. And they too need to develop their capacity for political analysis.

Positioning Whereas agencies may have a clear global mandate and mission, many do not develop a clear concept of their mission in a particular context. The choice of implementation partner — government, local NGOs, community-based organisations, the humanitarian wing of rebel movements — puts one in a perceived position. Greater dilemmas may arise when agencies try to combine humanitarian aid with human rights work, conflict mediation and support for justice and reconciliation. The questions remain whether multi-mandate agencies may not have to make much clearer choices and then seek complementarities with other agencies, and under which conditions should they do so?

Just as UN peace-keeping troops, aid agencies may experience ‘mission creep’. As the context changes, they change the objectives of their mission by adding new roles. Whether this is avoidable or not can be debated. What concerns us here is the risk of this happening unconsciously and without reflection about the implications in terms of the agency’s position in the conflict and the way it is perceived by various belligerents. There is thus a need to review regularly and consciously the specific mission.

Third, improved practice would ensure that agencies provide their staff with much clearer policies and guidance on which operational protocols to follow. The ICRC and

Amnesty International for example have clear policies regarding commenting on the causes of war or the legitimacy of taking up arms, as well as protocols on public denunciations of human rights violations. Many operational humanitarian agencies have a relief background, and so lack the policies, protocols and skills that need to frame professional work on human rights, conflict mediation or negotiation for justice and reconciliation. The resulting lack of consistency may be perceived as partiality and contribute to resentment and threat against the agency. Protocol also applies within the agency. The experience of an agency field office in Somalia that first learned from the BBC Somali Service that their headquarters had called for a military intervention illustrates the need for clear internal procedures.

An important point to note here is that it may not be enough for the resident representative to have a full understanding of the mission, the agency policies and protocol. Most communication with outsiders in the field involves programme staff and support staff — such as drivers — and their portrayal of the agency's position may sometimes have more influence over how it is perceived than the official position expressed by the resident representative in formal meetings.

Technical and procedural skills and drill Finally, providing agency staff with manuals and guidelines on how to reduce their vulnerability through the use of security procedures and protective devices, should be backed up with practical drills. These should include operating and maintaining radios, driving in a convoy, building a bomb shelter, retracing one's steps in a dummy minefield, providing a security briefing, rehearsing an evacuation and dealing with staff members who have breached discipline.

Retrospective incident analysis In practice, the boundaries between banditry, acts of terrorism and acts of war are blurred, and often there is insufficient information for accurate classification of a particular security incident. But incident and incident-pattern analysis are still the exceptions rather than the rule. This is true for aid agencies and also for UN peace-keepers as the current parliamentary investigation in Belgium into the killing of 10 Belgian UN troops in Kigali in early 1994 reveals (Senaat, 1997). The failure to analyse incidents properly, see why they occurred, how the agency might have contributed to their occurrence, what the 'lesson' in them might be and how they could have been prevented, means that there can be no systematic learning to improve threat assessment and the security measures in use.

Relationships with local players

Broad-based relationships with power brokers The proactive positioning of an agency is the opposite of the reflex of the besieged to dig in or withdraw. It involves developing broad-based, inclusive contacts with the multiple authorities and power brokers. In highly fragmented environments where groups enter into shifting alliances, this poses considerable problems. It is easy to overlook one or more power broker, who therefore may retaliate violently. But also where the belligerents have seemingly more cohesive structures, a common perception or policy on humanitarian agencies and their work is not necessarily transmitted through the ranks. The government's army in east Sri Lanka has a regional command, but brigadiers at zone level have considerable 'discretion' with regard to aid agencies. Similarly, the LTTE in east Sri Lanka is not quite as clear in its policy towards aid agencies as it is in

north Sri Lanka. Few agencies apart from the ICRC deploy the competent human resources to develop this network of contacts and keep them clear about their role and constraints. Interestingly, when experiencing 'political' problems the ICRC may choose to strengthen its delegation, rather than scale it down (Dind, pers. comm.).

Perceptions and what influences them The perception of an agency is however not only derived from the verbal communications of the agency about its mandate and mission. An agency also conveys an image through its general appearance. This may include the location of its offices, the ostentatious display of wealth in the material resources with which it operates and even the security measures it adopts. In Angola DHA took accommodation separate from the main UN building and its military verification mission (UNAVEM), thereby physically symbolising the independence of the humanitarian mission from the political and military ones (Lanzer, 1996: 15). Clearly the proliferation of computers, radios and vehicles sends its own message. So too do barbed-wire topped walls around the compound, body searches for visitors to the office and the use of flakjackets or armed guards.

No less important for an agency's image is its staff composition. This is already recognised for gender and for socio-economic strata (for example, the number and position of staff of urban or rural origin or of higher class or caste). In civil wars and fragmented societies, the desire to recruit staff on the basis of skill and equal opportunity will have to be weighed against the need to have a 'defendable' mix among the staff of all relevant political and social categories. Ignoring this aspect may open the door for accusations of partiality, which may or may not have real grounds (see Lode, 1997: 36–9). In Pakistan the national refugee administration as a matter of policy had allocated different Afghan refugee camps to one NGO only, to provide the full range of services. What was overlooked was that the different mujahedin parties had also taken control of different camps. As a result, one agency eventually discovered that most of its staff belonged to the fundamentalist Hezb-i-Islami party. By contrast another agency followed a policy of ensuring in its staff composition a defendable 'proportional representation' of all ethnic and religious groups and political resistance parties. A drawback of such policy is that the aid agency may simply internalise the conflict and will have to argue and defend the way it positions itself to its own staff constantly.

Also relevant are the appearance and behaviour of noticeably international staff. Although all societies have many subcultures, there are more major cross-cultural differences. Many implicit messages are conveyed by speech styles, body decorations and dress. In Sri Lanka and highland Ethiopia, interactional patterns stress the recognition of hierarchy and seniority so that polite and deferential behaviour is expected in body language and speech style. The interactional ethos of the Somalis by contrast is highly egalitarian and to many Westerners they appeared almost provocatively self-confident. Skinheads, closely cropped 'marine' hairstyles and the cultivation of the beard in Islamic movements underline the fact that bodily decorations are not simply a matter of fashion but also proclaim social and political messages.

If how we dress is an expression of our identity, then we should consciously consider how others may read our dress codes. Whether one agrees with this or not, it is a fact that many patriarchal societies articulate their moral and communal integrity in terms of the 'purity' of women. That is strongly signalled in dress and behaviour codes for women.

In times of conflict, where group identities need to be redrawn or reaffirmed, such social and cultural codes may apply even more strongly. Intentionally or not the NGO workers who in the 1980s travelled in Afghanistan wearing local dress signalled a message of 'solidarity' with the mujahedin. That became more conspicuous when more ICRC and UN staff started moving around in the countryside, usually clean shaven and in Western clothes, as was the habit in communist or modernist Kabul.

An extreme case may be that of a female health worker who presented herself at a check-point manned by Buddhist Sinhalese military, dressed in Tamil sari and with a Hindu dot on the forehead, in order to cross the lines into the territory controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. After denouncing the killing of Tamil civilians in acts of war, her agency had already been accused by the national media of partiality. Surely, she was 'confirming' that perception to the Sinhalese soldiers?

It is relevant to note that the Red Cross/Red Crescent and INGO Code of Conduct states a commitment to respect culture and custom. Will aid agencies then be prepared to provide guidance and instructions for staff on what constitutes culturally sensitive behaviour (the better tourist books already have a small section on this), and initiate disciplinary action against staff that are unable or unwilling to show sensitivity and respect? Admittedly, socially or culturally insensitive behaviour does not often by itself give rise to threats and violence. But it can provide fertile ground for those whose object is to stir up animosity towards international humanitarian agencies. Other important factors have to do with the agency's presence and programme. Remaining with an endangered population during times of insecurity can send a powerful message of solidarity (Lode, 1997: 37). On the other hand, resentment may be caused by inducing 'assessment fatigue' among populations, or by making promises of projects that never materialise.

It is possible, and in dangerous situations necessary, to consider one's programmes from a security point of view. One important question to ask is how controversial a programme may be? Water-supply programmes are far more contentious in Somalia than in Cambodia. The reconstruction of houses in an ethnically cleansed area is far more controversial than in other places where the displaced population can simply return to its homes. The provision of curative medicine and surgical instruments to LTTE-controlled areas in Sri Lanka is much more provocative than in Afghanistan where no government or armed party has tried or could hope to impose a military and economic embargo against its opponents.

A related issue concerns the politics of allocation and distribution. In humanitarian philosophy, the principle of non-discrimination refers to allocation on the basis of need only. But the power brokers and populations in a fragmented environment will often interpret non-discrimination as an 'equal share' for each interest group. Allocating resources on the basis of need, or providing services — like a health post — on the assumption that they will be for common use, may trigger violence among the antagonists; this violence may turn towards the aid agency. There are times when an agency cannot overcome the social divide but it ignores it at its own peril. It then may be forced to adopt other approaches: equal share, necessary duplication or equitable alternation. Necessary duplication means that each group has to be provided with its own service, in contravention of cost-effectiveness logic that holds in stable situations. Equitable alternation means the provision of a resource on a rotating basis: a mobile health clinic circulates among the antagonistic groups; the host population children attend school in the morning and the refugee children in the afternoon; 10

houses are first reconstructed in the territory of one group and the next 10 in the territory of the other group.

No less important are the effects of the programme on patterns of reciprocity and authority. The above discussion has mainly focused on the divide between larger antagonistic groups in conflict with each other. But there are lower-level circles of reciprocity, between host populations and displaced ones, between kin, neighbours and resource-user associations. Well-intentioned aid can undermine these patterns, which at some point may cause resentment and anger. Host populations become upset when aid is targeted only at the displaced people. Those who stayed during the years of violence feel bypassed when aid is targeted at the returnees. In south-east Afghanistan there are complex patterns of owner- and usership of 'karez' irrigation canals. These are easy to overlook or misunderstand, and getting all stakeholders together may be difficult if many of them are still absent as refugees in Pakistan. The well-intentioned sponsoring of the repair of the 'karez' may spark local conflict.

It is relevant to reflect on the socio-cultural definition of humanitarian resources. The relief system treats its commodities as 'neutral': externally managed, private property to which target beneficiaries are entitled as an individual human right. In a number of contexts, however, customary law defines certain resources as common property. The rationale is to guarantee the usufruct rights to all members of a culturally defined group, as a mechanism of assurance; where humanitarian aid is defined and perceived as 'outside' the socio-cultural system, it becomes lootable property. When offered as a common resource, the customary mechanisms of responsibly dealing with such, and of settling disputes and infractions if and when they arise, can be positively invoked (Bradbury, pers. comm.).

Humanitarian assistance that ignores and then replaces existing patterns of reciprocity over time may leave people more vulnerable. Just as when public welfare is cut back, that vulnerability may express itself in anger when the agency decides to close its programme.

Potentially more dangerous, however, is the perception by power brokers that the operation of a humanitarian agency undermines their power, either because it is felt to strengthen the opposing groups, or as loosening their grip on the population that they need to control. The fact that an agency stimulates and supports civic associations can already be sufficient. Hence a number of church workers were assassinated during the civil wars in Central America, not because they were active in the guerrilla movement, but because they supported civic associations. Literacy and legal aid projects, or programmes providing alternative employment opportunities to young males in areas where militias actively recruit, can all be seen as threats by oppressive power brokers. A number of important questions then need to be asked continuously: who benefits, who loses, who is bypassed by the programme? What is the power base of local power brokers? How could the agency's presence and programme (be seen to) threaten that power base?

Where humanitarian agencies themselves come to be perceived as power brokers, they must anticipate that those who feel threatened by them will project negative images of the agencies to others. They can find themselves in hostile environments. From Chechnya and Burundi it has been reported that there is widespread suspicion of the motives of aid agencies. This can be deliberately created and fuelled by disinformation efforts guided by one or more of the warring parties. In Sri Lanka, the national newspaper press in November 1995 engaged in an orchestrated campaign of

casting suspicion on international aid agencies at the time when a more assertive UN attitude towards a humanitarian crisis in Jaffna appeared a possibility. In Liberia in late 1992 the departure of the head of the UN co-ordination office was similarly hastened by a vitriolic press campaign (Scott, 1995: 19). Developing broad-based contacts with power brokers may no longer be possible or sufficient. Direct channels of communication to the population may be needed. This may stay at the level of project contacts, or need to be scaled up to wider 'humanitarian broadcasting'.

Acceptance and reciprocity Obtaining the consent and acceptance of the belligerents or armed factions makes eminent sense. But the cultivation of relationships *per se*, for the short-term gain of access and agency security, could be no more than pragmatic fieldcraft that at best compromises the agency's neutrality and at worst contributes to impunity (Bradbury, pers. comm.). The target beneficiaries may remain indifferent towards the security of the aid agency, or as we have seen, feel resentment and hostility about the way in which a programme is designed and implemented.

The agencies will have to analyse the nature of the relationship between the power brokers and the populations they control (Duffield and Prendergast, 1994: 154, 164). These may range from reciprocal, with armies and armed opposition groups extending public welfare (such as the Tigrayan and Eritrean people's liberation fronts during the Ethiopian civil war), to predatory (the Southern People's Liberation Front in Sudan especially prior to 1991; the Funcipec opposition before the Cambodian peace accords), to one of terror (Renamo in Mozambique; the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia).

The question then arises of the need to negotiate with the power brokers reciprocal obligations that concern not only the agency but also civilians and non-combatants. It is encouraging in that respect to see progress in agency practice. The Code of Conduct for International Rehabilitation and Development Assistance to Somalia (1995) for example refers to the pursuit of peace and respect for human rights almost as an afterthought, but the Joint Policy of Operations (1996) adopted in Liberia explicitly puts peace and the rights and capacities of the people of Liberia solidly at its centre (Atkinson, 1997: 27–8). In 1995 Operation Lifeline Sudan managed to obtain agreement with the warring parties in south Sudan on ground rules pertaining to the independence and security of humanitarian agencies. These ground rules, however, which include reference to basic rights of civilians, were discussed with local people in the process of their formulation and only then disseminated (Levine, 1997).

The more an agency explains its role, principles and criteria to populations, including those who are not its 'target', the more sensitive, respectful and consultative an agency and its staff are perceived to be, the greater the chance that the local populations themselves will start taking on co-responsibility for the security of an agency. This may be by convincing unruly elements that the agency should be respected and not attacked or stolen from, forewarning agency staff of possible threats and helping with the recovery of stolen property or a kidnapped staff member.

Where such reciprocity is pursued, agency security probably cannot be dissociated from the effort to extend protection to the civilians. It is not difficult to see how embittered local people would refrain from warning international actors about impending danger when, as happened under the UNPROFOR mandate in Bosnia, these are seen to be concerned only about their own security. This creates its own

dilemmas and risks: ignoring abuses against civilians may damage the agency's image and relationship with civilians, while addressing them may damage its image and relationship with violent power brokers.

The above considerations outline an approach to security that requires from agency field staff not only technical but also political and social science skills. Pre-conflict anthropological knowledge may be useful but is insufficient, given that pervasive violence can effect profound changes in a society (Menkhaus, 1996: 31). Improving the quality of staff in this regard has implications however for the personnel and staffing policies of aid agencies. The range of skills required becomes broad and necessitates significant experience (see also Slim, 1995). High staff turnover provides little time and incentive for investment in training and guarantees low returns on that investment when it is made. It is also not uncommon for staff who have shown ability in unstable situations to be deployed time and time again in stressful conditions, without consideration for the medium-term impact on their personal well-being and family life. This lack of more creative support for capable staff makes a number leave the 'business' altogether (see Macnair, 1995). Staff performance evaluations will have to give more weight to the ability to analyse the dynamics of a dangerous environment, to develop not only good internal but also good external relationships and to steer the agency relatively safely through its hazards.

Among aid agencies

In principle agencies should exchange information about risk, threats and incidents and co-ordinate their responses. There is therefore a strong case to be made for collaboration and collective discipline. Ideally agencies would agree on a basic operational protocol informed by ground rules. Those unwilling to adhere to it should be encouraged to withdraw and lose funding. Ideally again, the various agencies would collectively review and analyse security incidents, and discuss the most appropriate response.

There are a number of reasons why this does not happen; some of which are unacceptable. Security incidents are quickly 'buried' because making a fuss may anger those who are a potential threat even more, or may make the donor ask questions, or may negatively affect the recruitment of new staff. More cynical motivations concern the fact that a number of incidents are directly or indirectly caused by an agency itself, and may either reveal ignorance about the operating environment or negligence to do with security precautions — something an agency may prefer to cover up. One should anticipate however that increasingly relatives of deceased aid workers will start to question — and sue — agencies for neglect.

Where the programme design or the attitude of an agency staff member has directly or indirectly contributed to or even caused a security incident, other agencies may not support a firm and self-absolving response, but will distance and differentiate themselves. Thus an interagency inquiry into a series of security incidents on the Pakistani/Afghan border in 1990 revealed a widespread unsatisfactory agency performance. Repeated surveys and project promises that did not materialise, the bypassing of districts and their population *en route* to the project areas and the failure to relate to other than a few influential authorities, generated a discontent that provoked 'banditry' (Paktika Emergency Task Force, 1990). In contrast, one NGO continued to operate unhindered in the same area. This was partially due to its

immunisation programme targeting women and children of all factions, and thereby being inclusive, as well as the fact that controlling vaccines was of little political use. But partly also their comparative success was the result of careful preliminary assessments and good political ‘homework’. In Afghan eyes, it was perceived as different, and until other agencies developed more sensitive and informed ways of working, it could not take a common position with them.

It appears therefore not possible in general or *a priori* to recommend a unified interagency security authority, a role that is sometimes sought by or solicited from the UN. There have been several occasions when the UN wanted to or did suspend aid to a certain area, usually after incidents to which political initiatives or simple insensitivities of its staff or bureaucracy had contributed (see Menkhaus, 1996). On such occasions, other agencies may decide not to support the measure. Much depends on the specifics of the local power dynamics and the role that aid and its agencies come to play in these.

What should however drastically improve is the open exchange of information and viewpoints on threats and incidents among agencies, so that they can learn from each other, and at least understand the different positions others may take. Individual agencies should adopt policies to share information about security-related issues, and where an interagency joint policy is adopted with the explicit purpose to protect agency property and personnel, this should not be disregarded by newcomers or renegade agencies (see Atkinson, 1997: 23).

Donors

Donor agencies do not have to be passive observers of how aid agencies deal with insecurity and risk. There are many ways in which they can contribute to raising the level of professional security management on the agenda:

- They can commission or fund research on particular types of security incidents, such as hostage taking, and the responses to them.
- They can request that, in their programme proposals, agencies make assessments about the security situation.
- The impact of agency conduct and programme design on security can be written into the terms of their evaluations.
- They can suspend grant disbursements when there are indications that an agency is flaunting an agreed interagency joint policy.
- They can fund agencies to do preliminary analysis and relationship building prior to designing and implementing a full programme.
- They can support training in security management and fund still relatively unusual field positions such as ‘conflict analysts’.
- They can encourage agencies to enquire into security incidents and the response to them, and to share that information.

There are also indirect ways in which donors can contribute to reduced risk: they can show flexibility about the type of commodities delivered, especially with regard to changing from more to less lootable items, and they can invest in measures that promote livelihood security and employment opportunities to provide alternatives to violence as an economic strategy. Importantly, they can also invest more actively in

the development of balanced and constructive national and international media, and in impartial and effective national law-and-order forces and a judiciary.

International political actors

Front-line diplomacy and the management of security at field level may however remain relatively ineffective if not backed up by international pressure. Short of military deployment, this can be exercised through legal, economic and political means. The experience of recent years has probably mostly served to highlight the ineffectiveness of threat with legal action. International tribunals cannot bring to trial the main perpetrators of gross violations (see Vandeginste, 1997) while peace accords with or without a truth commission usually involve a form of amnesty (see Armon and Wilson, 1997: 18–27; Lode, 1997: 54).

While the threat of legal action should not be dropped, it should be complemented by various forms of political and economic pressure. Most warring groups have, and need, international links. Some have political aspirations and seek recognition; others have economic interests at stake. Either represents an opportunity for leverage. During the factional fighting in Monrovia, Liberia in April 1996, the offices, vehicles and stocks of UN and NGO agencies were looted. Violence was also directed against prominent Liberian civic leaders who had become increasingly outspoken against the commercialisation of the Liberian war and the increasing prominence of armed interests in the successive peace accords (Armon and Carl, 1996: 31). The fact that the EU delegation and assets were unaffected by the looting may have been attributable to firm preventive warning to the faction leaders by EU staff. If however there had not been a perception that the EU had sufficient clout to affect the short-term or long-term interests of the faction leaders, would such warning have been heeded?

It may not always be possible to exert direct political influence or pressure on power brokers that violate human rights and threaten humanitarian agencies. Two so far relatively little used or explored avenues to indirect influence are private business interests and the diaspora of a population in a country in conflict. The idea of a code of conduct for companies investing in or doing business with countries at war has already been suggested (Cairns, 1997: 95). There may also be scope to try and enlist, for example, oil companies in Colombia, mining interests in the former Zaire or companies negotiating with the Taliban to construct a gas pipeline through Afghanistan in the quest for ground rules that include respect for the security of humanitarian personnel. In the same vein, it is known that the diasporas of Sri Lankans, Liberians and Croatians play important political and economic roles in and around the conflict that affected or affects these countries. Here too there may be opportunities and channels of influence to have the armed groups operate with more restraint and respect.

Where the international community has to deploy troops, their mandate and rules of engagement should be very clear and their responses to incidents and provocations as thought through as those of aid agencies. The experience of Somalia highlights the crucial importance of building relationships, and of restrictive rules of engagement that allow only a very targeted use of force. Disarmament is an area where further analysis appears required. Excluding disarmament from a mandate begs the question, first of all in the eyes of populations under threat, of why the troops were deployed in

the first place? Admittedly the practicalities of disarmament on the other hand may implicate UN troops in a changing balance of power and hence perceived partiality. This occurred in Kismayo in Somalia, where one armed group successfully attacked the faction in the town after the latter's heavy weapons had been confiscated by the UN (African Rights, 1993).

Conclusion

In a high-risk situation the warring factions, supported by their regional and international political and economic contacts, have relatively free play. With their threatened or actual violence, they can intimidate and manipulate local populations, aid agencies and the international community. The intent of a multi-track approach, as outlined here, is to develop an alliance between international political actors, aid agencies and local populations, whose combined pressure on the warring factions — and ideally also on their direct or indirect 'collaborators' — will restrict their free play, and thereby restrain them into respecting basic principles and rules of conduct.

Notes

1. The title is an explicit reference to *In Search of Cool Ground* edited by T. Allen and published in 1996 by UNRISD, James Curry and Africa World Press. Just as the displaced they may have come to assist, aid workers are increasingly in search of a secure place.
2. Both in Europe and the US some recent initiatives propose the development of a database of security incidents to inform an analysis that includes trends.
3. The Sri Lankan government has signed the 1947 Geneva Conventions but not the 1977 Additional Protocols. The LTTE, in a 1988 letter to the UN Commission on Human Rights, explicitly states its acceptance of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols. Such stated intentions should of course be measured against practice.
4. Car accidents and health hazards remain a major risk for aid workers. We therefore use the word 'threat' for those situations whereby the property and the physical integrity of aid agency staff are endangered by violence. UNHCR for one developed a Personal Security Awareness training programme with nine modules including one on risk awareness, but between 1994–6 the agency managed to train less than 6 per cent of its staff working in areas of security risk.
5. An exception is the ICRC which since late 1996 submits all new staff members to a five-day full simulation exercise that very realistically exposes them to what working in areas of armed conflict is like. They are then invited to reaffirm their commitment and only then is a contract signed.

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