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Alan Taylor

**"Relief, Development and the  
Foreign Voluntary Aid Organization"**

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INTERTECT  
P.O. Box 10502  
Dallas, Texas 75207

(214) 521-8921

INTRODUCTION I have been asked to help you launch your Workshop by telling something of what I know of disasters and their relationship to development. As I am supposed to spark discussion, it was also suggested that I be provocative and controversial. In a field where there is an abundance of opinion yet a dearth of hard fact, it is easy to be controversial -- and I certainly propose to be that. But for the many organizations represented here which have an interest in both disaster relief and development work, I think that it would be most helpful if I begin by setting out some of the ways in which the one can interfere with the other. After that, I would like to go on to say something about the relationship between the voluntary agencies and the Western news media and their work in disaster relief abroad.

A NEW  
BUT BIG  
BUSINESS

Large-scale international disaster assistance is a phenomenon comparatively recent in the history of welfare provision. Yet in the 25-year period from 1949 to 1973, some 223 major natural disasters received international aid. Of these, 45 were earthquakes, 123 floods, 23 cyclones, hurricanes, typhoons and tidal waves, and 9 were fires. Twenty-three others included such phenomena as volcanic eruption, drought, extreme cold, avalanche, fire, and snowstorm. The Red Cross is quoted as saying that, on average, it launches an international appeal for assistance once every 23 days. Indeed, it is the nongovernmental organizations which have played the most conspicuous part in major relief operations around the world. But what of the performance of these organizations in the field? What are the difficulties they encounter in delivering their relief? I would like to review seven problem areas.

## PART 1 - OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD

EXAGGERATION OF INEQUALITIES The first broad category of difficulty, and one which is intimately bound up with questions of development, is that relief can, and frequently does, exacerbate existing differences in wealth and income -- both within a given community and among different disaster communities. Persons with higher socio-economic status are generally able to take advantage of organized relief more than those of lower status. The giving of relief tends therefore usually to stratify further the victims' society by accentuating existing economic divisions. The reasons for this are various.

Isolation by distance and poor communications, or by virtue of language differences, illiteracy or cultural suspicion, means that the less well off do not have the same access to relief, government aid programs, or sources of credit as do their more fortunate brothers. Those who are not affiliated in some way with an existing community organization may find that they either do not become aware of the availability of relief, or that the norms governing the conduct of the program preclude those without established community affiliations. Those who do not already have a secure income, land or agricultural production to offer as collateral will be refused loans to aid them in their recovery. Because emergency housing, or loans for rebuilding, are frequently given only to those with title to a plot of land, many programs of reconstruction aid help only those who are better off to begin with.

RELIEF           The second danger associated with relief which impinges on development is  
AS A           that the introduction of resources from outside of a community can inhibit  
DISINCENTIVE   both psychological recovery and physical reconstruction. People will  
TO RECOVERY   often feign helplessness and delay in providing their own solutions to  
                  their needs, secure in the belief that relief aid will be distributed to  
                  them if they are still without provision when the allocation is made.  
                  If this continues for more than a very brief period, then the requesting  
                  of relief comes to be seen as a normal and reasonable solution to the  
                  problems of daily living. Especially where aid is given away for free,  
                  the agency is identified in the mind of the recipient as a patrón —  
                  one who is to be looked to for assistance in solving any and all kinds  
                  of difficulty. Traditional self-reliant measures for coping with  
                  disaster are then foregone in favor of accepting the new relief.

Not only may people refrain from doing for themselves what is needed for  
recovery from the abnormal event, they may actually destroy what little  
they are left with after the disaster in order to be first to qualify  
for free relief. Other victims may leave off doing what would normally  
be required for survival even if there had not been a disaster. For  
example, free food distributions have caused earthquake victims to  
neglect the harvesting of their own crops in favor of waiting in line  
for relief agency rations. The result of this can only be to increase  
the vulnerability of the population to further disaster.

The very process of applying the label "recipient," "beneficiary" or "refugee" classifies people as objects of concern and pity. The role associations which go along with the words tend to condemn these people to a passive state, one which is defined by and manipulated by the relief agency. This process denies the victim that very scope for initiative and self-help which is so essential to recovery. It is a subtle process, innocent in perpetration and one which can sit comfortably with the victim. But a situation of dependency can be created which is subsequently very difficult to break. The problem is not so much that the victims are given goods and services which they could equally well provide for themselves, but that in offering easy and immediate solutions to need, longer-term strategies for problem-solving are made to appear less attractive, and are inevitably delayed.

RELIEF            Not only may relief inhibit self-reliance during and after an emergency,  
AS A              but the knowledge that relief will be given in times of hardship can have  
DISINCENTIVE    the effect of dissuading people from taking action to protect themselves  
TO PREVENTION   before an event. A property owner who is confident that the Red Cross  
                    or some other local agency will compensate for losses after a flood, is  
                    not likely to be drawn to the idea of preventing damage by taking costly  
                    measures himself. Similarly, the knowledge that gifts, low-interest  
                    loans or subsidized services will be made available by government and  
                    other relief agencies, has been known to encourage people both to remain  
                    in vulnerable areas, and to be less enthusiastic about farming and  
                    obtaining an income generally.

RELIEF AS A  
DISTRACTION  
FROM  
DEVELOPMENT  
ACTIVITIES

A third danger is that the availability of relief works, labor projects and supplemental allowances of all kinds -- especially food -- can have the effect of attracting people from non-disaster areas and away from other worthwhile activities. Labor for necessary agricultural work can be put into short supply; and voluntary work on non-aided projects of community improvement can be abandoned in favor of those projects which are financed or assisted by a relief agency. Emergency work programs have also been known to interfere with school attendance by offering unusual opportunities to increase family income. Where the daily wage offered on a relief work project is more than the normal rate in the locality for agricultural work, then this too may have the effect of attracting labor away from normal productive activities. Artificially inflated wage rates increase expectations which carry over beyond the end of an emergency. This may or may not be considered desirable, depending on one's economic and social perspective.

REINFORCING  
THE  
STATUS QUO

A fourth danger is that the giving of relief can work against development objectives by tending to solidify the status quo. In an attempt to establish rapid means for the distribution of resources, relief agencies often alight on those local officials, dignitaries and locally influential individuals who can, through their good offices, ensure that facilities, personnel and community cooperation are obtained without delay. From the relief agency's point of view, such people usually have the added advantage that they speak the same language, share the same assumptions, and belong to the same social class as do the relief agency officials themselves. Communications between the donors and their local agents

are thereby much simplified. Yet, in selecting already powerful individuals to act as its agents within the victim community, the relief agency adds strength to the local elite.

Control over the distribution of relief is a political instrument which can be used in the search for social prestige, economic gain and political allies. Those in need are inevitably drawn to the dispensers of goods and services, and are likely to find themselves paying tribute -- in humility or favor, if not in cash or kind -- for the privilege of receiving their rightful ration. For their own convenience, or simply in an attempt to smooth what they perceive of as flaws in the distribution system, the appointed agents may be tempted to impose additional, non-official requirements on the recipients, to be complied with before aid is given. This too has the effect of strengthening the local power against unsuspecting and frequently illiterate beneficiaries.

HASTE AND  
IGNORANCE  
COMBINE IN  
SECONDARY  
DISASTERS

The fifth danger is that the precipitous speed with which emergency decisions are made does not allow for adequate analysis of the problems addressed or for study of the likely social and environmental effects of those decisions. Arrangements are made, for example, for the building of emergency housing, refugee camps, or community facilities, without an adequate view of how the design, siting and method of construction will affect long-term patterns of recovery. An organization which makes a fleeting visit to a disaster-affected community, without knowing anything of its history, culture or ongoing social system, is quite likely to end up making matters worse than they would have been otherwise.

USURPING LOCAL AUTONOMY

A sixth and most important point in this series, is that the high degree of centralization which is often associated with relief operations tends to remove what little decision-making power is normally vested with community leaders and local government authorities. Many non-governmental aid organizations -- especially those without ongoing local representation in the disaster area -- are prone to usurp local autonomy by introducing large and unprecedented resources which no local leader can ever hope to compete with. Overnight, the outside aid organization becomes a political force in the local social economy, of which, sadly, it is all too often completely ignorant. The dangers are threefold. Firstly, by effectively removing the power of decision from local leaders, these people are denied their usual legitimacy before the populace. If a good job is done, the credit accrues to the relief organization and not to the leaders. Secondly, by taking responsibility itself for the relief works, an agency denies the opportunity to local officials to gain experience in the management of their community's own recovery. Precipitous assistance in the short term -- which places a high value on immediate effectiveness -- may in fact deny the victims the opportunity to prepare to cope with future disasters which will inevitably befall them.

DISTORTION OF TRADITIONAL PATTERNS OF RESPONSIBILITY

The seventh and final danger to be mentioned here, is that as government or outside agencies appear to take on responsibility for relief and reconstruction, it becomes popularly accepted that that is indeed where the locus of responsibility not only does, but should lie. What is done by a victim -- person, village, town, or country -- in response to their own felt needs, will be conditioned by what they believe to be the



responsibility of other parties. This, in turn, will be influenced by a perception of others' resources in relation to their own. Where government or relief agency enters upon the scene and proceeds to display its wealth, it is not surprising that the victims conclude that the responsibility for recovery lies best with the well-endowed helpers. The more conspicuous is the aid, the stronger is the victims' belief that the aid organizations will do all. In turn then, the more difficult is it for the aid organizations to resist the newly created expectations that it is they who have responsibility for improving the victims' lot. But the resources at the disposal of all relief agencies are likely to amount only to a small fraction of the total need. In appearing to shift the locus of responsibility from the people to the agencies, the latter can therefore only create illusions, delay the recovery process, and set the scene for later disappointment and recrimination.

WHO IS TO  
MAKE THE  
CHOICES?

Having reviewed the dangers to development which are activated with relief, it must not be assumed that working for long-term goals is, prima facie, better than catering to the satisfaction of immediate wants. Choices must be made on the basis of value preferences. However, the important thing is that conscious choices are made, and that they are

made at appropriate points in the social system, not left to chance factors at the whim of one particular decision-maker, or one particular agency. Actual and planned programs of relief must be subject to analysis to determine the trade-off relationships between objectives formed according to short-term and long-term goals. The fact that the aid policies of any one agency can intimately affect the performance in the field of any other agency, implies that inter-agency collaboration in this process is essential. However, the matter of who gets to make the decisions on which time perspective is more important, is a key question in social policy. Among the melée of would-be helpers, each with his or her own time horizons, objectives and methods, a coordination mechanism must intervene to ensure that the victims themselves have a voice in determining what kind of recovery they want, and when.

GOOD  
AND BAD  
RELIEF

Although I have painted a picture which contrasts development with relief in rather black and white terms, I have done this because I would like everyone to be aware of the dangers, and not because I want to castigate the giving of relief per se. From the development perspective, there are good and bad ways of delivering relief. They are not all equally harmful. Indeed, with good planning and a careful selection of objectives it is often possible to achieve in both directions simultaneously.

However, in setting up a relief program which is sensitive to development, a key policy question is always: When does the agency wish to see the benefits materialize? For each of the possible needs which can be

addressed, there is a range of alternative methods which yield benefits in the short, medium or long term. The agency can give people food or building materials today, or it can enable them to increase production of these things for tomorrow; it can set up temporary work projects to put money into pockets now, or it can stimulate economic development to give people employment in the future. An agency can set up emergency distribution channels -- for food, etc. -- or it can concentrate on strengthening the marketing apparatus and/or local institutions to handle available supplies through the normal and ongoing socio-economic system. Similarly, the agency can attempt to organize the victims to solve their own problems, or it can aim to encourage local leadership, administrative skills, self-confidence, and social solidarity so that the people will be better equipped to organize themselves on subsequent occasions. The pursuit of the short-term options requires acumen in the field of logistics. The pursuit of the long-term options requires a much more diverse range of skills and a much longer-term commitment to the community.

## PART 2 - BEING CONTENTIOUS

PROBLEMS  
IN SOURCE  
OF FUNDING.

Many of the problems encountered in the field by large non-governmental relief organizations are traceable, directly or indirectly, to their source of funding. As an epilogue to this paper, I would like to examine this, and the special relationship which voluntary aid agencies have to the sources of popular news and information.

ROLE OF  
THE MEDIA

Those relief agencies which are supported by voluntary contributions from the public depend for their continued existence on a public appreciation of their work. This is generated primarily through the activities of the mass media -- film, radio, television, and the press. Indeed, in the more developed countries, the donor public is likely to obtain its information and understanding of natural disasters entirely through the last two sources. The electronic media especially have tremendous power of image formation, with the ability to create instant and sympathetic identification with the victims' plight. As coverage from all corners of the globe becomes possible, disasters which would formerly have been of purely local significance, now take on international meaning. Portrayals of disasters in the less developed countries probably have the effect of making people in the rich countries more world-community-minded, and this is no doubt to be viewed positively.

STOCK  
DISASTER  
STEREOTYPES

Nevertheless, it must be observed that the view of Third World disasters enjoyed by the general public and by most of the relief organizations in the rich world is filtered through Western, middle-class values and beliefs of a highly ethnocentric nature. News-gathering and broadcasts focus on those aspects of the disaster which are easily visible. The actual destruction is thereby exaggerated and the arrival of aid is heralded as the cure to the country's problems. Victims are portrayed as passive, dazed, helpless and inarticulate individuals who simply wait for things to be done for them. The government is frequently assumed to be disorganized and corrupt. The fact that these stereotypes fit well the typical Western view of the "natives" of poor countries is probably no accident. The

stereotypes also contrast well with the popular image of the relief agency -- one which is capable, active, sensitive, resourceful, organized, and compassionate. Educating the general public in the economics, sociology and social psychology of disaster events is a difficult and time-consuming task and one which the news media are not, in any case, equipped to undertake. But even if journalists and television correspondents have the educational preparation and insight themselves to perceive the true nature of the phenomenon upon which they are reporting, the political constraints and/or the commercial competition under which their network operates usually prevent the presentation of news reports which are anything but sensationalist in content and stereotypical in form.

INTER-AGENCY COMPETITION REINFORCES SIMPLISTIC APPEALS An understanding of the role of the news media in disaster situations is helpful in view of the fact that relief organizations, primarily non-governmental but also donor governmental agencies, are obliged to compete for media attention with other similar organizations attempting to attract contributions for basically similar ends. In order to do this, relief organizations must cooperate with the news media in projecting those stereotypical images of need which will publicly justify their involvements. They must then launch some project which purports to address the problems, and project an image of this in such a way that the particular agency is identified as especially worthy of public support. Finally, to ensure support for its programs in the future, the agency must take advantage of the news media, as well as its own publicity, to project post-facto accounts -- usually highly edited -- describing its activities.

VICTIMS OF      It must be noted that in the whole of this process, the relief agency is  
 OBJECTS        at no point answerable to the victims whom it purports to serve. Victims  
 RATHER THAN    have no voice in relief agency affairs and no vehicle for expressing their  
 SUBJECTS        views before their benefactors. The relief agency is accountable, if at  
                   all, to its donor public, through the imprecise and corruptive influence  
                   of the news media. This state of affairs reveals itself in several ways.

APPEALS        First, different types of natural disaster attract different degrees of  
 ACCORDING TO    response from the relief agencies according to their saleability as horror  
 SALEABILITY     stories. Earthquakes, for example, although of relatively minor signifi-  
 NOT MIND        cance in terms of their annual death toll when compared to other forms of  
                   disaster, attract considerably more attention and therefore more aid  
                   resources than do other types of sudden catastrophe. Those disasters with  
                   slow onset and relatively long duration -- primarily drought and famine  
                   conditions -- attract less publicity and aid than do those disasters  
                   having a sudden onset. It can also be observed that those disasters which  
                   strike cities, or which occur in countries geographically proximate to,  
                   or enjoying economic and political ties with the donor country, are more  
                   likely to attract attention than those which affect rural areas, remote  
                   areas, or politically insignificant parts of the world.

In the field, the effort to fulfill aid stereotypes is no less conspicuous.  
 Medical teams are dispatched; emergency housing units are donated; and  
 air transport is utilized to a much greater extent than is strictly neces-  
 sitated by the event. That aid which can be easily portrayed in photo-  
 graphs, on television and in film, is particularly appropriate for the

relief agency's public relations needs. Scenes of donations being made to representatives of the recipient community; scenes of food being distributed to waiting lines of children; and scenes of medical staff (in uniform) applying injections to (usually naked) victims, all enhance the saleability of the relief operation to the donor public. That aid which is not capable of being photographed -- advance planning, disaster impact studies, or psychological counseling for example -- is inherently less attractive to the donor agency. For the same reasons, high-technology, capital-intensive items -- helicopters, field hospitals, and experimental "emergency housing" units for example -- provide convenient gimmicks which add visible point to the agency's mission.

A related and third phenomenon, is that agencies tend to select those types of aid which can be easily counted or measured. The number of housing units, or square feet of housing installed; the number of mouths fed; the tons of commodities delivered; or the number of volunteers in the field are all useful figures in the campaign to attract public attention and create confidence in the donor countries that something constructive is being done.

URGENT AND  
SHORT-TERM  
FOCUS IS  
UNNECESSARY  
AND WASTEFUL

The fourth effect of a donor orientation rather than a recipient orientation, is that most foreign relief agencies focus their efforts on attempting to respond to what they believe are urgent but short-term needs. For the most part, these are the areas which require dramatic activity of the kind mentioned above. While it is true that there may be unusual needs for medical care, feeding and housing for example, these are rarely so

short-lived that they can be taken care of by brief expeditions of mercy. Also, although some of the needs may be urgent, it is in fact usually impossible for foreign organizations to respond to these needs with the necessary speed -- at least after a sudden-impact disaster.

DISINCENTIVE TO COORDINATION The fifth effect of a donor orientation is that relief agencies find themselves competing with one another for social credit. There is therefore every incentive for agencies to refuse to collaborate with one another or to accept coordination. The result is a waste of resources, and a certain amount of inter-agency conflict from which the victims suffer.

NEGLECTING DISASTER PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS The sixth and final effect of a donor rather than recipient orientation, is that while international relief agencies are bound by a limited public understanding of what the problems are to which they address themselves, they are unlikely to respond to needs in pre-disaster planning -- either for prevention or preparedness. There are many activities within the pre-disaster and reconstruction contexts which are as yet beyond local capacities, and which could benefit from international assistance. However, without public education programs in the more developed countries, it will be impossible for aid organizations, especially the voluntary ones, to refocus their energies on policies which could have long-term benefits.



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## SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) What is more important: trying to alleviate suffering today or working for its prevention in the future? If both are important, and only one is possible, which takes precedence?
- 2) Does the concentration of suffering in one place and at one time justify aid-giving policies which are different from those used at normal times? If so, why?
- 3) Do the criteria which we use for assessing the suitability of relief projects differ from those we use for development projects? If so, why?
- 4) What are the strengths -- pertinent to relief -- of our individual voluntary aid agencies?
- 5) What are the weaknesses -- pertinent to relief -- of our agencies?
- 6) Are there ways in which voluntary agencies can complement each others' skills?
- 7) How fast (or slow) can our agencies move to deliver help in the field?
- 8) How much influence or control do project beneficiaries have over the decision-making -- in Canada -- which affects their futures?
- 9) What means do we have for learning of the effects of our disaster aid on the physical, social and economic environments?
- 10) How well equipped are we with sensitive and reliable representatives who know what is going on in the field? How do we know that they know?
- 11) In launching appeals for specific disasters, do we add weight to an "event-centered" awareness on the part of the Canadian public? Could we develop a public consciousness of the ongoing and recurrent nature of disasters in poor countries?
- 12) What efforts do we make to educate officials of the mass media in disaster and development issues? What educative influence do we have over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation?
- 13) Do we respond to disaster events with an eye to the public relations appeal -- in Canada -- of a particular type of aid?
- 14) Do we allow the need for figures describing our achievements to influence the design of our emergency projects?
- 15) Do we as voluntary agencies compete with one another for funds? If so, does this fact influence our disaster response policies?
- 16) What attention do we give to disaster prevention; and to disaster preparedness? If little, would we like to find out more?

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Alan Taylor is a member of INTERTECT and an Associate of the Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Toronto. His training has been in the fields of Public Health, Social Anthropology, and the Sociology of Development -- the last two degrees obtained from the University of Sussex in England. Since 1967 he has been actively engaged in disaster relief and rural development work, and now operates as a free-lance consultant in evaluation and organizational development to agencies working in these areas.