Reporting Humanitarian Narratives – are we missing out on the politics?

Introduction

Western audiences have become accustomed to the way the media report crises in the developing world. The framing of the coverage frequently focuses upon the *humanitarian* dimension of the crisis, often to the exclusion of other aspects. This chapter will discuss how the nature of this coverage has evolved and the extent to which the trope of humanitarian reporting is closely connected with how many NGOs seek to interpret and portray faraway suffering. It will also highlight the notable contrast with the manner in which crises in developed nations are interpreted; where there is a more rounded and nuanced understanding of the origins and effects of the problem. The chapter will further investigate how the focus of attention upon the humanitarian dimension in the reporting can mean that there is diminished evidence of a political understanding of the nature of such crises in faraway places.

There is a well-understood argument that faraway crises are constructed by media coverage, because without the media, in most cases there would be no awareness or knowledge of such events (Benthall, 2010). Indeed many serious crises are hidden from view and the wider world is barely aware they exist (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2002) (Hawkins, 2008) (Sen Arijit, 2011). Yet even when there is reporting, the nature of the coverage is not necessarily sufficiently well informed to give audiences an adequate picture. According to Ian Smillie what we experience is "random, fickle and incomplete" … because reporting and understanding faraway

places and in particular “news about the developing world is authorless, anchorless and impossible to understand or follow” (Smillie, The Alms Bazaar, 1995).

All too often the reporting of humanitarian crises in the developing world and particularly in Africa follows a familiar narrative. Its emphasis is upon distant suffering of helpless civilians who are usually awaiting some kind of salvation from external forces. This has been well examined, originally by (Boltanski, 1999) in *Distant Suffering* and more recently by Chouliaraki in *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Chouliaraki L. , 2006). It is apparent that the tone and focus of this coverage of humanitarian crises from the developing world is very often disconnected from wider explanations and understanding.

Unlike the coverage of crises in more developed regions, the suffering is often highlighted in exclusion from and not linked to causes, explanations, and even possible solutions. Invariably this simplification and intense focus upon suffering – usually in the form of shocking visual images – leaves out so much else. In particular there is no emphasis upon political causes underlying the problem or political processes as a means to solve the issues (Calhoun, 2016). Or at best these are dealt with in a superficial and stereotypical manner, or sometimes misconceived and inaccurately described. The pattern of this kind of reporting cannot be viewed in isolation as only a failing of the media. Sometimes it is in the particular interests of the political players both the donors and those in the country where the crisis is situated to minimize the role of politics. This framing is also part of a narrative conveyed by NGOs involved in fundraising for humanitarian crises who may wish to

downplay contradictory and complicated factors at the expense of a simplified story of suffering that requires urgent outside assistance.

Origins of Humanitarian Reporting

The birth of what has become known as "humanitarian reporting" in the modern era began with the international coverage of the Biafran war in the 1960s. The consequence of the fighting between the Igbo secessionists and the Nigerian state was widespread starvation and suffering amongst the civilian Igbo population. During the course of that conflict a new form of crisis reporting was born and this eventually became the dominant influence on the way that western media came to interpret disasters in the developing world for the decades that followed. Shocking visual images of civilian suffering, including starving children, became headline news on mainstream international television output and very unusually even in the tabloid press. It was a confluence of several factors which led to this new form of coverage; developments in technology which made the mass media use of such images a daily possibility, a developing awareness amongst NGOs of the potency of such images, a highly media literate group of advisers who surrounded the rebel forces and journalists who were interested in a new way of reporting which gained them extraordinary visibility (Harrison & Palmer, 1986).

Colonel Ojukwo leader of the rebel Biafrans had used the services of a PR agency Markpress, based in Geneva to promote his cause. He also attracted some high profile and media literate supporters, such as Frederick Forsyth (the future thriller writer), who disappeared from his post as a BBC reporter covering the war in order to become a cheerleader for the Biafran cause. A number of key aid agency workers – in

particular those working for the Irish based Catholic relief mission- became passionate advocates for the suffering Biafran civilians (Harrison & Palmer, 1986). And other relief workers such as Bernard Kouchner (the future French foreign minister) were so moved by the suffering that they founded the relief agency Medicines sans Frontiers in response to their desire to offer solidarity with the Biafran cause. The shocking images of Biafran children starving became a cause célèbre for radical protest in western capitals. And for years to come the very word "Biafran" was associated with these images of extreme starvation.

This support for the Igbo cause mediated through the use of shocking images of hunger and suffering translated into a huge flow of aid and assistance provided by independent NGOs prepared to challenge the Nigerian blockade. There were dramatic night time flights into Biafra conveying food and medical aid (and it eventually transpired, arms and ammunition were also being smuggled aboard). More cynically the rebel regime charged "landing fees" and an unrealistic exchange rate which became its prime source of foreign currency and was in turn used for purchasing arms. (Barrow & Jenkins, 2001) This "back story" to the Biafran crisis only emerged much later and became a complicated twist to the dominant narrative conveyed by the terrible images. Yet it was an important and political context because it eventually emerged that the use of the pictures of hungry children had unintentionally enabled the rebels, whose cause was ultimately a hopeless one, to continue fighting for months if not years longer than they would otherwise have been able, inevitably leading to far more suffering and death. In this way the aid, which was raised internationally and donated to Biafra as a result of the propaganda effort, could be viewed as having done "more harm than good." The over riding imperative was to end the suffering of

starving civilians whose plight was plastered across popular media – print and television – rather than a more nuanced discourse able to understand the complicated political situation, and the complex assessments needed to resolve the crisis. One of the journalists who had covered the story, Colin Legum, later commented that "Your head was telling you one thing but your heart was telling you something very different." (BBC, 1995)

Famine in Ethiopia

Some years after Biafra there was another world wide transmission of a report of African suffering when the 1984 story of the Ethiopian famine broke on BBC Television (Harrison & Palmer, 1986). The reporter Michael Buerk (and the Visnews cameraman Mo Amin) travelled to Tigray in northern Ethiopia and broadcast a news report containing harrowing pictures of widespread starvation which was then transmitted on over 400 stations worldwide and won countless awards. Buerk memorably used the phrase "biblical famine" to describe the grim scenes he witnessed there (Buerk, 2004). Once again this was a complicated and unpleasant story of competing military and political actors who were largely indifferent to civilian suffering (Rieff, 2002; Buerk, 2004). But this uncomfortable dimension to the suffering was largely absent from the ensuing media coverage. Despite the work of Amartya Sen and others on the significant social and political origins of famine, this barely resonated in the way the story was portrayed, as it reverberated around the world including mainstream tabloid outlets (Sen A. , 1981; de Waal, 1997). Instead the international attention, on a scale that was without precedent with its accompanying powerful images focused upon what was apparently a "natural disaster." A singular narrative depicted an unfortunate population starving due to lack of annual

rains. The accompanying celebrity involvement and in particular the birth of "compassion through rock music" under the aegis of Band Aid and Live Aid reinforced this simple and uncomplicated coverage. (Harrison & Palmer, 1986)

Ethiopia in 1984/5 thereby assumed the narrative of a story of "pure humanitarian suffering" which required straightforward humanitarian assistance. It was even characterized as "a golden age of humanitarianism" which referred to the apparent nature of the suffering and the world wide compassionate response (Robinson, 2002). This became the dominant frame both at the time and in popular memory, largely through the collective experience of Live Aid and the associated fund raising. Yet there is clear evidence that even as the famine unfolded there was a wider political dimension that was being conveniently side lined, both internally in the causes of the famine and externally in the international response.

The original report of the famine, which became such a momentous news sensation was treated as a *sudden event*, yet self-evidently famine is a long and slow process. This sense of a breaking news story is what propelled the issue into the international headlines. However it is clear that Western governments had been aware of the famine for many months, so it is rather strange that the day after the BBC report there was an emergency statement to the UK Parliament reacting to the revelations in the news and promising emergency relief. For the diplomats, Foreign Office officials and Ministers this was not breaking news. Yet they reacted as if the images were a shocking revelation of an unknown and humanitarian crisis, a natural disaster. The internal group within the UK government set up to monitor the public response was called the "Ethiopian Drought Group" (Franks, 2013). Yet in fact the

causes of the famine were well beyond lack of rains, but the title ignored the social and political origins of the crisis.

Paradoxically it could be argued that at the time it was specifically because there *were* wider political reasons that the international response was largely limited to dealing with what was framed as a non-political humanitarian crisis. The dominant cold war ideology still infused much of western foreign policy. As Ethiopia was firmly within the Soviet sphere, this meant that long term engagement in development was out of the question for Western countries. They were prepared to send emergency aid, but even in doing this they were determined to use evidence of the donations as a means of criticizing the "other" side. Both the US President Reagan and in the UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made much of the contrast between the generosity of the Western nations providing humanitarian relief, compared with the Eastern bloc that were only interested in supplying arms (Franks, 2013). Western aid was given a high media profile. For example, there was a determined priority encouraging Royal Air Force air drops of food which made for great television pictures, even though aid workers criticized this for being expensive and inefficient way of providing relief. The overriding message was that this was a natural disaster and the aid kindly supplied by generous Western donors would feed the suffering and solve the problem.

It is a further paradox that the same attitude toward the crisis was apparent from within the Ethiopian regime, despite their very different ideological alignment. The problem was only ever described as a drought (Article 19, 1990). For obvious reasons there was no willingness to acknowledge the political background to the famine in Tigray and Eritrea. The war against the secessionists despite being on a huge scale

was conducted largely in secret from both the national and international media. For example one of the medical aid workers described how during that period she once stumbled across a ward full of wounded Ethiopian soldiers who were usually kept out of sight of foreigners (Bertschinger, 2005, p. 126). Similarly the deliberate policies against the civilians in those areas were not being acknowledged and this included the brutal villagization or resettlement policy that caused many thousands of deaths (Brauman, 1988). In fact some assessments claim that it was as deadly as the famine itself (Clay,1989). So there was a convenient labelling of the crisis as solely attributable to lack of rainfall, rather than the vanishing entitlements of a vulnerable population attributable to political and military decisions (Giorgis, 1989). Crucially this again played into the convenient and simple narrative of humanitarian suffering devoid of political causes that could therefore be relieved by the transfer of aid.

The preference of the Ethiopian regime – as in many other similar crises from Myanmar to Somalia – was that they distrusted international NGOs and therefore wanted where possible, to keep the delivery of aid within their own ambit. This was not just for straightforward political reasons of control but also because aid could then sometimes be diverted elsewhere - something that Polman (2011) argues inevitably takes place to a greater or lesser extent, against a background of conflict. It was particularly significant in this crisis because the Ethiopian government was seeking to use the aid for its forced resettlement program of moving the population away from the northern areas affected by the famine (Clay & Holcomb, 1986). This became highly controversial and when Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) spoke out publicly against this policy and the way that international aid was being used to support it, the doctors were subsequently expelled from the country (Brauman, 1988). Other

agencies including the UN were accused of being complicit by not preventing this use of aid to fulfil such a policy. In some cases the Ethiopian government insisted on making the supply of food to hungry children contingent upon their parents' agreement to being resettled.

Medicins Sans Frontiers (MSF) argued that NGOs and the UN needed to engage with the political realities of relief rather than allowing the Ethiopian government to manipulate them. But by trying to keep the agenda to a simple one of looking after the needy and not enquiring further or avoiding confrontation, many of the agencies and of course the government of Mengistu were limiting the problem to a pure humanitarian crisis, with potentially devastating consequences for the population of the affected areas. The Article 19 report *Starving in Silence* highlighted this dilemma and concluded that "it is essential that the coverage is politically informed. Over-hyped naively "humanitarian" reporting can be as bad as no reporting at all." The report went on to say "the Band Aid factor distracts attention from the need to address the political causes underlying the famines in Ethiopia" (Article 19, 1990).

Rwanda and its consequences

A further and very prominent example of how a story of humanitarian suffering became disconnected from a wider political context occurred in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, when millions of refugees fled across the border to Eastern Congo in 1994. There was a well-reported crisis in the camps dealing with this huge influx of refugees, which was linked to a major aid appeal to Western nations. Hundreds of NGOs descended upon the area to minister to those who had arrived in

the camps. Yet it was only some time later that it emerged that many of those receiving succor were in fact from the Interahamwe, the Hutu genocidaires and their families who had left Rwanda when they feared that they might be sought out by the invading RPF armies. David Rieff makes the following comparison "It is as if two hundred thousand SS soldiers had taken their families out of Nazi Europe as it fell to the Allies, to somewhere they could hope to be sheltered from retribution, by sympathetic NGOs" (Rieff, 2002, p. 53).

The fault for this misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the refugee crisis in and around Goma in 1994 lay both with the NGOs and with the media (Terry, 2002). The aid agencies that arrived in unprecedented numbers were caught up with the immediate challenge of caring for a huge volume of refugees. There was plenty of competitive posturing in this as it was also a valuable fundraising opportunity because of the focus of attention (Dowden, 2004). Yet they failed to ask the right questions of who was being helped. Meanwhile the media too were failing to understand and to probe into what was going on. It is well known that journalists neglected the Rwandan genocide, partly because it coincided with a major story in South Africa; the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as President so in the aftermath of the genocide few journalists had sufficient understanding of what was really happening. George Alagiah of the BBC for example admits that for a week he (along with many others) failed to comprehend and properly report the story of the refugee crisis (Alagiah, 2001, p. 120)

With this wholesale misinterpretation of major stories of crises, we are left to question if delving into the complexities of such events matters less when the crises occur in

Africa. **If we compare coverage of Africa to coverage of commensurate crises in Europe, we find that media reporting differs greatly.** The reporting of difficult confrontations in other parts of the world such as the long drawn out Northern Irish crisis or the fighting in the Balkans in the 1990s were subject to different standards of reporting (Myers, 1996). The humanitarian suffering in the Balkans in the 1990s was never encapsulated solely as a story of hopeless victims engaged in an inexplicable suffering. There was a repeated explanation of the background to the suffering images, well-understood causes for the fighting between the groups involved, and ultimately an explicable political process. At no point was this simply an impossible story of "warring tribes." On the other hand the shorthand and frequently lazy formulation of "ethnic conflict" is used all too often in African crises (Allen & Seaton, 1999) from Darfur to Rwanda to Kenya. The contrast between the explanation of the Bosnian and Rwandan crises makes clear how the reporting differs and how this in turn gives a very different frame (Myers, 1996).

"Pure Humanitarianism"

The problem with these cases is that media's acceptance and promotion of simplistic narratives of humanitarian crisis, devoid of complexities and context, has historically led to unintended consequences. As Andersen (2006) has argued in the case of the Civil War in El Salvador, lack of political context when reporting conflict has historically led to the trope of hopelessness in news coverage. When media mystify the causes of conflict and viewers are offered no understanding and therefore no pathways for action, human suffering becomes as hopeless as it is inevitable. Hopelessness without political context has been characterized by the filmmaker Adam

Curtis as the phenomenon of "O Dearism" (Curtis, 2009). He describes this "pure" decontextualized version of humanitarian events, where the focus is on faraway victims and inexplicable suffering, as a disconnected exclamation of "O Dear," an attitude of helplessness and inability to deal with the problem. His film makes a plea to reinsert the political understanding necessary to engage with so many apparently "humanitarian" crises. Curtis links the end of the Cold War as the origins of O Dearism because of the disappearance of an overarching framework of ideology, but in fact the disconnected framing of humanitarian suffering had begun well before this point and was evident already in the coverage of the crisis in Biafra.

So who is at fault for the omission of politics and for the problem of the "pure humanitarian" interpretations? There are at least three substantial and interconnected sets of causes we can identify. Firstly, news reporting allows the political dimension to be left out. In particular, the reliance upon images and the unwillingness to explain the complexities and confront the stereotypes have far reaching consequences.

Secondly, there is the complex role of the NGOs, many of which are now global multi- million dollar brands. As a consequence, what are now relatively powerful institutions may seek a consciously apolitical position in many of these situations, which is particularly significant given their increasingly direct use of media to report events in the field. (Cooper, 2011) As Nieman (2009) agues, many NGOs are seeking to preserve a role for themselves and their own brand using effective Public Relations, and media are influenced by these strategies. The uncomfortable reality may therefore not be acknowledged that on occasion it could be better not to intervene or even to withdraw because humanitarian aid might not be achieving its goals (Howard, 2010). In addition, these complications make it increasingly difficult to determine when and

if relief agencies and international NGOs are the best actors to take on the burden of humanitarian relief. In some cases, shouldering a burden that may be better shouldered locally may absolve those intent on fighting of responsibility (Holmes, 2013). This is a version of what is sometimes referred to as "fungibility" where support from aid agencies allows recipient governments to shift resources around and pursue other agendas, even that extends conflict? (Sobhee and Nath, 2010). Indeed, Linda Polman (2010, 2011) in her critiques of the aid world cites many examples where humanitarian intervention led to worsening outcomes.

This links to the third set of causes for the absence of politics, which derives from the intentions of those who are participants. There are many reasons why certain actors involved in a crisis, both directly as protagonists or indirectly for example as donor nations, would favor a limited interpretation of humanitarian crisis, preferring wherever possible that disasters remain "natural." At a global level, many in the international community might wish to preserve the status quo. In many cases where aid is required the recipients, even in "normal times," are living very close to the edge of extreme poverty and potential hunger. Addressing the overall causes for such huge disparities would itself be viewed as destabilizing and a challenge to the hegemony that governs the international distribution of power (Chouliaraki L. , 2012). Not engaging with the complex inequities and balances of global power is a result of avoiding a discussion of deep structural economic inequalities that characterize the global North and South Meanwhile participants on the ground, in particular competing violent groups, may have their own agendas. Linda Polman's argument is that many want aid as a tool for their own ends and to exploit as a potential powerful commodity, rather than a resource for helping needy civilians (Polman, 2011). In

other crises, protagonists above all favor a lack of interference, insisting that the international community should just provide the aid and keep themselves at arms length. Such is the case that has played out for some years in Somalia for example with the resistance by groups like Al Shabab to NGO relief work (Holmes, 2013).

John Holmes was the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and in this capacity between 2007 and 2010 dealt with a range of devastating crises ranging from Darfur to Haiti (Holmes, 2013). In the account of this period "The Politics of Humanity" Holmes, became convinced of the overwhelming need to understand the nuance and complexity of the political dimensions of these problems, arguing that "media coverage is not interested in nuance and the experts are not listened to because what they say is not black and white enough to conform to our prejudices." It is apparent from so many of the crises he describes, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or the Sri Lankan Tamils, that instead of simple dichotomies between good and evil, or black and white, only multiple juxtaposed shades of grey actually exist. And the civil war in Syria has provided a further example of this with multiple warring groups where outsiders find it almost impossible to decipher and understand who is worthy of support.

Situations like this do not provide a ready narrative either for media or the public because they are too complex and indecipherable. As a consequence, once again the focus becomes the overwhelming scale of humanitarian suffering, a frame disconnected from the complicated political causation (Calhoun, 2016). In this way even a crisis like the Haitian earthquake in 2010, which by all appearances is purely a "natural" disaster, also has a profound political dimension. The ongoing chaos of

relief efforts in Haiti and the failure after years to satisfactorily rebuild despite the huge scale of aid and involvement of thousands of NGOs, indicates the profound political background to such a crisis (Katz, 2014).

Understanding Africa

This history of media coverage of Africa has left its mark on the global perception of the continent, and that in turn has deeply affected the ways in which humanitarian crises have been understood, narrated and responded to. The absence of a political understanding of the often messy political realities in continuing African crises has led to a particular dilemma. For some years there has been a debate about the persistent negative reporting of Africa (Hawk, 1992, Wainaina, 2005) (Bunce, Franks and Paterson, 2016). The term "Afro-Pessimism" conveys the lack of positive news in the way that Africa is depicted in the international news media, with the continual emphasis upon unpleasant suffering rather than the more balanced news frames that are used in reporting other areas of the world. This has led on to a determined effort to try and highlight "good news stories" in the reporting of Africa (Gault, 2007) to try and counter Afro-Pessimism. But the origins of this negative framing in the coverage can also be traced back to the same absence of political understanding. (Pawson, 2007) Since those original powerful images use in the Biafran crisis a key characteristic of reporting from Africa was a disconnected story without a context of politics and the ability to politically solve anything. As a result, the reporting became a parade of misery, a succession of wars, famines and disasters - punctuated by the occasional celebrity story of someone famous coming to "help."

If the frame of the story is terrible suffering, conveyed by such images with little means to engage with how the crisis could be understood and potentially solved, then there is inevitably a degree of hopelessness, which has thus been characterized as "Afro-pessimism." In many ways this is a direct legacy of the power of images to override a complex and difficult to interpret narrative. The saying goes that " a picture is worth a thousand words" but equally so there are many cases where a picture can obscure and distort the words that a journalist might be seeking to convey. (Luyendijk, 2010) And in the new media and social media environment there are even more ways in which pictures can be misleading. (Cooper, 2011) (Cottle and Cooper, 2015)

David Clark has written in particular about the production of the contemporary famine image (Clark, 2004) and the immense (global) resonance that surrounds these pictures as a recent phenomenon. But as we have seen, it was the Ethiopian famine, (and the Biafran conflict beforehand) that established the trope of the images of distant suffering. In addition, such imaging corresponded to the significant rise in NGOs, which were experiencing a powerful impact from these new forms of global communication. "1984/5 was a crucial moment in the trajectory of NGOs. It brought their work prominence and assured them greater prestige and a much larger income than they had experienced previously. These benefits were achieved by virtue of a hyper-inflation in images of Africa" (Lidichi, 1993, p. 107). Such image tropes are shocking and powerful, but they also result in a paradox. If their simplistic "pure humanitarian frame," which reduces the trope to the simple suffering victims, obscures an awkward and complicated message of political realities, where for example multiple unpleasant protagonists vie for control, and in turn are offered aid, that may in turn result in worse harm.

Rethinking African Images

The images surrounding the coverage of the Ethiopian famine were able to yield such extraordinary reactions that it prompted some thinking by a group of aid agencies about the potency and power of such pictures. In particular it led to soul searching about the ways that Africa was being depicted through a kind of biblical suffering this visual style portrays (van der Gaag & Nash, 1987).This deliberation led eventually to agreements and codes of conduct by NGOs on the use of images, starting with Article 10 of the Red Cross Code in 1992. Yet many years later it is still apparent that many of the images used regularly by some (but not all) NGOs in their marketing and fund raising are far from being "responsible." The agendas of many NGOs is to highlight suffering and achieve donations and this "commodification of suffering" remains the most effective way to achieve those goals, even if it reduces the message to an oversimplified and distorted one. (Aid Thoughts, 2009)

The way that NGOs portray themselves and relate to crises has received some attention in the recent literature (Kalcsics, 2011). At the most basic level they want simplicity, a message that will enhance and not impede fund raising. A humanitarian crisis, caused by a complex emergency where multiple unpleasant warring factions are in a protracted conflict, is not a good message to distil to the charity-giving public (Smillie & Minear, 2004). The ongoing conflict in the Congo, which since the mid 1990s has seen more loss of life than any other war since 1945, is a prime example of all these difficulties. Referred to as "Africa's hidden world war" (Benn, 2004) it has remained relatively unreported, and therefore notoriously difficult from a fundraising perspective. There have been specific aspects of the conflict, in particular the repeated

incidents of mass rape, which have managed to highlight sporadic attention, but those stories have been rather disconnected from the broader political context and the inevitable negotiating process that would be the only way to curtail this situation for good (Holmes, 2013, pp. 148-155). There are plenty of stories and fundraising for rape crisis centers and medical assistance but as Holmes argues there is insufficient wider political will to engage with the underlying causes of the suffering.

Urs Boegli a former head of the ICRC media services made the observation "Far too many disasters with political causes and for which there can only be political solutions are today labelled "humanitarian crises"… After all, rape is rape...no one would describe it as a "gynaecological disaster." Yet conflicts, which are referred to as "humanitarian disasters," are often much more than that. This steers the international response in the wrong direction, towards purely humanitarian action in cases where political action is required" (Boegli, 1998).

Boegli and many others are seeking to find ways to explain and interpret that does not present a distinct "pure humanitarian" story set apart from other analysis and concerns. In this way we should look for a unified narrative, which reflects the far more nuanced way that we report from within our own societies, rather than using the frame of a *humanitarian* narrative, which is about the hopeless, inevitable suffering of a distant "other," reporting devoid of political nuance, explanation and public understanding.

The message that many aid professionals have unthinkingly used and that media have promoted is that "A starving child knows no politics" (BBC, 2000). The assumption

is that it should be a straightforward matter of providing help for such a (blameless) victim and that there is somehow a neutral zone where that is achievable, without having to engage with complex surrounding political realities. In this scenario, the role of the relief worker is simple; cut through the middle, provide the aid and unquestioningly, save lives. Yet in the context of many complex emergencies this now appears to be naïve, simplistic, and ultimately counterproductive. As Alex de Waal has argued " A hungry child is created by politics" (de Waal, 1997). To end the cycle of on-going humanitarian crisis, it is imperative that relief agencies, recipients, governments and the media all acknowledge and engage the complex political and social realities that increasingly define the context of disaster. Only then will donors, agencies, governments and publics be able understand disasters and respond in ways befitting a global humanitarian community.

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