



2002

No. 02-28

*DISCOURSES OF DISASTERS, DISCOURSES OF RELIEF AND DFID'S
HUMANITARIAN AID POLICY.*

A diagnostic snapshot of the crisis of relief as a legitimate and universal instrument in contemporary conflict

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Published: April 2002

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I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 The debate

The 1990s have seen an intense debate regarding the role of relief in conflict situations. By contributing to war economies and military strategies relief has been diagnosed to be part of the problem, especially following the Rwandan genocide and refugee crisis. “Relief fuels war” became an almost self-evident statement repeated in numerous academic and popular publications. As the new Labor government took office in 1997 and a separate Department for International Development (DFID) headed by a Secretary of State was established, the debate surrounding the role of humanitarian relief was ongoing. The government’s White Paper on International Development emphasized the need to reconsider the implications of “diversion and manipulation of external assistance” (White Paper, 1997: pt.3.54) for humanitarian response. Secretary of State Clare Short later on called for a “new humanitarianism” that does not just treat symptoms but addresses the causes of conflict (Short, 1998). In summary relief has faced fundamental criticism and its value as an end in itself has been called into question. This dissertation will look into the history of ideas behind these developments and analyze how a donor, DFID, has incorporated the critique of relief into its humanitarian policy. The response of donors to the challenges of relief will shape the future of humanitarian assistance and therefore constitutes an important question for research.

I.2 Aims and methodology

This paper will review DFID’s position on humanitarian assistance within the wider context of academic and agency-discourses that provide a - necessarily - fragmentary “history of ideas” on relief. This “history of ideas” will illustrate how certain conceptions and criticisms of relief have become entrenched. Against the background of these discourses we shall look at DFID’s policy and identify certain similarities and differences in underlying definitions and perceptions of relief and disasters. The paper argues that material relief has been increasingly dislodged and de-legitimized as an appropriate

response to disasters in general and conflicts in particular.¹ DFID's policy is symptomatic of this development in that it is both affected by and responding to it.

Following a short outlook on the context of relief in contemporary conflict situations, two influential discourses on the subject of relief will be reviewed. The first, academic discourse focuses upon disasters, their causes and consequences. Starting from a short review of the famine discussion the paper proceeds to a brief overview of recent ideas explaining violence and conflict. The second, partly academic and partly popular discourse focuses upon the impact of relief on people and institutions and the relationship between relief and development. This discourse is more concerned with practice than with a sophisticated analysis of causal relationships. Both discourses are intertwined and united by a critical view of "pure" relief that may have unintended consequences and in fact "fuel" conflict.

Theory or academic debates can be understood as contributing to both the destruction and the creation of certain knowledge(s). The latter become incorporated into practices i.e. "practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken for granted meet and interconnect." (Foucault, 1978:5). These regimes prescribe what is to be done ("jurisdiction") and what is to be known or represents "truth" ("veridiction", *ibid.*). Policies can be understood to form part of "regimes of practices" where knowledge and power interact (Schaffer, 1984: 156). This dissertation looks at the establishment of certain truths on disasters and relief and their integration into public policy.

In the following we will follow a "holistic" understanding of public policy i.e. policy is not understood as separate from implementation. "Public policy is after all what it does." (Schaffer, 1984:189). DFID's humanitarian aid to Sierra Leone in 1997/98 will provide an example of practice in this paper. This case preceded the formulation of the policy statement on conflict and humanitarian response two years later and has been described

¹ This said I do not mean to write a paper in defense of relief – or of the "real existing" international relief system.

as a “policy experiment” (Macrae/Leader, 2000:24) for a more coherent response to humanitarian crisis. It therefore deserves attention.

The dissertation is based upon a review of primary (reports, statements, resolutions, policies, parliamentary debates etc.) and a wide selection of secondary sources. In addition two semi-structured interviews with senior policy makers have been conducted.

I.3 Context: Patterns of contemporary internal conflicts

A majority of contemporary conflicts are internal conflicts (Gantzel, 1997). They are blamed for the dramatic rise in non-military deaths: it is estimated that 90% of today’s war deaths are civilians (Turton, 1997).

The disengagement of previous superpowers since the end of the cold war has led to heavy cuts in military and overseas development assistance (ODA) for developing countries at the economic and political periphery (Duffield, 1994a: pp.18, Volman, 1998). This has contributed to the declining competence of the state. In the post- cold war era massive and centrally controlled armies have become hard to sustain. In many war-torn and war-prone countries decentralized war strategies and low-cost war technologies have taken over from centralized and cost-intensive military strategies (de Waal, 1997b). Self-financing technologies of warfare include the involvement of armies in illicit commercial activities, the use of militia, the mobilization of fighters along ethnic lines, the forcible conscription of adults (and children) and looting and pillaging from the local population (de Waal, 1997b).

Sovereignty as a guiding principle of non-interference in the relations between states has lost its exclusive significance following the end of superpower-confrontation. It was openly discarded in the 1992 UN “Agenda for peace”. This agenda provided legitimate avenues to actively intervene in (internal) conflicts in the name of human rights and the ideal of a “liberal” peace based upon the Washington consensus that involves a commitment to democratic rule (“good government”) and an open international trading system (Harriss, 1995: pp.2, Macrae/Leader, 2000:12). On several occasions (Somalia,

Bosnia, Iraq etc.) the “international community became de facto a belligerent” (Macrae/Leader, *ibid.*) with the UN taking a lead role.

I.4 Context: The international humanitarian response

From the late eighties to mid-1990s the proportion of emergency-related expenditure in ODA increased substantially (from 3% in 1988 to almost 10% at its height in 1994, Macrae/Leader, 2000:15). These funds have often been channeled through NGOs as “sub-contractors” of government funded programs (Korten, 1990: pp.102). Consequently the number of humanitarian NGOs involved in (conflict-) relief proliferated. For a long time conflicts had been “monopolized” by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC, compare Bradbury, 1995:21). The ICRC is mandated by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to fulfill specific functions in conflicts and operates under a set of principles that have come to influence humanitarian work in general.

One of these principles, neutrality, is best understood as the attempt to stay outside ideological controversies and military hostilities between the belligerent parties (IRC, 1983:17, Leader, 2000:19). Neutrality can be described as a compromise between humanitarian and military objectives. Humanitarian agencies stay outside the political and military business of the belligerents in exchange for access to victims. Neutrality is closely related to the principle of “independence”, which describes the need for agencies to maintain their own, separate space from governments in order to take operational decisions based upon humanitarian needs alone (IRC, 1983:17). “Sub-contracting” of international humanitarian assistance has certainly challenged this independence.

Together with the principle of sovereignty the old barriers between military and humanitarian interventions broke down during the aid operations in Somalia and Bosnia in the early 1990s (Harriss, 1995, Macrae/Leader, 2000:12). Many humanitarian agencies were providing assistance while enjoying the armed protection of a party to the conflict (UN troops) rather than basing their interventions upon non-partisanship and the consensus of all fighting parties – a breach of neutrality.

Rwanda was perhaps the single most important event that discredited humanitarian aid. “Impartiality” i.e. the principle to give non-discriminatory assistance to beneficiaries based solely upon the level of need (IRC, 1983:17) came under suspicion. In providing relief to refugees who were largely of Hutu origin in camps containing perpetrators of the violence in Rwanda, agencies were accused of providing the logistical basis for Hutu militia to reorganize and continue their attacks on civilians in Rwanda. Under these circumstances impartiality acquired a bad flavor.

The evaluation of humanitarian aid to Rwanda suggested that humanitarian aid should not replace decisive political action, which could have prevented the genocide (Macrae/Leader, 2000: 9). Some interpreted this as a need to strive for greater coherence between political and humanitarian action. Humanitarian aid and politics were no longer seen as necessarily separate (Duffield, 2001: pp.11-13, Macrae/Leader, 2000:10).

PART ONE: DISCOURSES AND DEBATES

II. DISCOURSES OF DISASTERS AND RELIEF

II. 1 Relief – some etymological and initial remarks

Before setting out to review academic and agency-discourses of relief it may be useful to review meaning(s) of the word “relief” in the English language. Except for a usage that applies to tenure in the feudal system there are two major groups of entries listed in the Oxford Dictionary (1989: pp.564). The first group shares an element of mitigation and ease from some cause of distress, pain or discomfort. The second, associated group relates to some form of aid or assistance in a situation of poverty, war or other hardship. In summary relief addresses a situation of need and has been identified with alleviation (rather than cure).

In the 20th century relief has been associated with “the five essentials – health, nutrition, shelter, physical protection and water/sanitation.” (Buchanan-Smith/Maxwell, 1994:14), in other words with life-saving and life-sustaining activities that meet physical needs. The principles of “impartiality” and “neutrality” with which relief came to be identified in the practice of International Humanitarian Law (Best, 1994: pp.235, Roberts, 1996:51) further emphasized the detachment from any political, social or economic “root-cause”.

II.2 Discourse I: Famine and famine relief

Famine as an object of study enters the academic debate in the late 18th century, most famously in the works of Robert Malthus. He represents famines as situations of scarcity where there is simply not enough food to keep people from starving. In his “principle of population” he even goes as far to say that famines (as well as wars) serve as checks to keep the growth of populations in balance with a notoriously inelastic food supply (Malthus, 1992: pp.40; Winch, 1987:20). This perception of famine as a natural and somewhat “necessary” phenomenon resulting in mass starvation has been very influential (Sen, 1981:160). During most of the 19th century Britain showed a certain reluctance to

mount a significant response to famines in its colonies (Ireland being one example; see de Waal, 1997a: pp.22).

Empirical evidence that is collected in preparing the Indian Famine code in the late 19th century disproves Malthusian theories. Members of the famine commission identify the lack of employment amongst landless laborers and their resulting inability to purchase food as the main reason behind famines, not the scarcity of food (de Waal, 1997a:22). But it takes almost another 100 years until this insight is put into an adequate theory. Sen (1981) reinterprets famines as predominantly economic disasters where the main question is not the availability of food but the “entitlements” of individuals to food that often coincide with (a lack of) purchasing power. Sen shifts the focus from supply to demand (Edkins, 2000:43, Devereux, 2000:19) and from food availability to individual command over available food supplies (Sen, 1981: pp.154). Relief thus has to recreate these entitlements, for instance through a public works scheme that generates adequate wages for deprived individuals to effectively demand and command food.

Sen’s view of famine attracts criticism from scholars who emphasize the political and oppressive dimension of famine. Rangasami (1985) claims that Sen overlooks the fact that famines have winners and losers. She also remarks that famines are a long process marked by “pressing down” (Rangasami, 1985:1749) and asset stripping of the victims rather than a sudden collapse. De Waal (1989) adds on to this critique when he places the coping mechanisms of populations to avoid destitution (rather than to avoid starvation) at the center of his analysis of the famine in Darfur.

Keen (1994) criticizes that Sen’s entitlement theory excludes extra-legal or violent means that may be employed to deliberately undermine the entitlements of people (Keen, 2000b: pp.285, Edkins, 2000: pp.56-57, Sen, 1981:45). Keen focuses upon the functions of “human-made famines” (Keen, 1994:37) as rational strategies of powerful groups, who benefit from stripping the assets of the politically marginalized (land, livestock, labor etc.). These dynamics require a human rights approach to famines and the protection of those who are most likely to fall “below the law” (Keen, 2000b:292). De Waal argues

that only a “political contract” between an accountable government and its constituency (de Waal, 1997a: pp.7) that guarantees a right to subsistence can help to conquer famines in the long term. He condemns international relief that diverts attention from this contract, undermines local capacity and accountability and therefore is the least desirable option (de Waal, 1997a: pp.137).

It can be argued that the “famine” discussion (the most elaborate and long-running discussion of any type of disaster in the social sciences) has been very influential. It is worth recapturing the three conceptions of famine disasters and adequate responses in the following simplified² scheme.

Famine-concept ³	Root-cause	Consequence	Required action
(Neo-) Malthusian: “natural”	Scarcity of food/ demographic pressure	Creation of physical needs leading to mass starvation	(Food) relief (mostly reluctant and limited)
Indian Famine code/ Sen (1981): “economic”	Poverty/ economic vulnerability	Sudden collapse of entitlements leading to mass starvation	Public works/ supporting purchasing power
Political economists (de Waal, Keen, Duffield ⁴): “man made”	Political vulnerability/ marginalization	Violation of political and economic rights, leading to gradual asset stripping and final destitution	Promoting human rights and accountable government (“political contract”)

What we can see is that an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the dynamics at work in famines leads away from the superficial diagnosis of food shortages (identified as a symptom) to underlying root causes and from a focus on response to prevention. Both root-causes as well as consequences of famines are placed at a more abstract level: from “needs” to entitlements and rights and from “scarcity” to economic and political vulnerability. Under these assumptions material relief becomes marginalized from the

² The scheme cannot capture the subtleties of all arguments such as Sen’s (and Dreze’s, 1989) later reflections upon the role of the state and public policy in famine prevention. Under “required action” we have concentrated upon those recommended actions that are intrinsic to the three individual famine conceptions. This does not mean that Sen, de Waal or Keen denies the possibility of food scarcity at the heart of a famine – but they treat it as an exception.

³ This overview inspired by Devereux, 2000 and also Edkins, 2000, de Waal, 1997a and Keen, 2001c.

⁴ Compare Duffield, 1993

discussion. Massive relief remains a reasonable response of last resort where earlier interventions have either failed or not taken place at all (accepted by all three “schools”). But it is partly de-legitimized as an inadequate response that only addresses symptoms.

This said we have to remember that Malthus was not exactly an advocate of relief (Christian morality probably prevented him from attacking it more directly, compare Malthus, 1992:99). It seemed to be the only viable temporary response to an acute situation of food scarcity but certainly not the ideal one – in Malthus’ view this was moral restraint leading to reduced reproduction (Malthus, 1992:207). We can therefore see that there is a certain continuity of criticizing relief for just “alleviating” rather than “curing” famines/ disasters.

II.3 Discourse Ia: The political economy of relief in contemporary civil wars

The main and innovative idea put forward by political economists was that famines may not only produce winners but that the processes and prospects of asset stripping may be the very “objective” of famines. The research of political economists has demonstrated that these man-made famines have often coincided with situations of civil war (de Waal, 1989; Keen, 1994; Duffield, 1993; de Waal, 1997a). It is argued that internal wars rather than just representing destruction create “alternative” and rational political and economic systems, markedly by creating impunity for the use of violence (Duffield, 1993, Kaldor, 1999, Keen, 1998b, 2000b). Keen locates “functions” of violence in civil wars at the national and at the local level (“top-down” and “bottom-up” violence, Keen, 2000a:25).

Violence during civil strife may enable state elites to crack down on political opponents and redistribute economic resources amongst followers (Keen, 2000c:3; Reno, 2000). At the regional and local level conflicts may create “forced” markets (Keen, 2001a:63) with restricted entry that ensures high profits for monopolist traders. Certain groups may be pushed into cheap labor or even slavery. Other economic gains may be realized through the illicit appropriation and trade of resources (land, livestock, crops, mineral resources). Local asset transfers may tie in with national-level political and economic objectives (in the case of Sudan for instance with the project to open the South to Arab settlement) and

with parallel markets controlled at the highest level (Duffield, 1993). War may become “the continuation of economics by other means” (Keen, 2000a: 27)⁵. These dynamics may be particularly strong in “weak” states with little or no monopolized power of coercion.

Based upon these assumptions violence is not so much a means of waging war (and eventually winning, Keen, 2000a:26) but an end in itself (in that it “produces” immediate gains such as wealth and status for those who perpetrate it). In the absence of an incentive to win the war and legitimize one’s rule the needs of civilians are at best irrelevant to rebel and government forces (Reno, 2000:253). At worst civilians represent an immediate target of violence. The provision of relief to these most affected groups is against the interests of those who attack. It might upset the “forced market” and make the exploitation of economic opportunities more difficult. But armed groups eventually let relief through their lines - in order to further their immediate economic, political and military objectives (Keen/Wilson, 1994). Relief becomes integrated into conflict strategies (Prendergast, 1996: pp.17, Bradbury, 1995:18, de Waal, 1997:146) and consequently “fuels war”. Research lists and analyzes numerous examples.

Food aid, for instance, becomes a major “strategic resource” (Duffield, 1994:142) where it can be diverted to feed fighters and be withheld from contested areas (de Waal 1997b: 298). Under these circumstances it may pay off to use violence, in order to attract relief in the first place and then to loot and steal it (Keen, 2000a:30). This manipulation leads to a situation where “relief ebbs and flows according to the level of insecurity” (Duffield, 1994a:113) and, it could be argued, vice versa. In resource-scarce environments such as in Somalia relief and the necessary logistic and human infrastructure may provide the main source of income (rents, transport contracts, import duties, taxes etc.) for a government or rebel group (Prendergast, 1996: pp.28, de Waal, 1997a: pp.170). Relief “legitimizes” authorities that control it (Africa Rights, 1994:5). Relief also diverts attention from the political sources of a crisis and helps to sustain silence around human

⁵ Keen has moderated this statement by emphasizing the inter-connection between “greed” and “grievance” i.e. the political rebellion of exploited groups against exploitative rulers leading to further and eventually worse exploitation (2000c: 8)

rights abuses (Keen, 2000a:36). De Waal emphasizes the “hard” interests of an international humanitarian industry i.e. levels of funding and visibility that prevail over the interests of beneficiaries (1997: pp.138). Duffield even classifies the “international aid network” as a form of global governance (2001: section 4).

The political economists that have analyzed contemporary civil wars describe it as an alternative and somewhat absolute system that penetrates society, where violent acts serve a “function” and where local and global interests interact. Within this framework relief is not only an inadequate response that only addresses symptoms (as argued by famine theorists) - relief risks to become part of the problem.

Recommendations for better relief frequently go beyond the original definition and mandate of relief as a life-saving or life-sustaining activity. In contemporary conflicts there seems to be little room for the “alleviation” of symptoms along impartial lines. In order to make a positive difference humanitarian relief is encouraged to tackle the root-causes of conflict, “reduce” violence (Keen, 2000a:37) or be openly political (de Waal, 1997: pp.217).

II.4 The relief-development debate

This chapter reflects a growing convergence of relief and development in a debate that crossed the lines between academia, donors and agencies.

As of the mid-/late 1980s a better understanding of the dynamics at work in both natural and man-made disasters has emerged that casts doubt over the traditional separation of relief and development. Sen’s entitlement approach (1981; 1989) points at socio-economic root causes that turn “drought” into famine at the individual and household level. Rangasami (1985) stresses the long processes of asset-stripping that lead to a final stage of destitution and starvation. It is realized that all disasters involve human agency. A new, more sympathetic perception of the “disaster victim” is constructed. In his famous book on the famine in Darfur de Waal (1989) portrays the people affected by drought not as helpless but as a people who are committed to protect their livelihoods and

institutions. The book provides insights into coping strategies of people affected by famine⁶. The question becomes how relief can build on and support these strategies.

There is an increasing trend to distinguish between “shocks” and “trigger events” such as floods, drought etc. and “vulnerability” to these external shocks that turn the event into a disaster (Chambers, 1989). “Vulnerability” is defined as the longer-term social, psychological and physical factors that expose people/communities to certain possibly damaging events (Woodrow/Anderson, 1989:12). Disasters are “crises that overwhelm, at least for a time, people’s capacities to manage and cope” (Krimgold quoted in Woodrow/Anderson, 1989:1). “Capacities” in this framework are simply the positive opposite image of “vulnerability.” Where people do not have the capacities “to manage and cope” they are “vulnerable” to disaster. At this early stage of the debate little attempts are made to differentiate between natural disasters and conflicts.

Relief is charged with concentrating on short-term “needs” rather than addressing the longer-term capacities or coping strategies that could help people to mitigate or even prevent calamities (Woodrow/ Anderson, 1989). From the perspective of people who are affected by disasters a clear-cut distinction between relief and development is artificial as poor people base their livelihood strategies upon the likelihood of recurring disasters (Buchanan-Smith/Maxwell, 1994:3). It is more of a concern to funding agencies and those involved in the response effort: a planning and management tool rather than reflecting any reality on the ground (Bradbury, 1995:8). The phenomenon of “permanent emergencies” (Buchanan-Smith/Maxwell, 1994:11) equally challenges the short-term time horizons of relief planning that diverts resources away from development needs (Buchanan-Smith/ Maxwell, 1994:3). The usual top-down approach of international relief de-capacitates local administration (Abdel Ati, 1993).

⁶ Coping strategies have been observed and analyzed by other authors, compare Corbett, 1988 but de Waal’s work has been particularly influential.

It is against this analysis of the shortcomings of relief and a (mis-)understanding of disasters as short-term crises that practitioners start searching for avenues to integrate or link relief and development.

“Better “development” can reduce the need for emergency relief; better relief can contribute to development and better “rehabilitation” can ease the transition between the two.”(Maxwell/Buchanan, 1994: 2).

In relief greater emphasis needs to be given to building local administrative capacities and the construction of infrastructure (Ibid.). The “linking” of relief and development gained special popularity amongst the United Nations as they were trying to solve serious co-ordination problems between their various emergency- and development-incarnations (White/Cliffe, 2000: pp. 316). It also became part of the “populist” NGO discourse.

But emphasizing “vulnerabilities” and “capacities” over “needs” may have introduced the danger of inverting the “normal” humanitarian hierarchy: the prioritization of basic relief activities that protect human life (compare Maxwell/ Buchanan, 1994:11). This inversion is especially apparent in the stream of populist “developmentalism” (Macrae, 1998) of which Mary Anderson’s work is maybe the best example.

Both relief and development programs should be more concerned with increasing local capacities and reducing vulnerabilities than with providing goods, services or technical assistance. In fact, goods, services or technical assistance should be provided only insofar as they support sustainable development by increasing local capacities and reducing local vulnerabilities. (Anderson/ Woodrow, 1989:97)

The same authors argue that material/physical inputs eventually create “dependence” on outside support (in other words cause a different form of “vulnerability”, 1989:54). This classification of material relief represents an interesting parallel with much earlier ideas. Malthus’ critique of the poor laws in the late 18th century pointed at the possibility that relief may create the poverty that it tries to alleviate. It might induce the poor to engage in early marriages and the production of a numerous offspring that would further threaten the balance between population and subsistence. Against this background the modern emphasis on self-reliance, sustainable development and capacity building looks like a positive inversion of Malthusian worries over dependency (or “dependent poverty” as he calls it, Malthus, 1992:101). Despite the fact that research has not been able to find

systematic evidence for relief-induced dependency (Duffield, 1997:39,n.6, Bradbury, 1998:333) it is a popular concept in UN-, NGO- and donor-documents and statements. “Dependency” obviously has the potential to rationalize the insufficient provision, premature “phasing out” or outright denial of material assistance in the “higher” interest of sustainability.

Political economists have criticized material relief for the inadvertent support it may lend to the political and economic objectives of belligerents. The new capacity-building objective of relief may be just as compromised and a precarious enterprise (Buchanan-Smith/Maxwell:14). Capacities (just as “civil society” and “social capital”) can turn out to be “good” or “bad” and local relief administrators probably make skilled army logisticians. Developmentalists adapt their capacity-building agenda accordingly. Relief, it is argued, cannot only “do no harm” but support “local capacities for peace” i.e. those forces or “connectors” in society, who seek a peaceful solution to a conflict (Anderson, 1999:34). This rests on a de-politicized view of conflict as a result of misunderstanding, ignorance or weak institutions (Duffield, 1998b:86). While these assumptions are highly debatable and evidence for the success of such selective capacity building is lacking (apart from testimony collected from “practicing” agencies, Anderson, 1999) these ideas gain popularity amongst many NGOs and donors (Duffield, 1998b:77, compare DAC guidelines, 1997).

In loading relief with developmental objectives the distinction between the two areas of activity becomes blurred. In addition to ensuring human survival relief is expected to build institutional capacities, support coping strategies and reduce the impact of disasters. Duffield argues that developmental relief introduces conditionality through the backdoor: “Even humanitarian assistance is no longer given without the expectation of something back: it must be developmental.” (Duffield, 2001:5, Duffield 1998b: pp.86-87). The distinction between relief and development is broken down, which prepares for the collapse of the distinction between humanitarian aid as a politically neutral zone and politics (Macrae/Leader, 2000:25). While relief has of course always been subject to political considerations it was not tied to political conditionality or the recognition of a

legitimate host government. This was a reserve of development aid (Macrae/Leader, 2000:4). As relief and development became more closely associated a “rights based approach” i.e. the question of how humanitarian aid contributes to human rights is expanded from development to emergency aid (Harriss, 1995: pp.2-3, Fox, 2001). This eventually justifies the withholding of humanitarian aid or the introduction of “conditionalities” (Duffield, 1998b: pp.77-78).

II.5 Summary: Relief in muddy waters

Several key-terms that once seemed to be fairly distinct and clear have become ambiguous and acquired different meanings in a post-modern and post cold war world.

“Isn’t power a sort of generalized war, which assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the State? Peace would then be a form of war, and the State a means of waging it.”(Foucault, 1980:123).

The work of the political economists seems to underwrite this proposition. War is not just destructive but brings about an alternative political and economic system that is only gradually different from the state-powered “peace” that Foucault is describing. In a world of protracted internal crisis violence is a continuum in both situations that are labeled “peace” and “war”. Civilians are seen as both victims and perpetrators of violence (“bottom-up” violence). The distinction between combatants and non-combatants is relative.

As “peace” and “war” get closer so do two activities that have been traditionally associated with one or the other: “relief” and “development.” Relief is increasingly expected to contribute to longer-term developmental goals. Developmentalists argue that relief has to somehow target the “vulnerability” of people or in other words strengthen their capacity. In “permanent emergencies” there is no room for short-term engagement and planning-timeframes.

As political economists point at the ways in which relief may be integrated into war economies relief becomes further scrutinized. Once situated in a supposedly apolitical world of “neutrality” and “impartiality”, relief is now seen to “fuel conflict”, especially

when it is naively assumed to reside outside partial interests and when its political consequences are ignored. The failure of an impartial approach is a logical consequence of blurred distinctions between victims and perpetrators. The “undeserving” victim has emerged (Stockton, 1998:354). Feeding the “undeserving” victim translates into feeding conflict.

Interestingly many of those who claim that relief contributes to conflict conclude that if relief can do “harm” then it can be turned around and do “good” i.e. help to reduce conflict (Prendergast, 1996; Keen/ Wilson, 1994) or even “build peace” (Anderson, 1999). Thus in the post cold-war world the mandate of relief widens first to development and then to conflict-reduction.

Developmentalist policy re-labels conflict as an expression of underdevelopment (Duffield, 1998 b:21) providing development opportunities (Macrae, 1998). This allows development to continue on a “business as usual” trail and remain unchallenged as a worthwhile enterprise (Duffield, 1998b:77). Conflict prevention is identified as a central development goal (DAC, 1997: pp.9). Conventional relief responding to physical needs, on the contrary, is questioned as representing a valuable end in itself. The official policy dialogue in the UN and donor agencies challenges relief to change its mandate, to do more than just attending to basic survival needs and to engage in the politically charged territory of capacity or peace building. In the long running history of criticism against relief this has been interpreted as the ultimate attack against humanitarianism (Macrae, 1998).

PART TWO: DFID'S HUMANITARIAN POLICY

III. THE CRISIS IN SIERRA LEONE IN 1997/98 – A CASE STUDY

In May 1997 the labor party won the election in Britain and established the Department for International Development with ministerial status (replacing the former Overseas Development Administration, which used to be part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, FCO). The new government emphasized a need for “coherence” between the aid program and other areas of British policy (trade, agricultural policies) in order to achieve sustainable poverty reduction (Short, 28/05/1997; White Paper, 1997). The importance of “human rights” issues in informing the government’s decisions on development aid (and foreign policy, Short, *ibid.*) was pointed out.

We will be paying particular attention to good government and human rights issues in making our decisions. We are not intending to impose conditions on sovereign governments but we are looking for partnerships so that we can work together with shared values. (Clare Short, 28/05/1997)

Partner governments must be committed to the creation of the right economic and political government (...) if sustainable development is to thrive. (*Ibid.*)

Soon after labor’s victory a potential partner, the democratically elected Kabbah government in Sierra Leone was ousted by an armed coup d’etat. After some weeks of hesitation the new British government decided to suspend all pledged aid to the African country including humanitarian aid. This was met by criticism from NGOs, which accused the British government of denying humanitarian aid on political grounds and thus violating the “humanitarian imperative” of responding on the grounds of need only (Action Aid, 1999). In 1998 a parliamentary commission, the International Development Committee (IDC), also critically examined the withholding of aid to Sierra Leone as a case study in its review of DFID’s policies on “conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction” (IDC, 1999b). The case of British aid to Sierra Leone has been identified as a “test of the Department’s humanitarian policy” (IDC, 1999a: lvii; Macrae/ Leader, 2000:25).

III.1 Short background on the conflict in Sierra Leone

In 1996 Sierra Leone was experiencing the sixth year of an increasingly brutal internal conflict that involved a rebel force, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), government troops and Civil Defense groups, such as the Kamajors. Much of the fighting was taking place in the Southeast of the country that is rich in mineral resources and especially diamonds. Reportedly rebels and sections of the government troops (soldier by day/rebels by night called “sobels”) collaborated in lucrative diamond-mining activities and engaged in atrocities against civilians (Keen, 2001b:166). The Kamajors initially acted as village-based civil defense groups against both rebels and “sobels”.

Giving way to international pressure from the UN and major donors such as the US and the UK (Keen, 2001b:172) the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), a military junta that had ousted a previous, equally undemocratic government in 1992 agreed to elections in 1996. The elections (of which the UK was a major donor) resulted in 79% of voters participating and the victory of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) under the leadership of Tejan Kabbah (Reno, 2000:250). With the assistance (and under the pressure) of various regional and international players (including the UK) the RUF and the government agreed to a peace plan in November 1996 (Gberie, 2000:9). On the ground though the fighting continued.

The new government managed to attract generous external aid and support: a five-year rehabilitation and development program received \$ 640 million in pledges amounting to 84% coverage (Zack-Williams, 1999:153). The dependence of Kabbah’s government upon the Civil Defense Forces raised suspicion amongst the army (Gberie, 2000). In May 1997 the government was overthrown by yet another military coup d’etat. This time the coupists established what they called an Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) under the leadership of J.P. Koroma, allegedly a former “sobel” himself (Gberie, 1997). They invited the rural based RUF to share in the government of the country. As the rebel forces advanced into Freetown much of the states institutions were destroyed and public services broke down.

Nigerian ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG)-forces, who operated as a peace keeping force in neighboring Liberia, bombarded Freetown in an attempt to reverse the coup d'état claiming 500-1,000 civilian lives (ODI, 1997). At the end of August 1997 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) formally extended ECOMOG's mandate from Liberia to Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leonean mandate consisted of enforcing a comprehensive regime of economic sanctions (UNHCR, 1998). The United Nations confirmed a limited version of the ECOWAS-embargo restricted to arms, petrol products and travel by members of the junta (UN SC, Resolution 1132).

After the signing of a peace agreement between AFRC representatives and ECOWAS, ECOMOG was turned into a peacekeeping force (OCHA IRIN-WA, 5 February 1998). In a move that clearly went beyond its mandate ECOMOG invaded Freetown on February 1998 and the Kabbah government returned from exile at the beginning of March. Following the reinstatement of the democratically elected government sanctions were lifted immediately (UN SC, Resolution 1156).

III.2 Humanitarian impact of the conflict/ the situation in 1997/98

According to the Human Development Report Sierra Leone was the second least developed country in the world in 1990 (UNDP, 1993: 14). From 1992-98 the GDP in Sierra Leone declined on an average level of -4.3% per annum compounding already high levels of poverty (Davies, 2000:350). By 1997 Sierra Leone had dropped to the very bottom of the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2000). The conflict had at least killed 15-20,000 people (Reno, 2000: 231) and displaced about one third of the country's population - approximately 1.5 million people (Gberie, 1997). Most of the 1 million internally displaced fled to urban areas. The population of the capital doubled from 750,000 to 1.2 – 1.5 million inhabitants (FAO/WFP, 15/01/1997: 8). The displacements and the looting and destruction of farming tools, crops and seeds severely affected agricultural production (Reno, 2000:253; FAO/ WFP 15/01/1997: 3). The country became dependent upon humanitarian aid, though it was never provided in sufficient quantity (Keen, 1998:322).

The coup in May 1997 displaced 157,000 people (UNSG, 05/12/1997). It also brought massive human rights abuses and violence to Freetown (Abdullah, I., 1997:5). Though the rice harvest (main staple food) was improved as compared to 1996 (UNOCHA, 17/02/1998) marketing and distribution was hampered by a lack of fuel (UNSG 05/12/1997) and insecurity. Southern and eastern areas, where fighting between the AFRC/RUF and Kamajors continued, were cut off commercial and humanitarian supplies (UNSG, 05/02/1998). These are the same areas to which hundreds of thousands of IDPs⁷ had been resettled since the signing of the Abidjan peace agreement on 30 November 1996 (UNOCHA, 01/03/1997). Many were still rebuilding their livelihoods⁸ when the renewed fighting broke out.

There were reports of looted harvests and “food taxes” imposed upon the rural population (UNOCHA, 20/12/1997-20/01/1998). The report of the UN Secretary General on Sierra Leone in October 1997 (UNSG, 21/10/97) rated the humanitarian situation as “serious and still deteriorating” yet the lack of security for personnel and supplies meant that no major effort was undertaken to address the situation. It is interesting that the UN presented “security” as an insurmountable obstacle when a number of non-governmental agencies continued to operate in Sierra Leone (CARE, CRS, World Vision, Action Aid, ICRC et al., S.L. Committee on Food Aid, 12/02/1998). Keen claims that blaming security has been a “technique” of the system (UN-agencies and NGOs) to hide its chronic failure to address the actual needs in Sierra Leone (Keen, 1998:322).

The destruction and neglect of infrastructure and breakdown of most of the public services since the coup affected the health status of the population and there was an increase in the incidence of communicable diseases, in particular measles (UNSG, 21/10/1997). Only 16% of health care facilities were operational (as compared to still 54% before the coup). It is estimated that only 1/15 of the population had access to some form of primary healthcare. Water and sanitation facilities were neglected (UNSG,

⁷ In April the number was 671.000 most of them originating from the Southeastern provinces (UNDHA, 18 March – 14 April, 1997).

⁸ In April 1997 WFP envisaged a need for food for work schemes in support of 500.000 returnees replacing initial resettlement rations (ibid.).

18/03/1998). Prices for basic and vital drugs (such as chloroquine) had gone up and the Ministry of Health could no longer provide drugs.

ECOWAS/ECOMOG failed to establish an effective sanctions exemptions system and cross-border relief deliveries could not be operated until early 1998 (and even then at a very modest level) leading to an effective blockade of food. In December 1997 there were less than 500 metric tons of food aid in stock in Sierra Leone and targeted feeding programs were virtually halted (UNDHA, 03-19 December, 1997). The price of the main staple, rice, had risen threefold since the coup in Freetown (UNSG, 05/02/1998). Action Contre la Faim reported a 53% increase in Global Acute Malnutrition in children under five years old in Freetown (from 5.7% to 8.7%). Severe Acute malnutrition was increased by 100% to 1.6% (UNOCHA, 20/12/1997-20/01/1998). Action Aid confirmed 15% of global acute malnutrition in the Northern part of the country thus surpassing the emergency threshold of 10% (UNOCHA, 17/02/1998). In short the coup d'état, continued fighting and the sanctions led to what the Interagency report called a "humanitarian crisis" by early 1998 (Ibid.).

Shortly before the expected return of president Kabbah in March 1998 an Inter-Agency Flash Appeal (covering a period of three months only) was launched which requested US\$ 11,255,538 to meet "immediate humanitarian needs" (UN-OCHA, 01/03/1998). Based on the evidence it seems that these needs were not so much a result of the fighting surrounding ECOMOG's intervention in February 1998 but of the preceding 10 months with the sanctions and insufficient provision of humanitarian aid playing a key role.

III.3 British response to the crisis in 1997/98

The British government was one of the main donors pledging for Kabbah's five-year rehabilitation and development plan. Since the support to the 1996 elections "nurturing democracy" had been the main objective of British involvement in Sierra Leone (interview notes, P. Penfold, 2001). Considering the changed situation since the coup d'état the Minister of State of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued a statement on 27 June which announced that assistance to the rehabilitation, reconstruction and

development of Sierra Leone would be resumed “once, but not until, constitutional order has been restored.” (UNDHA, 24-30/06/1997) A statement from DFID followed, which reads:

“DFID is not giving further funding to NGOs working in Sierra Leone. We will not be taking any firm decisions on future strategy until we see how the situation develops. Should the military leaders retain power for some time, DFID will not continue to provide aid along the lines agreed with President Kabbahs democratically elected government. When hostilities subside we will consider the possibility of commencing humanitarian aid. This, however, will require a full needs assessment, a clearly defined strategy and an appraisal of the signals it would send to the regime.” (UNDHA, 24-30/06/1997).

Originally DFID had planned to spend £ 12 Million in 1997/98 of which 6 Million were reserved for governance projects and for support through NGOs for resettlement and rehabilitation (IDC, 1999b: pp.32-33). As the resettlement and rehabilitation program was part of a wider strategy and plan agreed with the Kabbah government (in expectation of a settlement of the conflict) DFID had indeed a strong reason to reassess its assistance.

DFID claimed that relief and negotiations for humanitarian access would legitimize the illegal regime i.e. send the “wrong” (political) signals. Later on DFID stated that NGOs were unable to prevent the diversion and looting of humanitarian supplies.

Our judgment was that the wrong aid in the wrong hands would actually make the conflict worse apart from not reaching the people that we really wanted to reach. (Mukesh Kapila, DFID in: IDC, 1999b: 24).

Responding to concerns regarding the diversion of aid to warring parties NGOs established a Code of Conduct, which largely limited the storing and distribution of bulk food (UNDHA, 24-30/06/1997). But as NGOs redefined their strategy, responding to the changed circumstances, DFID did not release its funds despite numerous UN- and agency-reports describing a worsening humanitarian situation. It maintained that there was no serious crisis that required a response beyond the ongoing NGO (-funded) programs (IDC, 1999b:245; Action Aid, 1999). Other governments assessed the situation differently and continued the funding of humanitarian programs (IDC, 1999b: pp.58-59). It is not clear why humanitarian programs that DFID had funded until the coup d’etat would suddenly become redundant afterwards, when fighting caused new internal

displacements and interrupted the provision of basic services in a country that was already dependent upon humanitarian aid before the coup.

In between the coup d'état and March 1998 (the reinstitution of the Kabbah government) DFID spent £ 1,560,000 on Sierra Leone bilaterally. This can be compared with roughly £ 8 Million on average per year in the previous three years (Action Aid, 1999). Out of the disbursed funds only £ 1 Million was effectively spent in Sierra Leone. This money was channeled through the ICRC⁹ and used for protection and humanitarian work (as of November 1997). £ 250,000 went to refugees in neighboring countries and the rest was spent on the Kabbah government and civil society in exile. When the elected government was restored to power in March 1998 DFID immediately released another £ 5,1 Million out of which 4,3 were used for emergency work in Sierra Leone (IDC, 1999:32).

Following the coup the UK government was actively involved in the political response of the international community. The British government played a lead role in securing the adoption of sanctions by the UN Security Council. Britain invited the ousted president Kabbah to the Commonwealth Heads of State meeting in October 1997 in Edinburgh. It supported the elaboration of a detailed reconstruction plan in the event of Kabbah's return to power. Through DFID the running of the government house in exile (Conakry) was supported (Action Aid, 1999; House of Commons Hansard, 1998: Column 488).

Concluding its review of the Sierra Leone case the International Development Committee sums up the impression that is created by DFID's funding decisions against humanitarian aid and in favor of the government in exile.

We question the wisdom of supporting President Kabbah's government-in-exile from DFID funds, given the responsibility DFID had at the time to decide on humanitarian relief within Sierra Leone. It would have been better to use funds from the FCO. This would have removed the impression of partisanship in DFID's humanitarian judgements." (IDC, 1999a:lix).

Policy "coherence" understood as development policy influencing other areas such as

⁹ The former High Commissioner explained this with ICRC's specific mandate to work in conflict given to it by the international community (Interview Notes, P. Penfold, 2001).

foreign, trade and agricultural policies (White Paper, 1997, Section 2) might work both ways. It is difficult to fend off the impression that foreign policy objectives informed DFID's position to limit humanitarian assistance to Sierra Leone. It seems that in Sierra Leone the political conditions of good governance and human rights have indeed been expanded from development to humanitarian aid. The policy experiment was followed by the desired results in Sierra Leone, the return of democracy. In Britain though the protest of NGOs against the "denial" of humanitarian aid produced massive criticism and media attention. This may explain the ambiguity of DFID's official humanitarian policy statement, which seems to dilute impressions of an integrated political and humanitarian agenda.

IV. DFID's HUMANITARIAN AID POLICY STATEMENTS

The newly elected Labor government outlined its development policy in the White paper submitted to parliament in November 1997. At the center of the paper are the commitment to poverty elimination and the achievement of international targets for sustainable development based on UN conventions and resolutions (White Paper, 1997: 1.24 and panel 4). These targets are quantitative (halving of extreme poverty; access to services; mortality rates) and time-bound (to be reached by 2015) and the government can (at least theoretically) be held accountable against measurable indicators of progress.

DFID's involvement in conflict reduction and humanitarian assistance has to be seen against this strong commitment. Conflict is not treated as a phenomenon in its own right but as an obstacle to the achievement of the agreed development targets.

A major obstacle to the eradication of poverty is the persistence of violent conflict, or its legacy in many of the poorest countries. (DFID, Department Report, 1999:91)

Poverty itself and vertical inequality are presented as major factors in causing conflict (DFID, Conflict Reduction and Humanitarian Assistance Policy, CRHAP, 1999:2). Development and especially DFID's policy targeting extreme poverty are therefore in a

way equivalent to “conflict prevention.” The view of humanitarian assistance is quite different.

The uncritical or unregulated provision of humanitarian assistance can create long-term dependency and, during conflicts can even perpetuate crisis by inadvertently supporting warring groups and fuelling war economies. (DFID, Department Report 1999:94).

These positions on development and relief mirror mainstream and developmentalist donor policy as discussed before and expressed in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) guidelines on conflict, peace and development cooperation (quoted as a source of inspiration in the White paper, 1997:3.53). In this document humanitarian aid is treated as a “powerful lever for peacebuilding” but also as a potentially counter-productive intervention that is “fuelling tension.” (DAC, 1997:30). We also see the promotion of self-reliance against the alleged dangers of “dependency” (DAC, 1997: pp.30). Humanitarian aid is expected to contribute to development and be integrated with developmental goals (DAC, 1997: 32). Consequently best practice is to “limit the scope and duration of emergency relief to the strict minimum.” This principle it could be argued was applied by DFID in Sierra Leone.

In its own policy document on conflict and humanitarian assistance published in 1999 DFID avoids a clear position on the desirable duration or extent of relief. It is careful in loading relief in conflict situations with developmental objectives – this is rather reserved for relief in natural disasters (though the two strands are not consistently distinguished). DFID’s policy does not inflate relief with conflict reduction or peace building objectives but reserves these for a number of strategies (security sector reform, campaign against small arms) that require the involvement of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Trade (DFID, CRHAP, 1999:4). The agenda of “coherence” between different policy actors it seems is not extended to humanitarian assistance.

Yet there is a strong concern with the possible negative impact of humanitarian aid.

In conflict situations, ill-considered humanitarian inputs may perpetuate crisis through inadvertently supporting warring groups, fuelling war economies, or discouraging self-reliance and the pursuit of solutions for underlying problems (DFID, CRHAP, 1999:4).

There is no blanket commitment to providing relief according to need but interventions have to be scrutinized against the “costs and benefits” they produce. DFID basically reserves the discretion over “difficult judgments” to the government on a case-by-case basis (*ibid.*).

In the White Paper the government had announced that it would encourage the elaboration of an “ethical code of conduct for organizations involved in humanitarian work” (White Paper, Panel 17). The ten principles for a “New Humanitarianism” representing this “code of conduct” were first published in 1998 (Short, 07/04/1998). They seem to suggest a consistent approach to relief and humanitarian assistance. But these principles reconfirm that the provision of humanitarian aid is considered to be an option that will be based upon an analysis of the concrete case.

We recognize that humanitarian interventions in conflict often poses genuine moral dilemmas. We will base our decisions on explicit analyses of the choices open to us and the ethical considerations involved, and communicate our conclusions openly to our partners (DFID, CRHAP, 1999:4).

The basis for these ethical and moral considerations though remains unarticulated except for one principle: impartiality (principle 6). Impartiality though just signifies that aid will be given without discrimination in the event of aid being given. In other words it does not signify a universal commitment to assist those in distress (as principle 2 outlining a “more universal approach in addressing humanitarian needs” seems to suggest, *ibid.*).

The ten principles are the “humanitarian manifesto” of DFID and outline the “terms of engagement” with humanitarian agencies, in particular with NGOs (Interview notes, Mukesh Kapila, 2001). DFID saw a need to introduce a more pro-active and policy-directed relationship with humanitarian NGOs. DFID’s position as a donor gives it theoretical leverage over the enforcement of its “manifesto”. This threatens “independence” of humanitarian action and a more conventional “neutral” approach to relief (Macrae, 2000:27). Independence, neutrality and impartiality have traditionally

been seen as forming the most important principles of humanitarian action (IDC, 1999a: 66). DFID retains impartiality, which has limited value as a stand-alone concept (as discussed above).

On April 7 the day these principles were first launched Clare Short made the following statement in her speech on “Principles for a New Humanitarianism”.

I perceive a new mood, which goes beyond the simple expression of compassion and seeks a more determined effort to tackle the underlying causes of conflict and strife that underlie today’s humanitarian crises. Many want to move beyond charity, which simply alleviates the worst symptoms of crises to search for and support a just resolution of the conflict (Clare Short, 07/04/1998)

“Pure” relief is scrutinized and the suggested search for justice is a clearly political goal related to the government’s commitment to a human rights-based foreign and international development policy¹⁰. Thus the distinction between humanitarian assistance on the one side and political strategies on the other side is less than clear-cut in DFID’s humanitarian policy. Relief may well be integrated into a “coherent”, political agenda as the example of Sierra Leone has demonstrated (Macrae/Leader, 2000: pp.43-45 identify Afghanistan as another example).

Overall though DFID’s policy remains ambiguous and should not be read as a farewell to relief. Rather cautious statements that emphasize the dilemmas of humanitarian action exist side by side with statements such as a conventional definition of relief as “to save lives and relieve suffering” (DFID, CRHAP, 1999:4). This is partly related to the fact that the policy covers both natural and man-made disasters. Relief in natural disasters remains relatively unchallenged. Secondly DFID has in fact been involved in traditional and extensive humanitarian activities in conflict situations: Kosovo 1998/99 (£42 million plus £68 million HM Treasury Reserve), Sudan 1998/99 (£ 24 million, DFID, Department report, 2000) and East Timor 1999/2000 (£ 7 million, DFID, Department Report, 2001). With the Emergency Response Team (part of the newly established Conflict and Humanitarian Aid Department (CHAD) and sub-contracted to the Crown Agents) DFID has a logistical capacity and operations outfit that is capable of delivering humanitarian

aid directly. The team has actually expanded over the years (DFID, Department Report, 2000:86).

“Delivery matters” as the head of the Head of CHAD points out (Interview notes, M. Kapila, 2001). Yet in situations like in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan (in the late nineties) that could have triggered generous support, humanitarian aid has been restricted or suspended.

DFID’s humanitarian policy can be interpreted to justify both the suspension and generous provision of humanitarian aid. It lacks clear principles for action and resource allocation and creates “room for maneuver”¹¹ for both politicians and bureaucrats to do what may be appropriate, opportune or convenient.

V. CONCLUSION

Relief understood as life saving or life-sustaining measures that do not tackle root causes of distress or need, has become increasingly scrutinized in the discourses of aid and disasters under review. Research into the dynamics of famines establishes that economic and political processes play a key role in creating the exclusion and marginalization that finally leads to destitution and starvation. Especially the diagnosis of deliberate starvation in many famines casts doubt over the adequacy of relief that continues to dissociate itself from political causes. This critique is further compounded by an analysis of the role that diverted and manipulated relief has played in contemporary conflicts by inadvertently contributing to war-economies and strategies. Relief not only is inadequate it may make the underlying problems worse or “fuel wars”.¹²

A second more “populist” and practice-oriented discourse builds upon the insights of political economy into famines and conflicts and suggests that relief should be strengthening local capacities to prevent and/or deal with the impact of disasters. This is

¹⁰ Visible in the production of a joint FCO/ DFID “Annual report on Human Rights” since 1998.

¹¹ Schaffer, 1984: 147, uses this concept positively to describe space for genuinely better policy outcomes.

¹² In reality the proportional significance of relief in relation to other elements of war-economies varies enormously: from very important to marginal (Shearer, 2000).

both related to a new understanding of the role that coping-strategies play in the survival of individuals and households and developmentalist worries about relief creating “dependency”. These concerns go back to Malthus’ critique of the English poor laws and share the fate of his ideas on the precarious relationship between population and subsistence – a lack of supporting data. Yet the “dependency” discourse seems resistant to poor documentation and evidence and still survives in numerous agency-documents and donor-policies.

The critique of relief culminates in suggestions for change that clearly go beyond its original mandate: relief is now expected to address root-causes, contribute to development, reduce disasters/ conflicts or even build peace. Once expected to provide “impartial” and “neutral” life-saving services, relief is dragged into the politically charged zone of development and sometimes conflict reduction or peace building. Most UN- and donor agencies have adopted a reformed approach to relief that reflects one or more of these ideas.

DFID’s humanitarian policy is an example of such a reformed approach. Reflecting an overall commitment to “liberal peace” and the Washington consensus the White Paper emphasizes the significance of “good government”, “human rights” and a liberalized global economic system. The policy experiment in Sierra Leone illustrates that human rights concerns may override “purely” humanitarian concerns and lead to a situation where the provision of relief becomes conditional upon “good government” (previously reserved to development aid).

DFID’s policy document on conflict and humanitarian assistance emphasizes negative ramifications of relief on conflicts and dependency and the need to scrutinize each case individually before deciding upon appropriate action – which may translate into non-action.

Dependency-avoidance and its positive modern counterpart, the need to build “capacities” or support “coping strategies”, have often justified the failure to provide

timely and adequate quantities of relief (Keen, 2001d:2 and pp.15-16)¹³. Together with the “relief fuels wars”-discourse these are dominant and self-evident discursive practices and assumptions. Their dominance seems to be contingent upon their usefulness for specific institutions (such as donors or relief agencies) in situations when little or no relief serves economic or political objectives (such as cutting down expenditure, adapting needs to the capacity to deliver or, more recently, promoting democratic values). We have seen how research on famines and conflict situations has contributed to the creation of these discourses¹⁴ that have become integrated into “regimes of practice” where knowledge and power i.e. the power to decide what is to be known and what is to be done interact (Foucault, 1978). The fact that donors/ governments often fund the research that produces knowledge, which then may be incorporated into policies, illustrates the inter-dependency between knowledge and power¹⁵.

DFID’s policy is in many ways symptomatic of the crisis of the traditional concept of relief as a neutral attempt to alleviate symptoms of suffering. Based on the critique of relief in both scientific and populist discourse DFID presents a policy that indirectly questions the universal commitment to alleviate human suffering which forms the basis of IHL (IRC, 1983: pp.154-55, 641). But while the “humanitarian imperative” may be abandoned, relief is not. Massive and fairly conventional relief-operations responding to conflicts (and natural disasters) are still mounted when public attention, political pressure and strategic interests combined require a visible response. Naturally DFID evaluates its responsibilities in Europe (such as in Kosovo) differently from those in other parts of the world (Interview notes, M. Kapila, 2001).

DFID’s policy document on conflict and humanitarian assistance is careful to avoid the impression that conditionality is introduced into relief but creates an ambiguous “room for maneuver” that can justify both large-scale humanitarian operations as well as the

¹³ It is an open secret that international relief is almost always under-supplied, “too little, too late” as Duffield (quoted after Shearer, 2000:194) describes it.

¹⁴ I am not criticizing the outcomes of research but the way in which results have been generalized and integrated into policies.

¹⁵ This is not to claim that results are pre-meditated but those who fund can obviously influence the questions to be asked.

possible withholding of relief. Relief therefore is not threatened by a sudden death but has become a more selective tool. Some authors argue that humanitarian aid is now the new global instrument of shaping relations between the center and the periphery, those strategically unimportant “pariah” states that do not qualify for development aid (Duffield, 1998a). In this view DFID has taken over foreign policy for peripheral countries from the FCO (Macrae/Leader, 2000). The case of Sierra Leone seems to support this idea. Relief was withheld together with development aid – in the hope of supporting the return of a legitimate “partner” government that would qualify for development aid. At the same time we have to be careful not to overload a single incident with significance. The policy in Sierra Leone may have had more to do with the specific views and engagement of individuals representing the British government than with a consistent new approach to foreign policy in peripheral countries.

The September 11 events and the resulting military (and humanitarian) campaign(s) may provide arguments for both a further politicization of humanitarian aid as well as for more neutral and impartial humanitarian practices. In other words DFID’s humanitarian policy deserves further attention and comparative research into other donor policies may help to identify common trends and to predict where humanitarian assistance may go in the future.

List of ACRONYMS

APPENDIX A

AFRC: Armed Forces Ruling Council. Military junta in Sierra Leone established after the coup in 1997.

CDF: Civil Defense Force. Government-aligned militia (i.e. to Kabbah government) comprising various local militias, most notably the Kamajors.

CHAD: Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department (in DFID).

CRHAP: Conflict Reduction and Humanitarian Assistance Policy (DFID)

CRS: Catholic Relief Services

DAC: Development Assistance Committee (OECD).

DFID: Department for International Development (UK)

ECOMOG: ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group. Originally formed to intervene in Liberia (1990), mandate later on extended to Sierra Leone (1997) with Nigerian forces playing a lead role.

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States.

EO: Executive Outcomes. South African security-company employed by Sierra Leone government in 1995-96. Its contract was terminated (as agreed in the Abidjan peace agreement) in early 1997.

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FCO: Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Britain).

HDR: Human Development Report (UNDP)

IDC: International Development Committee. British parliamentary commission on development.

ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross

NGO: Non-governmental organization

NPRC: National Provisional Ruling Council. Military junta in Sierra Leone established after the coup in 1992. Handed over power to elected government in 1996.

ODA: Overseas Development Assistance.

RUF: Revolutionary United Front. Rebel group under leadership of Foday Sankoh that started armed attack in March 1991.

SLPP: Sierra Leone People's Party. Political party that won elections in 1996 with Tejan Kabbah as the designated president. Seen to have its power-base amongst the Mende people.

UNDHA: Department of Humanitarian Affairs (predecessor of UNOCHA), UN

UNOCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (successor to UNDHA, since 1998)

WFP: World Food Programme

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