

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233054616>

# Between Aid and Politics: diagnosing the challenge of humanitarian advocacy in politically complex environments—the case of Darfur, Sudan

Article in *Third World Quarterly* · December 2010

DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2010.541084

---

CITATIONS

13

READS

231

1 author:



Kate M. Bridges

3 PUBLICATIONS 29 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

This article was downloaded by: [Bridges, K. M.]

On: 14 January 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 932370192]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Third World Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713448481>

### Between Aid and Politics: diagnosing the challenge of humanitarian advocacy in politically complex environments—the case of Darfur, Sudan

KM Bridges

Online publication date: 13 January 2011

**To cite this Article** Bridges, KM(2010) 'Between Aid and Politics: diagnosing the challenge of humanitarian advocacy in politically complex environments—the case of Darfur, Sudan', Third World Quarterly, 31: 8, 1251 — 1269

**To link to this Article:** DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2010.541084

**URL:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2010.541084>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Between Aid and Politics: diagnosing the challenge of humanitarian advocacy in politically complex environments—the case of Darfur, Sudan

KM BRIDGES

*ABSTRACT* Humanitarian advocacy is emblematic of the relief community's desire to move beyond simply treating the symptoms of suffering, and towards tackling the causes. As such, advocacy is at the front line of debates over where the boundaries between aid and politics should now be drawn and the point where dissension on the subject is most evident. In this paper the challenge that advocacy poses for traditional humanitarian operations in Darfur and the effect of such political engagement on humanitarian identity more generally is assessed. Disagreement among humanitarian organisations is exacerbated by the continued tendency of aid agencies to privilege reaction over reflection. Floundering between unachievable traditional humanitarian principles and the failure of human rights to provide an adequate alternative, humanitarianism is swiftly losing both its identity and its legitimacy. To emerge from the fog of confusion humanitarianism must now take on the professionalism of military science and endeavour to better know both itself and its enemies.

Humanitarian action today has moved far beyond its purely philanthropic roots. It has evolved from de-politicised charity to human rights-based assistance, from dealing only with symptoms to addressing causes and from focusing solely on aid delivery to employing advocacy for humanitarian ends. These shifts have revealed altogether novel challenges for humanitarians. Addressing both symptoms (via assistance) and causes (via advocacy) are not always complementary objectives, particularly in highly politicised environments. The extent to which speaking out has increasingly affected an agency's ability to meet its traditional imperative of providing assistance has forced international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to reassess their priorities, as well as their role in emergencies. And while consensus has been achieved within the humanitarian community that aid never operates in a

---

*KM Bridges can be contacted at [k8bridges@gmail.com](mailto:k8bridges@gmail.com).*

political vacuum, the range of political engagement deemed legitimate remains almost limitless. The pursuit of coherence between aid and politics has meant *incoherence* for the humanitarian agenda. The subsequent concern is that 'with each agency adapting and developing its own strategic framework, the "new humanitarianisms" result in suboptimal or even counter-productive consequences'.<sup>1</sup>

This paper finds that the complication of humanitarian aims combined with prevalent uncertainty concerning humanitarianism's boundaries has led to a current situation of confusion over when, how and why agencies should engage in advocacy. The confusion is symptomatic of the fact that there simply no longer exists any agreement as to what 'humanitarianism' actually *is*. Divergent advocacy strategies are both a symptom of this problem and a contributor to it. And although diversity among agencies will always be beneficial to a certain extent, the currently limitless interpretations of the humanitarian mandate have ensured that humanitarianism's legitimacy and credibility can no longer be forcefully reasserted. Since humanitarians themselves cannot agree on how neutral, political or independent they actually are, it can hardly be expected that beneficiaries or belligerents will.

Fortunately, the challenge is not insurmountable. There is still enough agreement on the 'essence' of humanitarianism to provide a starting point for further discussions, and there are practical ways in which INGOs can begin to rectify failings. Much of the incoherency and 'ad-hocracy' concerning advocacy appears to have arisen not from considered disagreement but from lethargic analysis and a tendency to drift into new modes of action reactively rather than reflectively. The question now is whether humanitarians will collectively begin to address the confusion at the heart of their endeavour or continue to drift into further ambivalence.

This paper explores the current debates concerning the boundaries between aid and politics, and attempts to link grand theory with the practical day-to-day workings of humanitarian action in a highly politicised emergency, using four data sources: Darfur-based aid worker questionnaires; interviews with advocacy representatives; INGO Darfur evaluations; and humanitarian policy analyst comments. Conclusions as to the nature of the challenges that face a politically engaged humanitarianism and suggestions for how these challenges can be met are also presented.

### Analytical frameworks

Advocacy is symptomatic of modern humanitarianism's decision to move beyond simply mitigating the symptoms of crises and towards addressing their causes. It refers to activism that is undertaken to influence stakeholders so that tangible changes can be obtained for the benefit of an affected population. This fairly recent pursuit of political engagement by the humanitarian community is directly linked to the messy reunification that aid and politics have been undergoing since the 1990s. Since the 1990s humanitarians have come to accept that aid never operates in a political vacuum. It therefore appears both inevitable and desirable that humanitarian

assistance should experience some form of engagement with political actors. The current challenge for humanitarians is to identify exactly how and where politics and aid engage and how the politicisation can be managed for more humanitarian purposes. And since it is advocacy that encompasses the set of strategies that enable humanitarians to engage with other non-humanitarians, it is there that this challenge must be faced.

Differing perceptions of legitimate political engagement can essentially be traced back to differing interpretations of the root humanitarian ethic. While the debates are wide-ranging and often fragmented, the arguments generally fall between two broad positions. The first, which we see championed by critics like Hugo Slim, insists on the need for a more radical, politically involved and rights-based understanding of humanitarian action. The second, endorsed by those like David Rieff, rejects what it views as an overt politicisation of aid and calls for a return to a more apolitical endeavour that recognises the virtues of modest charity alone.

*Hugo Slim's 'proper politicisation'*

I think that the explicit adoption of rights by humanitarians will allow us to connect with a proper politics that leads beyond humanitarian protection to justice and to the development of real political contracts between people and power about the place and extent of armed conflict in their politics.<sup>2</sup>

Slim places himself in contrast to Rieff's 'back to basics', classicist position by foregrounding the necessity of humanitarianism's engagement with human rights. Alongside Marx and Engels, and more recently Alex De Waal, Slim begins his justification for a human rights-based humanitarian model by deriding the extent to which a depoliticised philanthropic discourse has tended to naturalise inequality. He notes that 'when charity and philanthropy are ends in themselves and left to float free of any serious challenge to power', humanitarianism is limited to offering help, but never redress. In this guise humanitarianism is at best a reactionary exercise and, according to Slim, it takes one of two negative forms:

1. It becomes a discourse characterised by the moral voice of pity, helplessness and rescue. The beneficiary is confirmed as an object, while the humanitarian has all the powers of agency.
2. It presents itself as a moral appeal that has the authority of science, and functions as though its analysis of technical solutions and problems has no attachment to subjective values.

Such discourses mistakenly 'de-politicise', or disregard all political factors or influences, of armed conflicts and crises of poverty as well as their own agenda. This de-politicisation is emblematic of how the West has historically reacted to Africa's wars: with a simple philanthropic response focused on providing food, shelter and treating symptoms. Slim's more radical, human rights-based interpretation of the humanitarian ethic is put forward as the

‘proper politicisation’ of humanitarianism. It is ‘proper’ because it re-orientates morality around equality, contract and justice rather than around pity and help. Since it exemplifies ‘a consistent and still impartial political philosophy grounded in basic goods, natural rights and justice’, it is able to create ‘political space for itself to challenge, mitigate and even transform the particular politics of violence and war’. Slim, and the ‘new humanitarianisms’ along with him, have responded to the heart wrenching failures of humanitarianism in the Balkans and Great Lakes with the insistence that humanitarianism *must* become part of the solution.

*David Rieff and the virtues of ‘mere charity’*

David Rieff readily admits that in Kosovo, and more recently in Afghanistan, situations existed where it was clear that humanitarian action by itself could never do enough to ease people’s suffering. After the sense of defeat and failure that followed Rwanda, Rieff acknowledges both the appeal of turning aid into ‘more than charity’ and the concurrent belief that ‘when aid was deployed in tandem with (well-intended) military power, political will and public commitment, there *were* humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems’ (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Rieff insists that this determination to link humanitarianism with an international response to crisis and to ‘meld [humanitarian] efforts with the campaigns for human rights and global good governance’ will lead to the humanitarian enterprise being unable ‘to preserve its specific moral gravity’. Rieff proposes that in this new ‘culture of national and international accountability’, humanitarians should remain separate from the Responsibility to Protect project and should not see themselves as part of the global response to conflict, for fear of undermining the very impartiality, neutrality, humanity and independence that make their role unique. Rieff rejects the coherence agenda on the basis that it has caused agencies to ‘surrender autonomy in the name of effectiveness, impartiality in the name of politics . . . and an autonomous humanitarian space in the name of the imperative of access and the increased efficiencies of “coordination”’. While the appeal of a more politically engaged, solution-finding and human rights-based humanitarianism may be, at surface level, more compelling than what de Torrente calls a ‘modest yet vitally important ambition to ensure that the most vulnerable are not sacrificed in times of conflict and crisis’,<sup>4</sup> Rieff insists that what is being lost in such a pursuit should be worth greater concern:

So many people, including so many relief workers, talk these days about ‘mere’ charity, ‘mere’ humanitarianism. As if coping with a dishonourable world honourably, and a cruel world with kindness, were not honour enough. Instead, a serious, wonderful, and limited idea [ie human rights] has become a catchall for the thwarted aspirations of our age. And few seem to notice, and fewer still to care about what is being lost.<sup>5</sup>

Rieff’s call is for humility and a recognition that, while humanitarians can motivate other political actors to provide conflict solutions, humanitarians

themselves must not let aid take part in that solution at the risk of jeopardising its independence and neutrality. His view stands in stark contrast to the utopianism of human rights, since it insists that our world will *never* be a perfect one and that Kofi Annan's vision of all goods being compatible—whether truth and justice, peace and justice or human rights and humanitarianism—and of states altruistically intervening in every abuse around the world are at root elaborate mystifications. Rieff points instead to the reality of increasing abuses and the ever-present self-interest of states and concludes that, in such a world, we must 'let humanitarianism be humanitarianism'.

Using humanitarianism to help advance the cause of human rights, to enable conflict resolution, stop wars and further social justice is to call it to do things that are beyond both its expertise and its jurisdiction. It is symptomatic of the tendency that Rieff would diagnose as humanitarian hubris and an 'emblem of moral overreach'. At heart, his concern is that the tying of aid to human rights, longer-term development goals and wider political objectives has suffocated one of the few arenas that was free of political conditions and affiliations. Alongside him critics like Fiona Fox and organisations like Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)<sup>6</sup> have insisted that the conditionalities and loss of impartiality and neutrality that arise with such ties are ultimately destroying one of the world's few truly admirable ideas: the idea that 'people dying without food, water and medicines should receive unconditional humanitarian aid whoever they are'.<sup>7</sup>

### *Diversity or disunity*

The debate over humanitarianism's role in highly politicised conflicts is essentially a debate over where the line should be drawn between aid and politics. Where this line is determines an organisation's advocacy strategies, since it confirms what political issues, if any, they can speak on, which actors they can engage with and whether they favour a strategy of denunciation, persuasion or mobilisation. Rieff's position can be broadly termed as 'back to basics' or 'classicist' humanitarianism, while Slim's views are more in line with a 'maximalist' view, characteristic of 'new humanitarianism'. It is worth noting, of course, that in reality debates of this nature operate on a sliding scale of which neither Rieff nor Slim are at the extreme ends. New humanitarianism at its most extreme would insist that aid be made conditional on achieving human rights and wider political objectives. An extreme classicist approach would avoid all forms of engagement with political or military actors at all times.

The objective of this paper is not to diagnose the correctness of either of the positions elucidated above but rather to assess how these divergences translate to operations on the ground in a highly politicised emergency like Darfur. Of particular interest is whether the proliferation of these apparently opposed philosophies has reduced the coherency of humanitarian advocacy to an unmanageable extent.

### Advocacy in Darfur

#### *The nature of the crisis and the humanitarian response*

The crisis in Darfur is perceived by most humanitarians to be a crisis of protection. Because the government of Sudan is recognised as being a major party to the violence, aid agencies face a particular problem: where violence is intentional, humanitarianism is a threat rather than an ally to negative authorities, and subsequent modes of action will inevitably be politically complicated. Assistance is considered by most to be little more than a palliative and advocacy therefore seems like the most logical place to focus agency energies. But without political will advocacy is also seriously limited in its options. In particular ‘denunciation’—identified as the favoured type of advocacy in crises where violations are deliberate<sup>8</sup>—presents a significantly risky option. As one analyst notes, while humanitarianism is trying to expand its possibilities and widen the definition of neutrality, the Sudan government is simultaneously attempting to narrow its interpretation of legitimate humanitarian activities, specifically those that it considers overtly political or non-neutral. Darfur is, as such, ‘a classically non-permissive advocacy environment’.<sup>9</sup> Agencies involved in the research described themselves as operating in ‘a climate of fear’, and many years after the crisis began, the Sudan government is still perceived as being in control with regard to its manipulation of aid and its ability to perpetuate suffering:

After thirty years of high-profile international humanitarian initiatives in the Sudan, the belligerents have done a better job of learning how to manipulate and frustrate humanitarian action than the international community has of using its considerable assets creatively.<sup>10</sup>

Since the level of global activism that was established on behalf of Darfur is the biggest that the world has experienced since the end of apartheid in 1994,<sup>11</sup> humanitarians must question how such a massive mobilisation can have had so little positive effect. For many of the interviewed analysts, the prevalence of *ad hoc*, ‘something must be done’ advocacy is considered to be a significant factor in its ineffectiveness. Knowing Khartoum’s adeptness at manipulating the crisis *should* reinforce the extent to which agencies pursue highly tactical and strategic diplomacy. However, there still appears to be a significant gap between: 1) recognition of the Sudan government’s considerable ability to frustrate aid and fracture the response; and 2) a subsequent determination to pour energy into understanding and responding to that manipulation intelligently. Throughout the research it was painfully apparent that aid agencies do not adequately attempt to ‘know thy enemy’. While almost all aid agencies insisted on the necessity of considered and strategic advocacy, the manner in which it was undertaken often belied such claims. For one leading agency, despite highlighting advocacy as ‘an integral component of [their] Darfur intervention’, their actual objectives were only drawn up five months after their advocacy activity began.<sup>12</sup> It was obvious that, although agencies gave lip service to the importance of selective and



professionalised advocacy, organisational resources seldom followed suit. Instead the trend is still to do advocacy *now*, because ‘something must be done’, and then consider actual strategies and the professionalism of the approach only as a secondary thought, if at all.

Whether advocacy helps or hinders operations will be significantly determined by the professionalism with which the decision to undertake it was reached. Myron Wiener insists that we need to move towards a more ‘instrumental humanitarianism’ which reflects the need to make context-specific judgments rather than reverting to rigid ideological responses.<sup>13</sup> In the context of a highly politicised emergency like Darfur it is unlikely that either the decision to speak or not to speak will come without some negative consequences, and in this respect cost–benefit analysis needs to be strategic and highly informed. In the words of one humanitarian analyst, ‘there is no edge, there is a continuum and what we need is better judgement’. Agencies must be able to justify why risking the loss of access to a refugee population in order to publicise abuses was in fact ‘the lesser of two evils’. Contrary to the utopian view that all goods are complementary, INGOs must learn to accept that they are making decisions between choices that are often far from optimal. With this in mind advocacy strategies should be decided on a methodical basis that assesses a range of contextual factors. Who is already speaking out? Will our agency be adding anything to the debate? Is this topic our area of expertise? What potential risks will speaking out bring to our programme? What are the implications of remaining silent? Is there any group better placed to whom we can pass on the information? All these questions require skilled analysis and in-depth knowledge of other actors and broader political factors.

#### *When advocacy affects humanitarian identity*

More crises with more interlocutors combined with more agencies with more capabilities have increased incoherence and undercut the collective effort. There is no consensus on what humanitarianism means or who a humanitarian is.<sup>14</sup>

Research revealed unequivocal disagreements between INGOs in terms of where they felt the boundary lines between aid and politics should be drawn. However, on splitting questionnaire responses into: 1) those more in line with David Rieff’s back-to-basics preferences; and 2) those promoting Hugo Slim’s human rights-based model, it became apparent that a minimalist approach attracts more favour than we have perhaps been led to believe. Very few agencies were conducting advocacy on such political topics as military intervention and, for the majority, humanitarian principles were still considered a central part of the humanitarian definition. In line with Dorothy Hillhorst, the research revealed that the minimalist principles represented in the International Red Cross Code of Conduct continue to ‘reflect the mainstream thinking of people involved with relief INGOs about what should constitute humanitarian aid’.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that certain statements by critics—that principles such as neutrality are barely relevant to contemporary

humanitarianism and that a new 'conditional' humanitarianism has gained the upper hand<sup>16</sup>—do not tell the whole story. Agencies continue to acknowledge that bedrock principles such as neutrality and impartiality are what distinguish their role and thereby justify their involvement in a sovereign state.

While humanitarians tend to insist on the 'principled' nature of their political engagement, deeper questioning and observation tended to reveal a more pragmatic approach which often accommodates certain requirements that violate humanitarian principles, such as accepting access to certain populations in return for providing aid to other populations that may be less in need. And while there is agreement on the abstract essence of humanitarianism—neutral aid given for the mitigation of human suffering—disagreement immediately arises when one questions exactly how adherence to this essence limits what type of advocacy the INGO can pursue. This is compounded by the fact that, although neutrality is still viewed as important, the definition of what it is has developed and bifurcated dramatically. For some it is absolute, for others pragmatic, for some it means silence and for others it means applying the same standards to all parties. Clearly there needs to be a minimum of consensus on what neutrality actually means before INGOs can discuss how closely they adhere to it. In general, questions posed to research participants regarding acceptable levels of engagement revealed an unambiguous lack of agreement. Although it seems premature to confirm Rieff's 'death of humanitarianism', it does seem impossible to deny Weiss and Hoffman's pronouncement that 'there is no consensus on what humanitarianism means or who a humanitarian is'.<sup>17</sup> A selection of aid workers' reflections on the definition of humanitarianism are presented in Figure 1.

As for whether such a lack of consensus matters, on looking specifically at Darfur it would appear that in highly politicised emergencies it can have a very negative impact indeed. Almost every single research participant agreed with the statement that 'humanitarians tend to be considered as a single entity by beneficiaries and the Sudanese government regardless of whether they pursue drastically different strategies'. Thus, proliferation matters particularly to agencies that make a conscious decision to maintain neutrality and yet find it undermined by the actions of other INGOs with whom they become bracketed. When the loss of perceived neutrality can entail the kind of insecurity that is currently evident among aid workers in Sudan, it is understandable that those with a narrower mandate view diversity in a negative light. These organisations often experience the negative effects of a political engagement that they have no control over.

Even more serious than confusion between agencies is incoherence *within* them. Internal confusion results in rifts between different INGO staff, advocacy taking place without adequate support or resources, staff being excessively risk averse thanks to misinterpretation of organisational mandates and unsynchronised, *ad hoc* targeting strategies being employed. For this type of incoherence there is little excuse. Agencies simply need to be investing more time and resources in staff training and sensitisation. The tendency to require awareness of humanitarian principles, of organisational

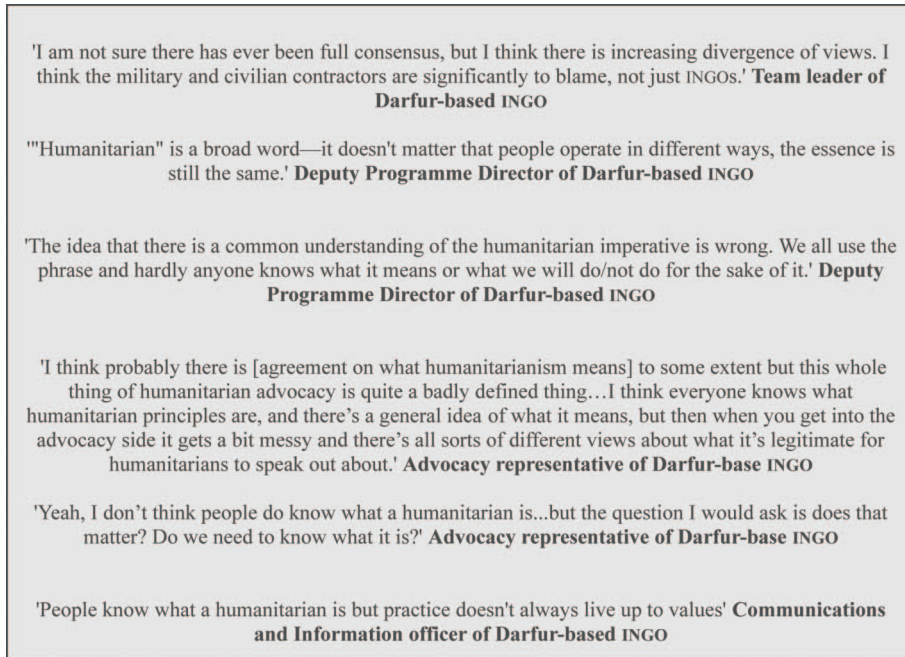


FIGURE 1. Aid worker reflections on the definition of 'humanitarianism' (selected quotes).

mandate and of overarching aid debates only from those labelled 'humanitarian affairs' personnel is a particularly negative trend. Since the problem of defining humanitarian boundaries is essentially one of improving judgment rather than providing abstract rules, then staff at *all* levels of the advocacy process need to be aware of these broader humanitarian mandates and debates. If aid workers themselves are unaware of their organisation's adherence to humanitarian principles, how can they expect their beneficiaries and the Sudanese government not to be?

*Privileging reaction over reflection*

Arguably the most significant observation gleaned from the research data was the prevalent uncertainty among respondents about the bigger picture. Throughout the questionnaire a considerable number of participants were 'unsure' of advocacy-related debates or replied with contradictory statements to questions of the same essence. This uncertainty was consistently reflected in interviews and evaluations as well. Those whose job titles involved the words 'advocacy', 'policy' or 'affairs' generally fared better, though not always. Despite the warnings from Rwanda about the dangers of believing in the sufficiency of good motivations alone, humanitarianism is still characterised by an obsession with 'boots on the ground' above all else and continues to let experience, research and training play second fiddle to

that preoccupation. Questionnaire respondents, interviewees and evaluations acknowledged that there were many aid workers in the field—generally characterised as young, idealistic and without previous experience in complex emergencies—who did not have sufficient understanding of what their INGO’s history, mandate and perspective on advocacy was and, in the words of one aid worker, ‘why or how different actors (political, armed, humanitarian) behave the way they do and how to relate to them’. These comments parallel Larry Minear’s research conclusion that, despite facing the same problems with the Office for Emergency Operations in Africa (1984–86) and Operation Lifeline Sudan (1989–present), aid organisations are still approaching Sudan as though it is completely uncharted territory: ‘All these mobilisations, individually on their own terms and also together, are thus profoundly unhistorical in construct and execution . . . their contexts were too narrowly understood and their preoccupations too technical’.<sup>18</sup>

Paradoxically, one of humanitarianism’s greatest strengths—its ‘can do’ attitude—is also its greatest weakness since it so often results in a privileging of reaction over reflection (see Figure 2).<sup>19</sup>

The disjunction between INGO self-images and their actual practices suggests that many of the humanitarian agencies have ‘drifted’ into their current approaches rather than given serious consideration as to how organisational developments affect their official mandates and humanitarian principles. Considering that this era is, as critic Frangonikolopoulos states, ‘a period of intense insecurity for INGOS, with their credibility and legitimacy increasingly in question’,<sup>20</sup> so called ‘humanitarian’ agencies should review their *actual* rather than *spoken* adherence to principles such as neutrality and impartiality. Such reviews should involve not simply their own perceptions but also the perceptions of their beneficiaries. If they find their action to be at odds with such principles then they should seriously consider defining themselves apart from the humanitarian endeavour.

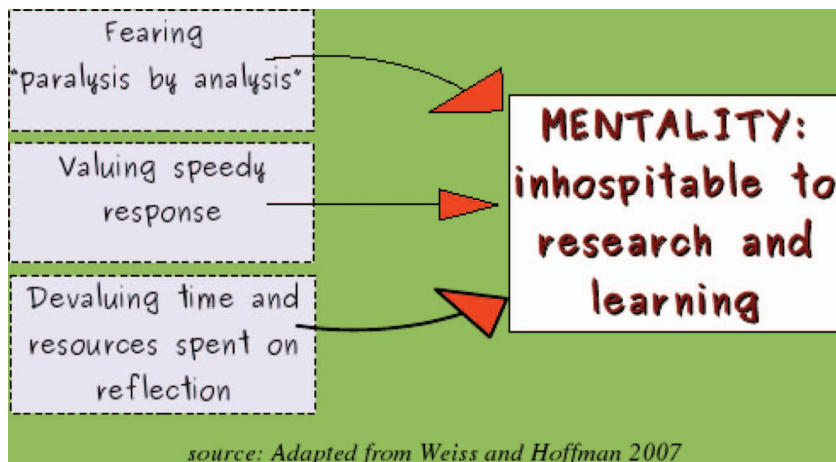


FIGURE 2. Attitudinal impediments to reflection in relief NGOs.

A particular question that must be asked is, if INGOs are able to filter the information that they glean from their privileged position outwards to non-operational agencies, to their overseas offices or to the United Nations—bodies which are not at such risk of reprisals when they call for international solutions—then why do they increasingly appear to be taking on this dangerous duty themselves? The concern is that agencies advocate on particularly hot, inflammatory topics not because they think they are the best-placed people to do it but because they want to be seen to be engaging in the issue of the moment. This tendency was revealed during the research by the number of field-based personnel who testified to the pressure to provide public statements on issues of international interest under which they were placed by their overseas headquarters. This was often regardless of whether those on the ground felt that private persuasion would achieve more, and without the risks, for the suffering populations. It should come as no surprise that advocacy can take place for a myriad of non-humanitarian reasons, whether career advancement, inter-organisational competition or to create fundraising opportunities.<sup>21</sup> INGOs are in competition with one another for funds, and advocacy on particularly visual and morally simplistic crises provides a means of easily engaging public interest. As Vanessa Pupavac points out, ‘advocacy can allow one to claim the moral high ground—without the stresses and responsibilities of implementing assistance programs on the ground’.<sup>22</sup>

According to Pupavac, advocacy on humanitarian crises is a way of addressing the gaping vacuum in Western politics that has been left since the death of grand narratives and the dissolution of cold war frameworks. For a postmodern generation with few if any absolutes, advocacy on moral certainties such as genocide can provide one of the few means for disenfranchised individuals to ‘vent [their] existential anxieties’. More than one advocacy agency has been accused of dumbing down the complexities of the Darfur emergency in order to gain the support of those individuals.<sup>23</sup> Since an agency’s advocacy is only justified as long as it is based on meeting the actual needs of the suffering population, they would do well to reflect on whether their motivations for undertaking it are misplaced.

The following is a summary of why the need to place more value on reflection and research is so pertinent.

*Politically motivated attacks on humanitarian agencies are a growing trend.* Where increased political engagement is a direct contributor to rising insecurity among aid workers, its undertaking needs to be seriously considered. Post-9/11 this is more pertinent than ever as agencies are increasingly perceived to be instruments of Western state diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> If agencies ultimately choose to abandon neutrality, then they cannot expect immunity of ‘humanitarian space’.<sup>25</sup> If they are ‘unsure’ of their own neutrality then it is hardly likely that those party to the conflict will be any clearer.

*Advocacy is hamstrung by internal confusion.* Until agencies are internally aware of their mandates and advocacy strategies, advocacy will continue to

be *ad hoc* and inconsistent, jeopardising operations far more than is necessary.

*The humanitarian record to date in Darfur is poor.* The Sudan government is described in one agency evaluation as ‘masterful in its use of bureaucratic restrictions and blockages to constrain or prevent humanitarian activity’ and by various aid workers as rigorous in its surveillance of INGO activities. It has continued to frustrate humanitarian efforts in Sudan for the past 30 years. Conceivably the INGO community has the resources and avenues available to meet the government head on, yet it has consistently responded in an ad-hoc manner showing an almost complete lack of institutional memory. It will need to pursue the equivalent of a humanitarian military science if it is to learn how to use its assets more effectively.

*Doing something is not necessarily better than doing nothing.* Good motivations are not sufficient justification for actions. There is no place for knee-jerk ‘something must be done’ advocacy. Similarly, unconsidered silence can have equally grave implications. Agencies need to be able to justify their reasons for favouring action or inaction at any given time. To do this, thorough cost–benefit assessments need to be undertaken before decisions are made.

*There may be a better alternative.* INGOs may not be the best men for the job. Similarly, Western audiences may not be the best targets and advocacy may not be the best method. There may be other actors whose expertise, jurisdiction or positioning mean they are better placed than aid agencies to speak out. INGOs must be more humble in their self-assessments and recognise that their mandates cannot be limitless. The limelight that can come with speaking out on issues of international public concern, particularly morally appealing ones, makes it tempting to ignore alternatives. INGOs often pursue the limelight when they might be more effective if they went behind the scenes, enabled affected populations to speak for themselves, targeted less visible but more influential personalities or passed their information onto less vulnerable actors.

*We cannot escape the need for personal judgements.* It is a feature of Western culture in general that we are keen to rely on abstract rules as a means of circumventing the difficult process of judgement or situations of uncertainty. Unfortunately easy answers and abstract rules are not true to the realities of relief work or to life in general. Whether advocacy affects operations will depend significantly on context, wider political processes, actors and the nature of the issue.<sup>26</sup> The key to sound decisions is a focus on reflection rather than simply reaction.

*It is easy to do advocacy for the wrong reasons.* An agency’s advocacy is only justified as long as it is based on meeting the actual needs of the suffering population. To ensure that this remains its objective will require

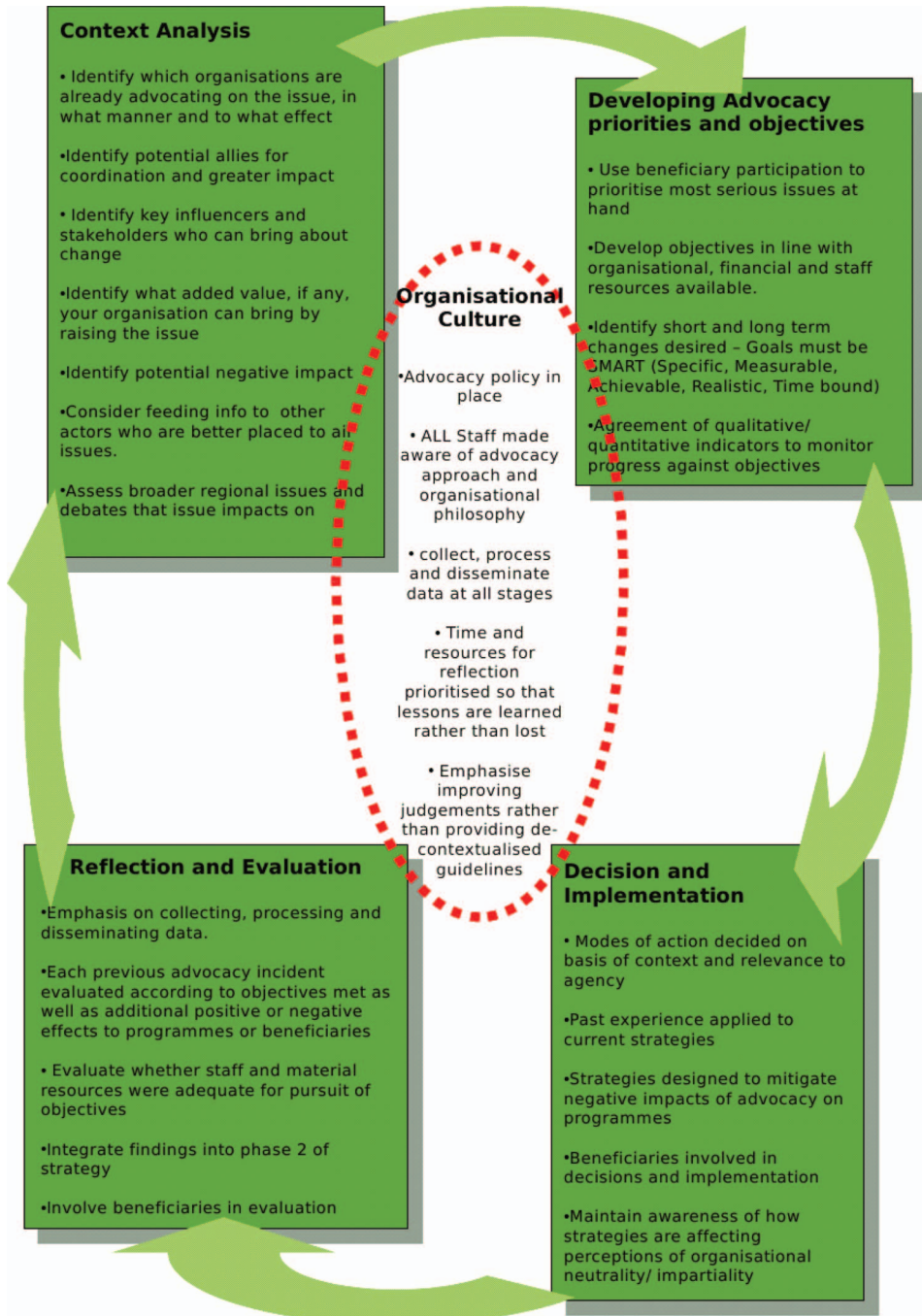


FIGURE 3. Incorporating strategic advocacy into the project cycle.  
 Source: Author's compilation.

constant self-examination as well as strong mechanisms of beneficiary accountability.

*Strategic connections are necessary.* In a highly politicised environment like Darfur, whom agencies choose to collaborate with can have a significant effect on the success of their advocacy as well as on their ability to avoid reprisals. Where perceptions often matter more than actuality, it is necessary for agencies to know how other INGOs or human rights organisations are viewed and to partner with or remain publicly distinct from them as necessary. The general lack of knowledge concerning what the rest of the humanitarian community is doing needs to be addressed if agencies hope to benefit from complementarity where it exists and to highlight separation where it undermines perceived neutrality.

Figure 3 illustrates some ways in which INGOs can be more considered in their pursuit of political engagement via advocacy. The diagram emphasises the extent to which organisational culture will need to develop in order for such consideration to be possible.

## Conclusion

### *A crisis of identity*

David Rieff laments the death of traditional independent humanitarianism and criticises the rise of a new conditional, politicised humanitarianism that leaves impartiality and neutrality shattered in its wake. As we have seen, however, there is reason to believe that Rieff's pronouncement may have been premature. Certainly a more politically engaged, cause-affecting and solution-providing humanitarianism has been viewed by many as a means of making agencies relevant to their contemporary climate. The global shifts and forceful critiques that faced the aid community in the 1990s made clear the fact that traditional humanitarianism—with its depoliticising tendencies and rigid interpretation of neutrality—needed to evolve or dissolve. However, this research also suggests that humanitarians retain a greater level of agreement over the importance of humanitarian principles and the provision of aid solely according to need than Rieff and others have led us to believe. The good idea, then, is not yet dead.<sup>27</sup> It is, however, increasingly confused.

Humanitarians sought their updated rallying cry in 'new humanitarianism', but have now discovered that unregulated political engagement is fast eroding that unique neutral and impartial identity on which their interventions were first justified. Such erosion would be less of an issue had they something concrete with which to replace that traditional identity. But the 'war on terror' has done much to quash the heady utopianism of those promoting a world order based on human rights, new sovereignty and responsibility to protect. For a while after Kosovo and Rwanda we thought that 'never again' might actually mean just that. Along with Tony Blair, we really believed that governments might adhere to 'a new internationalism,



where the brutal repression of whole ethnic groups will no longer be tolerated'.<sup>28</sup> Solidarism, with its insistence that 'states should satisfy certain basic requirements of decency before they qualify for the protection which the principle of non-intervention provides'<sup>29</sup> was, for a short time, the language of legitimate statecraft. But then came the global war on terror and the subsequent reprioritisation of security over human rights. Where states were previously receiving international criticism for internal repression, they could now skilfully deflect attention by labelling actions as 'counter-terrorist'.<sup>30</sup> The 21st century sees evidence of a return to a realist, pluralist-based rhetoric of national interests and power calculations. The lack of a decisive response to crises like Darfur or Zimbabwe is confirmation that the responsibility to protect agenda languishes far behind any state's self-interest. In Darfur members of the UN security council have vetoed meaningful sanctions and diluted resolutions to such a degree that Bashir's government is able to dictate peacekeeper mandates, resist Western ground troops, and restrict access largely as he desires. The international community is not simply passive in the face of Khartoum's record of obstructionism and non-compliance with UN demands and agreements; in the case of China and Russia in particular, it has actually facilitated that very resistance. What is more, we cannot simply blame these pluralist *Realpolitik* tendencies on power hungry elites, since it is 'the court of world public opinion' that confirms the legitimacy of their actions.<sup>31</sup> As Samantha Power observes, no US government has ever experienced a sustained domestic push from its public to intervene decisively in genocide or near-genocide abroad.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, none has ever been held to account for failing to do so. And so the notion of international human rights becomes, as contemporary realist Henry Kissinger terms it, 'mostly an unfortunate and sentimental intrusion into the real stuff of international relations—interstate power calculations'.<sup>33</sup> Subsequently new humanitarianism has faltered; aware of the virtual impossibility and often undesirability of maintaining traditional principles like neutrality, yet unsure with what to replace those original philosophies. Hugo Slim may well *wish* to reorientate morality around equality, contract and justice rather than pity and help, but the current state of world affairs suggests that such ideals can do little more than mitigate the main driver: self-interest.

And so, without an anchoring identity, humanitarianism is floundering. There is considerable confusion over where the line between aid and politics now lies. Arguably this has been a significant contributing factor towards what is perceived by many as the tragically insufficient and even 'systematic' failure of humanitarian interventions in the Darfur crisis. At the same time the extent to which effective advocacy is less about abstract rules than it is about subjective judgments based on specific contexts suggests that there is little possibility or even desirability of a 'one size fits all' solution. The remedy must be sought somewhere between the extremes of being carbon copy agencies and being a community that has no sense of its distinctive role or future function. Of the first extreme there seems little danger, but the latter option is worryingly emblematic of humanitarianism's current condition.

*Advocacy and the art of war*

Where there is major divergence in INGO strategies seems also to be where there is considerable uncertainty. It is significant that the current state of incoherence appears to be largely a result of lethargic analysis rather than considered disagreement. Agencies continue acting and advocating with fingers crossed that updated humanitarianism will, somehow, 'fall into place'. If we are to be more optimistic than Rieff, humanitarians must uncross their fingers and begin actively to address the fog in which they are embroiled. In keeping with Weiss and Hoffman, Hugo Slim and David Kennedy,<sup>34</sup> I must conclude that the way forward for humanitarianism is to prioritise the analytical impulse that has so far taken a back seat to reflexes. The call is for humanitarians to develop their own equivalent of military science, based on the recognised necessity of both knowing our enemy and knowing ourselves if we are to surmount obstacles.<sup>35</sup> For many years humanitarians have been characterised by learning disability and a lethargic process of adaptation that is far behind the pace of our shifting global landscape.<sup>36</sup> This mental lethargy sits uncomfortably alongside the tendency to jump head first into crises, and it is compounded now by the ever-increasing number of agencies, mandates and budgets that call themselves 'humanitarian'. This research suggests that the term still means something. There is an essence that receives some agreement. But that essence is becoming increasingly ambiguous as INGOs drift unthinkingly into a new millennium with little attempt to retain lessons from the last one.

The possibility of approaching the future with absolute certainty is one that analysis and self-examination will not guarantee. Rather, it will simply enable humanitarians to make difficult judgments with more responsibility, aware of the pitfalls. It is not the utopian vision of new humanitarianism but it *is* one that should inspire realistic hope. David Kennedy refers to the pleasures and insights of building a more sceptical humanitarianism, 'forged in disenchantment. Embracing the dark sides. Deciding—at once uncertain and responsible'.<sup>37</sup>

Until INGOs at least begin to reflect more on the nature of their own mandates, on wider political factors, on the strengths and weaknesses of those who oppose them and on the humanitarian community as a whole, the possibility of even conducting discussion about their future role remains bleak. And in the meantime, unthinking advocacy and poor organisational learning keep the Sudanese government firmly in control of Darfur's suffering.

*Macro- and micro-recommendations**Macro*

- Humanitarian agencies must deliberate between themselves—behind closed doors if necessary—in order to reach some consensus on the minimum characteristics required to define an INGO as 'humanitarian'.
- A finalised definition of 'neutrality' and of the other humanitarian principles must be agreed upon so that agencies can then ascertain

whether they subscribe to them or not. This may mean updating the Red Cross code or it may mean developing a new code altogether.

- Serious discussion must be devoted to calls for a system of humanitarian accreditation, particularly for use in highly politicised environments where humanitarian INGOs need to be easily distinguished from those with a non-humanitarian agenda.
- There must be more consistent attempts to sensitise beneficiaries, governments and other political, military and economic actors regarding humanitarian aims and principles.

### *Micro*

- INGOs must be more innovative and less Western-focused in their advocacy targeting.
- They must develop more effective means of assessing advocacy's impact. This will entail keeping better records, doing better evaluations and disseminating results more efficiently.
- INGOs need to involve beneficiaries in their decisions to speak or not to speak since it is those beneficiaries who will most likely bear the brunt of the Sudanese government's reprisals.
- Figure 3 provides guidance as to how better strategy and analysis can be incorporated at every stage of the advocacy cycle.
- INGOs must define clear and timely advocacy policies.
- Awareness of an INGO's policies, mandate and philosophy must be promoted at all levels of the organisation.
- INGOs need to conduct regular discussion at all levels and promote constant reassessment so that they can actively adapt to new realities rather than drift unthinkingly into new modes of action.
- Time and resources must be set aside for regular self-examination and reflection.
- INGOs must place more value on training staff in INGO policies, advocacy strategies and diplomatic skills before sending them into the field.
- Learning must receive greater resource prioritisation. For example, it must not always be the first thing to be cut as soon as funds become low. Rather it must be viewed as the means by which limited resources can be distributed in a more effective way.
- In trying to improve their advocacy and judgement procedures, the first arena that INGOs need to improve is the experience and skills of their staff.
- Having enlisted competent and well-trained in-country advocacy staff, INGOs must be willing to delegate greater responsibility to them since they will best understand the potential impacts of advocacy on continued operations and perceived neutrality.
- INGOs must provide their individual staff with time for reflection and self-assessment. The frequency with which Sudan-based staff experience burnout is a sign of privileging action above all else.
- Agencies must foster strategic partnerships with INGOs that complement their own mandates.

- INGOs must also pursue strategic separation, when to be seen partnering with more outspoken, less impartial organisations—particularly non-operational human rights ones—may damage perceptions of their neutrality.
- INGOs must foster an internal environment that values self-critique and examination rather than always privileging reflex over reflection.
- There must be an organisational recognition that: 1) often there is no perfect solution; and 2) the aim is not to always have an optimal answer but to be knowledgeable about potential pitfalls and responsible about mistakes.

## Notes

I am grateful to Professor Barry Munslow for input on earlier drafts of this article as well as to Daniel Bridges for his invaluable contribution as a proof-reader.

- 1 TG Weiss & PJ Hoffman, 'The fog of humanitarianism: collective action problems and learning-challenged organizations', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 1(1), 2007, pp 47–48.
- 2 H Slim, 'Not philanthropy but rights: the proper politicisation of humanitarian philosophy', *International Journal of Human Rights*, 6, 2002, p 26.
- 3 D Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in crisis* (London: Vintage, 2002), p 288.
- 4 de Torrente, quoted in P O'Brien, 'Politicized humanitarianism: a response to Nicolas de Torrente', Spring 2004, p 34, at <http://www.law.harvard.edu/students/orgs/hrj/iss17/obrien.shtml>.
- 5 Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*, p 335.
- 6 J Tanguy & F Terry, 'Humanitarian responsibility and committed action: response to "principles, politics, and humanitarian action"', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 13(1), 1999, pp 29–34.
- 7 F Fox, 'New humanitarianism: does it provide a moral banner for the 21st century?', *Disasters*, 25(4), 2001, p 288.
- 8 H Slim & A Bonwick, *Protection: An Alnap Guide for Humanitarian Agencies*, London: Oxfam, 2006.
- 9 S O'Callaghan, 'Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur: the challenge of neutrality', *HPG Policy Brief*, 28, 2007, p 2, at [http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/publications\\_brief.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/publications_brief.html).
- 10 L Minear, 'Lessons learned: the Darfur experience', in ALNAP, *ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action in 2004*, 2005, p 105.
- 11 O'Callaghan, 'Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur', p 6.
- 12 Referring to those five months, one aid worker stated: 'There was no strategy behind the advocacy activity—it was ad hoc, the issue of the moment'. 2005 retrospective evaluation of unnamed international INGO.
- 13 Weiner, quoted in TG Weiss, 'Principles, politics, and humanitarian action', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 13(1), 1999, p 9.
- 14 Weiss & Hoffman, 'The fog of humanitarianism', p 58.
- 15 D Hilhorst & N Schmiemann, 'Humanitarian principles and organisational culture: everyday practice in Médecins Sans Frontières-Holland', *Development in Practice*, 12(3), 2002, p 354.
- 16 Fox, 'New humanitarianism'; N Stockton, 'In defence of humanitarianism', *Disasters*, 22(4), 1998, pp 352–360; D Rieff, 'The death of a good idea', *Newsweek*, 10 May 1999, at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/88259>; and Rieff, *A Bed for the Night*.
- 17 Weiss & Hoffman, 'The fog of humanitarianism', p 5.
- 18 Minear, 'Lessons learned'.
- 19 Weiss & Hoffman, 'The fog of humanitarianism', p 63.
- 20 C Frangonikolopoulos, 'Non-governmental organisations and humanitarian action: the need for a viable change of praxis and ethos', *Global Society*, 19, 2005, pp 49–72.
- 21 O'Callaghan, 'Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur', p 7.
- 22 V Pupovac, 'The politics of emergency and the demise of the developing state: problems for humanitarian advocacy', *Development in Practice*, 16(3), 2006, p 45.
- 23 'Darfur advocacy group undergoes a shake-up', *New York Times*, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/02/world/africa/02darfur.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/02/world/africa/02darfur.html?_r=1&oref=slogin); R Gidley, 'Has advocacy on Darfur gone too far?', *Reuters AlertNet*, 23 October 2007; N Brenjo, 'Simplifying Darfur in order to save it', *Reuters AlertNet*, 18 October 2007; and D Rieff, 'The Darfur deception', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 2007, at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/sunday/commentary/la-op-rieff7oct07,1,1873356.story>.
- 24 O'Callaghan, 'Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur', p 3.

- 25 D Rieff, quoted in Fox, 'New humanitarianism', p 282.
- 26 Weiss, 'Principles, politics, and humanitarian action', p 11.
- 27 Rieff, 'The death of a good idea'.
- 28 T Blair, quoted in T Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist: Relief Work in Famine and War*, Earthscan, 2002, p 19.
- 29 RJ Vincent, quoted in NJ Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p 28.
- 30 JM Welsh, 'The evolution of humanitarian intervention in international society', in *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations*, ed. JM Welsh, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p 181.
- 31 D Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, p 273.
- 32 DP Forsythe, *Human Rights in International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p 163.
- 33 H Kissinger, quoted in *ibid*, p 50.
- 34 Weiss & Hoffman, 'The fog of humanitarianism'; Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue*; and H Slim, *A Call to Alms: Humanitarian Action and the Art of War*, Zurich: ISN Publishing House, 2004, at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/pubs/ph/details.cfm?lng=en&id=7264>.
- 35 Sun Tzu & Sun Zi, *The Art of War*, Minneapolis, MN: Filiquarian Publishing, 2006.
- 36 Weiss & Hoffman, 'The fog of humanitarianism', p 58.
- 37 Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue*, p 357.

### Notes on contributor

**Kate M Bridges** has recently been working with the United Nations World Food Programme in Malawi and latterly with an NGO consultancy organisation in Sydney, Australia.