The politics of emergency and the demise of the developing state: problems for humanitarian advocacy

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This article discusses humanitarian advocacy in the contemporary world within the wider crisis of political vision. Humanitarian advocacy over the past 15 years, drawing attention to how crises have been precipitated by state policies, has sought international intervention to protect people. It has consequently become associated with challenging the national sovereignty of the developing state. The author contends that the weak state is the problem, and suggests that the existing paradigm of humanitarian advocacy helps to legitimise the erosion of equality among sovereign states and the reassertion of international inequalities.

The rise of humanitarian advocacy

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) pioneered contemporary humanitarian advocacy under the motto ‘Care for and Testify’, thus challenging the reserve of traditional humanitarianism. The award of the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize to MSF was a mark of international recognition of the contribution played by humanitarian advocacy. Since the end of the Cold War, humanitarian organisations have not simply become more involved in lobbying for more official aid and campaigning to increase private donations (in appeals of the Band Aid type), but have sought to intervene directly in international politics. MSF made prominent appeals in the Western media for military intervention in Bosnia, and a willingness to support the concept of military action is now widely in evidence in the humanitarian sector. Representatives of Save the Children–UK (SCF) were among those lobbying Western governments to intervene militarily in Kosovo. SCF’s work has always been underpinned by advocacy on child rights, but this form of advocacy was new.

More recently Oxfam GB (OGB), which from the 1960s defined itself as a development organisation, lobbied for the right of humanitarian intervention to be widened and for a change to the principle of non-interference enshrined in the UN Charter, albeit as a last resort (Oxfam GB 2005). In the same vein, OGB appealed for ‘robust action’ in the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan (Oxfam GB 2004). Indeed, OGB now ascribes equal importance to advocacy, to development work, and to emergency relief work. This is just one example of how development NGOs have increased their advocacy and campaigning on human rights, a trend reinforced by their adoption of the rights-based approach to development.
Many NGOs have also become more closely involved in campaigns on issues such as debt relief or the reform of international trade rules that might previously have been left to specialist organisations such as People and Planet (formerly Third World First).

In addition to their own advocacy work, many British NGOs also run joint campaigns under banners such as Make Poverty History (MPH). For instance, MSF is involved in a campaign to make cheap generic drugs available to developing countries. Moreover, a growing number of NGOs are focused primarily on advocacy rather than on delivering aid, while human-rights organisations such as Amnesty International have expanded their remit to include advocacy on international humanitarian law and cooperation with humanitarian organisations. Other human-rights organisations, such as the Aegis Trust and Genocide Watch, are dedicated mainly to advocacy and do not conduct individual casework. The trend corresponds to general patterns of public engagement in the West. In the UK, for instance, organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) have moved away from direct involvement in child welfare and protection in favour of advocacy work on child rights.

Humanitarian advocacy was embraced as part of a fresh approach when the crises immediately following the collapse of the Berlin Wall cast doubt on traditional humanitarianism. It promised to reinvigorate a demoralised humanitarian sector and forge new partnerships with populations in the South. Recent humanitarianism has been preoccupied with the unintended consequences of humanitarian assistance, but humanitarian advocacy has serious ramifications too. This article discusses the problems of humanitarian advocacy in an unequal world, drawing upon examples from British NGOs. These NGOs’ conscious identification with progressive politics makes their advocacy work interesting, because it has frequently attracted staff or volunteers who aspire to move beyond emergency work and promote social change. The article begins by considering the wider crisis of purpose in international politics at the end of the Cold War, which helped to raise the profile of humanitarian advocacy. Since the early 1990s, humanitarian advocacy, drawing attention to ways in which humanitarian crises have been precipitated by state policies, has sought international intervention to protect people. Consequently, it has become associated with challenging the sovereignty of the developing state. However, this article will argue that the weak state, rather than the strong sovereign state, is the problem that lies behind today’s humanitarian crises.

In challenging the authority of the developing state, humanitarian advocacy has complemented international politics and economics. It has complemented international political developments that challenge the equality of sovereign states. It has also complemented economic policies that hollow out the developing state and abandon national development, thereby undermining the position of developing countries within the international system. At the same time, humanitarian advocacy for military intervention has encouraged the politicisation and militarisation of humanitarian aid, which makes it harder for NGOs to resist precisely the same trends in the ‘global war on terror’ (GWOT).

This article suggests that the existing paradigm of humanitarian advocacy legitimises the reassertion of an unequal international order, while too many of the high-profile NGO campaigns risk over-simplifying the causes and degrading the meaning of political engagement, at precisely the time when they seek to be key players in efforts to revitalise such engagement.

International politics of the emergency

Humanitarianism acquired new significance in post-Cold War international relations. Aid agencies are already nostalgically looking back at the 1990s as (if not a golden age for
humanitarianism) an interregnum when ‘the tide was definitely moving in the right direction’ (Christian Aid 2004:2):

Here was a chance for a brave new world. One in which rich countries would lift emerging nations out of poverty and help them to stand on their own, equal partners on a new, more equal and more prosperous stage. (Ibid.: 10)

The GWOT is portrayed as cancelling gains made by humanitarianism and ushering in a New Cold War, which subordinates humanitarian principles to security concerns (Christian Aid 2004; Cosgrave 2004). Yet there is more continuity in international politics than aid agencies may care to acknowledge, perhaps because they confuse their own presence in government policy making with progressive international politics. Arguably, the high profile of humanitarianism in the 1990s was due less to a flourishing humanism than to the way in which humanitarian advocacy complements the contemporary politics of emergency (Furedi 2002; Laidi 1998). The ending of the ideological divisions of the Cold War without major international conflict suggested new possibilities for a peaceful world order and boosted somewhat idealistic accounts of international relations, certainly in Europe, if not in the USA. Yet its end also revealed profound problems in domestic and international politics. Initial euphoria at the West’s ‘triumph over communism’ quickly gave way to pessimism about the future. Premature declarations of ‘the end of history’ soon rang hollow and came to suggest the abandonment, not the realisation, of grand historical projects. Indeed, security analysts were soon referring nostalgically to the Cold War period.

It is important to recognise that the demise of the ideological divisions of the Cold War also eroded political meaning and the legitimacy of public institutions in the West. Rivalry for influence in the developing world had fostered rival political visions of national development. A modernist project was galvanised in the West by international pressure to produce an alternative to counter the Soviet model of progress, something that also helped to give a sense of purpose to Western societies. Consequently the loss of the political framework of the Cold War was experienced as disorientating, rather than liberating. Progressive politics has fragmented in the West, and the emerging discourse exhibits disenchantment with mass politics and universal visions. Western politicians struggle to identify sources of meaning and common values around which their societies can cohere. In this search for an elusive meaning, the relativist age finds the Holocaust or similar contemporary catastrophes to be almost the only remaining moral absolutes against which it can define itself. Western societies increasingly seem to come together only in tragedy, whether the sentimental mourning for Princess Diana in the UK or the public outrage in Belgium against the murderer and paedophile Marc Dutroux. This problem is repeated at a local level, where city councils in the UK, such as that of Nottingham, seek to reconnect to the public by recreating a civic ethos based on outrage against violent killings. The lowest-common-denominator definition of the good citizen as ‘not a violent killer’ or ‘not a paedophile’ reveals the exhaustion of progressive politics and illustrates how civic life is being reorganised around insecurity, rather than a positive vision of the future.

Political disorientation has intensified feelings of vulnerability and of being at risk. This fuels the urgent sense that ‘something must be done’, but the responses themselves lack the coherence that would derive from a larger vision (Furedi 2002). The demise of grand historical projects has truncated political vision and encouraged short-term policy making. Politics increasingly resembles crisis management, as politicians lurch erratically from one issue to another, seeking to project a sense of purpose through action – or the politics of emergency (Laidi 1998).
Against this backdrop, recent humanitarian emergencies have resonated in the Western imagination, in part because they are symptoms of the failure not only of past political projects but also of contemporary politics that finds it difficult to do more than manage the present (Laidi 1998). A disenchanted polity has an opportunity to feel engaged and vicariously vent its existential anxieties in the struggle for survival represented by the humanitarian emergency. Moreover, the politicisation of such emergencies turns them into modern morality plays for Western audiences. Catharsis is experienced through somebody else’s emergency (Ugresic 1998). Victims and villains are identified and new moral certainties are found in the absolutes of life and death.

At the same time, however, those populations which are cast as villains have found their plight ignored in international humanitarian circles as well as by international politics, a fact which compromises the principle of universal concern for those in need, irrespective of their beliefs or politics (Fox 2001; Vaux 2002). The nostalgia for the 1990s ignores how its politicised humanitarian advocacy has the potential to jeopardise humanitarian work to alleviate suffering.

If humanitarian advocacy in the 1990s focused on complex political emergencies, the new millennium has witnessed efforts to raise the profile of poverty and development as issues that promise to move beyond the politics of emergency and address the long-term problems of people in developing countries. NGO campaign work is seen as addressing the vacuum in Western politics and engaging young people who remain uninspired by traditional party politics. In this vein one OGB initiative is aptly named ‘Inspired Action’, and its 2006 campaign is entitled I’m In.

I now turn to two core themes of contemporary NGO advocacy – sustainable development and human security – before returning to the nature of humanitarian advocacy as political engagement. This analysis suggests that there are deeper problems with NGO advocacy, which fails to take us beyond the politics of emergency, with adverse consequences for developing states and their populations.

The anti-modernisation philosophy of development advocacy

An important aspect of today’s truncated political vision is the low horizons that it offers the developing world, which in turn can only increase the likelihood of more humanitarian emergencies. NGO development advocacy has enjoyed a radical reputation with the general public and has not been as internally contentious as humanitarian advocacy for military intervention. However, its horizons are also low: the normative goals remain ambitious but are increasingly detached from material transformation. Developing countries have long found themselves caught between the contradictions of the market and international development policies. Here I want to highlight influences that have shaped NGO development philosophy and its anti-modernisation stance, before considering some of the implications of the divorce between material conditions and normative goals in development advocacy.

The need for long-term development aid over short-term emergency assistance has been a perennial theme of NGO advocacy, but NGO development philosophy has been wary of imposing Western development models on non-Western societies. It has largely defined itself as being opposed to a Western modernisation model of national development and industrialisation, because this is seen to be destructive of the environment, alienating, and harmful to the interests of communities. The ‘sustainable development’ approach champions strategies that respect local cultures, address the needs of individuals or communities, and emphasise rural rather than urban development. NGO development thinking is encapsulated in the much-quoted maxim: ‘Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed
him for life.’ The proverb has been repeatedly invoked since its first use in the 1960 UN Campaign Against Hunger.

**Historical antecedents of opposition to industrialisation**

The anti-industrialisation position of NGO thinking has long antecedents in Romantic hostility towards industrialisation, expressed by writers and artists such as William Blake and William Morris. In the context of international development, it may be traced back to Western anthropological perspectives, which in turn informed colonial administrations. Leading twentieth-century anthropologists were partly inspired by doubts about their own societies, notably the alienating consequences of modernity, and a desire to find alternative ways of life which would support their progressive reform agenda at home by demonstrating the possibility of different ways of organising society. Anthropological thinking therefore considered it important to preserve cultural pluralism, because it was thought that traditional communities could provide insights for modern society. Western anthropologists often expressed alarm at how contact with modernity was destabilising the societies that they studied. Hence they had serious reservations about the perceived aspiration of international development policy to transform the world on the lines of the advanced industrialised societies. Concerns about modernity’s destabilising impact on traditional societies were taken up by colonial administrators and shaped colonial thinking on development as it tried to deter nationalist movements (Duffield 2005).

NGO development advocacy continues to understand itself as posing a radical challenge to a modernisation orthodoxy that requires countries in the South to follow a Western path of national development. Yet this self-image is set against a straw-man model of modernisation that has long since lost favour with Western governments. Indeed, the growth of Western development NGOs and their increasing prominence in international development has been founded on Western scepticism about industrialisation in the South, articulated in both official and radical circles. Western governments arguably embraced a modernisation agenda for developing countries purely as part of their strategy to contain the influence of the Soviet Union: they remained wary about their industrialisation, fearing that it might challenge their own status, or have a destabilising effect and promote political radicalism, with broader consequences for international peace and security (Pupavac 2005).

Alarm about modernisation among Western policy makers was captured in E. F. Schumacher’s book *Small is Beautiful* (1973), which became the bible of the ‘sustainable development’ approach adopted by NGOs. Its publication during the 1970s oil crisis, which suggested that developing countries might challenge Western access to cheap raw materials, secured a large audience for Schumacher’s arguments. Schumacher argued that modernisation policies were damaging communities and livelihoods, while promoting greed and frustration, and were therefore counter to international peace and security. Development strategies should reject the goals of industrialisation and universal prosperity and concentrate on small-scale production and meeting basic needs, maintaining traditional communities and livelihoods by disseminating low-tech solutions. This retrenched international development agenda and its rejection of policies such as nationalisation also complemented the shift in the West from Keynesian to neoliberal economic policy, with the state playing a smaller role as employer and welfare provider. Western governments accordingly began to channel more of their development aid through NGOs, rather than bilaterally, thus helping to sponsor the spectacular growth of the NGO development sector since the 1980s. Following the end of the Cold War, the development of countries in the South to the level of industrialised nations is simply not an aspiration of the West, although developing countries are nevertheless subject to extensive externally imposed reforms.
Radical opposition to modernisation

Official concern about modernisation strategies was complemented by the counterculture critique of mass society that influenced radical politics in the 1960s and 1970s. If Western policy makers were fearful that urbanisation might promote political radicalism, radical politics has the opposite concern. In trying to understand why the masses did not embrace radical politics, critics suggested that modern consumerism anaesthetised people and created conformists (Marcuse 1964). Political radicalism could emerge only from those outside the processes of the modern industrial state; therefore radicals should oppose the idea of developing countries becoming modern industrial states like their own. Radicals were also becoming disenchanted with the communist model and the Soviet Union’s suppression of dissent in Eastern Europe. State sovereignty was associated not with national independence struggles but with violence, whether through the superpowers’ military interventions or their support for military regimes in the developing world. The counterculture critique idealised an authentic life of peasant farmers and independent artisans, producing traditional crafts, perceived as still existing in parts of the South, but being crushed by development.

This vision was further supported by the rise of environmentalism within Western thought, expressed in books such as Rachel Carson’s influential *Silent Spring* (1962), which condemned industrialisation as destroying the planet’s resources. Its holistic vision wanted to minimise humanity’s imprint on the planet and return to a simpler way of life, balancing human needs against those of the environment. Environmentalist perspectives were absorbed into the anti-modernisation critique as it became codified into the concept of sustainable development. Small-scale non-waged production is viewed as being less destructive of the environment and also less exploitative than large-scale production, by spreading ownership of the means of production (Sen 1975). These ideas inform NGO advocacy, which does not envisage people in developing countries adopting Western consumerist lifestyles, but retaining more ‘authentic’, simpler ways of life within a modified market economy.

In short, both official policy and NGO advocacy on sustainable development reject the idea that countries in the South should achieve Western levels of economic development, while at the same time retaining normative goals – even though these countries are marginalised within a global market economy. This policy convergence does not imply that NGO development advocacy is irrelevant. Rather, it helps to legitimise the rejection of the goal of transforming the material conditions of developing countries, by giving this rejection a radical gloss. Campaigns such as ‘Make Poverty History’ appear ambitious in their demands to end poverty, but closer examination reveals that they do not aspire to prosperity for all, but effectively redefine poverty eradication in terms of managing survival through better self-reliance. *Making Poor Poverty-Management History* may be a less snappy slogan, but a better description of the approach.

Some contradictions of development advocacy

Sustainable-development advocacy complements the erosion of the welfare-state model and makes a virtue of people having to create their own employment opportunities to support themselves in the face of structural adjustment reforms that reduce both state welfare and public employment. NGOs talk in terms of promoting ‘sustainable livelihoods’ and the position of the ‘poor in markets’; they argue that ‘[c]orruption and the abuse of power prevent the benefits of free trade, privatisation and political change reaching the poorest’ (Oxfam GB 2003:18). The theme of empowering people with the skills and confidence to start up their own micro-enterprises chimes with the ideology of neo-liberal economics. As Mark Duffield observes,
‘Sustainable development shifts the responsibility for self-reproduction from states to people reconfigured as social entrepreneurs operating at the level of the household and communities’ (Duffield 2005:152).

In this vein, the Africa Commission aims to ‘empower poor people to shape their own lives, including by investing in their health and education...’ and emphasises the need ‘to foster small enterprises’ (Commission for Africa 2005, Chapter 7:2). Similarly Christian Aid’s website (www.christian-aid.org.uk) declares that it ‘believes in strengthening people to find their own solutions to the problems they face’, while OGB speaks of people coming together across the world ‘[t]o end poverty for themselves, for others, for each other’ (Oxfam GB 2003/4).

Under the banner of neither patronising nor imposing upon them, NGOs are effectively telling people living in poverty how better to fend for themselves.

At its best, giving priority to meeting basic needs – such as UNICEF’s GOBI programme for infants – has had significant success in improving survival rates, despite the worsening economic situation in many developing countries (Black 1996). Impressive though such programmes might be as lifelines for populations in precarious circumstances, however, they cannot be described as development or poverty eradication. Overall, the sustainable-development model leaves most of the world’s population relying on household production, their lives dominated by the forces of nature, and highly exposed to risk and insecurity without the safety nets that citizens of post-industrial states expect.

To be sure, proponents of sustainable development have not wanted to abandon efforts to promote social improvement, even if the basic-needs approach seeks to lower people’s material expectations. However, the relationship between social progress and material advancement is being broken, and normative change is increasingly what is meant by development. Consider the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) project, which describes itself as ‘an expanded vision of development’ (www.un.org/millenniumgoals/). It does not aspire to create universal prosperity, but expects states to achieve its normative agenda by 2015 – including universal primary education and gender equality – without having advanced materially. Rather, its vision makes changing culture and individual behaviour the primary means of social advancement by ‘vigorously [promoting] human development as the key to sustaining social and economic progress’. In effect, pre-industrial societies are expected to adopt post-industrial norms, although still being based on enhanced traditional household production and forgoing the material comforts and welfare enjoyed in the West. Typically, for example, spending on basic community health care meets with approval, but spending on high-tech hospitals is viewed as an inefficient use of resources.

Crucially, the sustainable-development model does not address the limited capacity of the developing state, which without a developed economy and infrastructure can hardly become a progressive redistributive state that guarantees its citizens’ welfare. Insofar as the problem of the weak state is belatedly being recognised by official donors and NGOs, the problem is moralised in terms of corruption or bad governance. This ignores the material conditions underlying the weak, illiberal state and social or economic inequalities. NGOs’ reluctance to address contradictions in their development model relates to their antipathy towards their own modern industrial societies, associating these with violence and injustice, together with their Romantic perceptions of non-Western populations’ self-reliance, non-materialist expectations, and restraint. Such beliefs contrast with earlier progressive politics that, while often heavily critical of Western modernisation models, nevertheless saw social progress as contingent upon material advancement. However, the demise of the drive to national development is not returning countries to a simple holistic life in harmony with nature, but has brutal and competitive effects. The reality of a society organised around small-scale family producers or pastoralists and strong communal or kinship ties is likely to be able to support only
a precarious state with a weak relationship to the population and characterised by a nepotistic public sphere.

At the same time, NGO advocacy for sustainable development makes inequality between developing and developed countries an indefinite condition, because abandoning the technological advancement of developing countries essentially means abandoning the advancement of equality. For example, advocacy for fair trade assumes unequal means of production between developed and developing countries, with the latter engaged in low-tech or medium-tech micro-enterprises, as opposed to large-scale automated production; it also assumes their trading in international markets through a paternalistic relationship with ethical Western companies or NGOs, not independently. Moreover, like micro-credit conditionality, the proposed conditions for fair trade presume the right to dictate extra-financial terms, based on the Western advocates’ vision of the ethical life. So while NGOs are wary of developing countries following Western paths of economic development, they are in effect intervening in developing societies to change social and political norms.

Advocacy for sustainable development originally evaded the political consequences of effectively making inequality an indefinite feature of the international system, but since the 1990s human-security advocates have plainly been abandoning the principle of sovereign equality. Ironically, the anti-development critique, despite its avowed antipathy towards modern industrial societies, now endorses in the human-security model the idea of those very states having greater powers to use against developing countries. The assumptions of human-security advocacy belie the idea current in NGO circles that the 1990s offered developing countries the chance to become ‘equal partners on a new, more equal and more prosperous stage’ (Christian Aid 2004:10).

Human-security advocacy and international equality

If the sustainable-development model complemented the anti-state policies of neo-liberal economics, the human-security model that evolved in the 1990s assumed the inability of developing states to protect their populations, and the necessity of reordering international relations in order to deal with this reality. The 1945 UN Charter established a collective, self-policing, international system, underpinned by the principles of national sovereignty and sovereign equality between states. Each state is presumed to represent the interests of its own people and to have the capacity to guarantee its own security. Interference in the internal affairs of other states is outlawed in the Charter. Thus the viability of the international security system has been dependent on developing the newly independent states. These looked forward to securing their capacity in the heady early days of international development, but incapacity has become an indefinite condition for many states in the face of the demise of international development, weakening the possibility of their being equal subjects in international terms, or moral agents able to secure the welfare of their own population in domestic terms. Furthermore, the collective self-policing security model is made untenable.

The concept of human development as distinct from national development has captured the imagination of the demoralised international development community. The associated concept of human security concerns the enforcement of human-development norms and harnessing the higher priority (and resources) that Western policy makers give to security (King and Murray 2001; Mack 2004). Against the assumptions on which the Charter is based, the concept of human security highlights the fact that states may fail to protect the interests of their population, and that too often the state may violate individuals’ security. Despite their wide appeal in development circles, the concepts have been criticised for being attractive in terms of rhetoric, but of limited practical application for populations (ibid.).
Predictably, human-development rankings categorise many developing countries as widely failing their populations; conversely the advanced industrial countries are depicted as generally securing their populations’ welfare. Yet the Human Development Index (HDI) was inspired by the desire to demonstrate that social progress is possible without material advancement. A broad correlation between per capita income and HDI ranking is hotly contested in the literature, and cases countering this linkage are emphasised, although the commonly cited examples of China and Cuba might point to rather different conclusions than those usually drawn! Developing countries find themselves caught between the contradictions of an anti-materialist development outlook and idealised accounts of international relations. Importantly for low-ranking developing countries, there has been a tendency to interpret their position in the HDI as a moral rather than a material ranking. Human-security scales are implicitly used to distinguish unethical states, which violate their population’s security, and responsible states, which provide human security. Strategies to protect human security by force entrust the international community (of responsible states) to intervene on behalf of vulnerable populations in those states that are perceived to violate human security. Thus human-security advocacy essentially challenges the legitimacy of developing countries and promotes that of Western powers to intervene around the world, undermining the principle of equality among sovereign states.

Contrary to the provisions of the UN Charter, intervention is positively endorsed in the human-security model. NGOs that are challenging the right to national sovereignty and the principle of non-interference are essentially arguing for a change to the UN Charter in favour of international rights to enforce human security. The prohibition against such action was based on fears of its potential abuse by powerful states. Tellingly, discussions about human-security advocacy have neglected the potential conflict of interest between intervening states and the populations of developing states, or indeed between Western NGOs and the populations of developing countries. This neglect is striking, given that the concept of human security draws attention to the conflict of interests between a state and its population. NGOs talk of international relations in terms of belonging to an intimate global community, as if we are living in one big inclusive extended village, where people enjoy an equal voice and mutual ties of accountability, where wealth does not matter, and individuals in the South can just pop along to their neighbours in the North at times of need. In this vein, OGB extols ‘interconnectedness’:

"Oxfam is a worldwide network. A community that’s crossing continents. Linking villages, towns, countries. Connecting individuals who live thousands of miles apart. And from Bangalore to Bolton, from Tokyo to Tajikistan, this community is changing lives. People across the world are coming together with a shared goal. (Oxfam 2003/4)"

NGOs are assuming a direct, disinterested relationship that bypasses the developing state and allows them to claim to be voicing the interests of people in developing countries in place of their de-legitimised governments. In this unequal relationship, NGOs are political gatekeepers, determining which voices in the developing world they will represent, and how their problems are represented and addressed, often along with their implied role as economic gatekeepers in fair trade or debt relief. The possibility that NGOs might be drawn to viewpoints that reflect their own thinking is overlooked, as is the unequal distribution of power in such relationships. ‘Humanitarian war’ was a concept that humanitarian organisations themselves helped to legitimise in their demands for military enforcement in the Balkans during the 1990s. Official policy makers now take for granted that intervention, including military enforcement, is acceptable to aid organisations; and they talk about mechanisms for more efficient coordination between Western governments and NGOs in global governance. The possibility that intervening states and humanitarian organisations may have conflicting objectives is disregarded. The level of acceptability is such that Western governments have frequently found themselves

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criticised by aid organisations for not intervening *enough* in crises around the world, even following the controversial military invasion and occupation of Iraq. The collapse of humanitarian space in Iraq caused serious disquiet, because humanitarians were identified with the Western military forces as legitimate targets; but it has not prevented various organisations demanding more robust intervention elsewhere since then, including interventions that would bypass the UN Security Council (Oxfam GB 2004).

Western governments can happily live with criticism that calls for them to have a greater role in world affairs. The recasting of human insecurity in developing countries in moralised terms has provided something against which Western states can define themselves, while the endorsement of humanitarian enforcement has given them a flexible foreign-policy tool. When the alleged presence of weapons of mass destruction proved to be shaky grounds for the invasion of Iraq, the British government played the humanitarian card. Western politicians frequently observe that they cannot intervene everywhere, but the idea that they should be intervening has boosted their weakened sense of purpose and helped them to manage their crisis of domestic legitimacy. They have at least been able to take a moral stand and point to violations of human security in the developing world, even if they have found it difficult to identify common values at home.

**Moral projection**

The problem of human security in developing countries is real. However, the call to erode equality among states and expand Western governance of developing countries is an alarming and anti-democratic approach which reverses the political progress made in the international system during the twentieth century and resurrects the idea of liberal imperialism. The human-security model proposes only third-class social justice for populations in developing countries. The experience of Bosnia can be considered as perhaps the best and most comprehensive case of governance beyond borders. Yet after a decade of international administration, unemployment in Bosnia still exceeds 40 per cent, and the public welfare system is being reduced, not expanded. The population is expected to create its own employment through micro-enterprise, and to provide its own welfare through private insurance. In fact, post-conflict economic recovery in Bosnia under international administration has been far weaker than its recovery after the Second World War. International administrators seem happier elaborating social policies that are susceptible to moralising or bureaucratic target-setting (such as quotas), rather than designing policies that can generate real improvements in the political, social, and economic prospects of the population.

Within international humanitarian work, the growing preference for moral advocacy over material aid is increasingly clear. Live Aid’s mission in 1985 was to send aid direct to Ethiopia; Live 8’s mission in 2005 was about promoting an awareness of poverty among a Western audience. Consider the two UN *ad hoc* criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda: at their height, these (especially that in the former Yugoslavia) swallowed up 20 per cent of the UN’s funds, the main beneficiaries of which have been human-rights advocates and other professionals (like me!), rather than the victims of the violations. This preference is being repeated in relation to other crises, encapsulated for me at a meeting about the crisis in Darfur in 1994. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator, Mukesh Kapila, was highly animated in his address, urging the international community to prosecute war crimes, but he devoted rather less time to the refugees’ pressing needs for humanitarian aid. His conscious or unconscious priorities may seem a trivial matter, but they illustrate how humanitarian advocacy is becoming distorted. The perverse consequences of this bias can be seen in the UN’s warning that refugee rations might be cut to levels below calorific requirements – in the same month
that it announced that the International Criminal Court was taking up the case of violations of human rights in Darfur. The discrepancy in resources suggests that the international community is keener to take a moral stand on Darfur than to provide proper nourishment to the very refugees whose suffering it is invoking.

The degree of international commitment and sustained efforts to provide security and create a viable state in Bosnia are probably the exception rather than the rule. More striking is the rather arbitrary, superficial, and short-term character of foreign interventions, which do not seem to be based on a rational analysis of security risks or clear plans of what to do once they have taken place. The interventions create much sound and fury (‘shock and awe’), but their purpose remains vague. Policy is made on the hoof. Similarly, the literature on advocacy for humanitarian intervention is now dominated by the right to intervene militarily, but it has had relatively little to say about what happens next. In the words of Zaki Laidi, there is a desire to project moral and military authority in the absence of a clear political project (Laidi 1998). Consequently, today’s interventions are not evolving into the same formal or embedded relationships between ruler and ruled that prevailed during previous eras of liberal imperialism. Phrases such as ‘empire-lite’ (Ignatieff 2003) or the more damning ‘hyper-active attention deficit disorder’ (Ferguson 2004) are being applied. NGO advocacy and informal interventions are proving to be useful media for today’s ad hoc global engagements.

Muscular humanitarianism?

The re-legitimisation of international inequality between states, and the informal political role being delegated to NGOs in governance beyond borders, create serious problems for humanitarian advocacy. It is too easy for aid agencies to become cheerleaders for Western posturing over the state of the developing world. Despite the extensive soul-searching in the 1990s, the humanitarian sector as a whole still underestimates the ramifications of this reordering for humanitarian work. Interestingly, considering that MSF pioneered today’s politicised humanitarian advocacy, one of the strongest recent warnings on the dangers of humanitarianism becoming dangerously entangled with Western military missions comes from the research director of the MSF-Foundation (Weissman 2005). Fabrice Weissman’s report pointedly observes that humanitarians’ endorsement of the concept of humanitarian war has compromised the meaning of humanitarianism. He argues that humanitarian organisations must therefore bear some responsibility for becoming targets and being unable to work in places like Iraq or Afghanistan. In the light of NGOs calling for intervention in Darfur, Weissman asks: ‘After the Iraqi and Afghan populations, will the Sudanese people on the wrong side of the front line become the newest victims, abandoned by humanitarian organisations forced to evacuate the country after their symbol has been militarised?’ (Weissman 2005).

If MSF has got its fingers burnt by being too closely associated with Western foreign adventures, other humanitarian organisations are less wary. Those NGOs that are becoming more prominently involved in international politics through lobbying for reform of the UN Charter and intervention in individual crises are taking some risks. Least wary in advocating military interventions in the name of humanitarianism are probably the newer human-rights organisations: since these are not themselves engaged in relief work, they do not have to face the consequences of their stance on the ground. If they worry about too close an identification of contemporary military humanitarianism with past imperialism, they try to square this with the idea of ground troops coming from non-Western countries. But such niceties actually echo past colonial strategies of ‘getting savages to fight barbarians’ (Duffield 2005).

Generally, insofar as awareness of a changed climate is expressed, this is too easily put down to the global war on terror, as if humanitarian advocacy could continue as usual, if only Western
security priorities did not divert aid from humanitarian concerns. The humanitarian organisations have been slow to acknowledge the fact that their own political advocacy has facilitated this reordering, despite the compelling research produced by individual NGO staff members on the political, social, and ethical problems created by ‘humanitarian enforcement’. Indeed, this reordering would be formalised by the changes to the UN Charter for which some NGOs are lobbying. And NGOs have been inconsistent in criticising the failure to secure a prior UN Security Council resolution authorising military intervention in Iraq, while they were previously and subsequently willing to dispense with this same requirement in demanding military intervention in Kosovo or Darfur in the name of humanitarianism. Clearly, the practical consequences for specific missions, such as the collapse of humanitarian space in Iraq, have registered more with aid agencies than have the broad ethical dilemmas raised by the concept of humanitarian enforcement. Moreover, the huge response to the 2004 Asian tsunami has helped to reinforce complacency that humanitarianism will be all right after all, and to reduce the impact of some perceptive reflections on its future. The growing emphasis in official circles as well as among NGOs on ‘the right to intervene’ has yet to confront the fact that, even with unrestricted intervention and the willing compliance of developing countries, the normative development agenda is unrealisable without complementary material advancement.

**Advocacy’s narcissism?**

I wish to make one final, more general observation on the growth of humanitarian advocacy. Tony Vaux provocatively entitled his book *The Selfish Altruist* (Vaux 2002). Perhaps today we should speak of the *narcissistic altruist*. The contemporary preference for advocacy is not unrelated to the narcissistic cult of publicity. There exists a long-established philosophical notion that for charitable acts to be truly virtuous and not an expression of vanity they should be secret. These ancient strictures may be harsh and impracticable (how would an aid agency raise funds for its programmes?), but they are worth highlighting, because today’s desire to be seen to be doing something in high-profile emergencies is distorting aid priorities and undermining the principle of universalism. There is an obvious temptation to undertake advocacy rather than offering material aid when relief assistance has been criticised for damaging economies and feeding killers. Advocacy directly raises an organisation’s profile in a manner that the ordinary provision of aid does not. Advocacy can allow one to claim the moral high ground – without the stresses and responsibilities of implementing assistance programmes on the ground. Nor is it necessary to deal with potential contradictions between policy and practice. In other words, advocacy can in some cases represent a disingenuous flight from responsibility for social problems, rather than deeper engagement with them.

In addition, the distinction between doing good and being seen to be doing good is getting lost in high-profile contemporary campaigning, which seems too often focused on appearances. Its style flatters individuals into believing that they are changing the world through superficial gestures, without needing to sacrifice time or money. ‘It only needs to take you a matter of minutes every month, but it will help us to literally change the world’, states the MPH website in promoting its white-wristband initiative (www.makepovertyhistory.org). It goes on:

*By wearing one you are part of a unique worldwide effort in 2005 to end extreme poverty – you’re saying that it’s time to stop the deaths of more than 200,000 people every single week from preventable diseases.*

The campaign wristbands of the ‘noughties’ (displacing the badges of the 1980s and the ribbons of the 1990s) epitomises the trivial fashion statement masquerading as commitment. Throughout history, items of clothing have been used to symbolise allegiance to a particular political,
religious, or moral cause. However, today’s symbolic gesture has become the action itself and emptied of any meaning. Wristband wearers are being asked to project a moral position, but without having to commit themselves to anything beyond the gesture. Tellingly, the MPH website states:

*Wearing the White Band in 2005 is about sending a message that you want poverty to be stopped. You can wear it any way you like . . . The really important thing is that you just wear it.*

The phrase ‘[y]ou can wear it any way you like’ is the language of fashion magazines and appeals to a consumer culture, rather than countering it. Revealingly, the stress is on *you*, on your wearing and showing the wristband, and you demanding that something must be done: ‘The important thing is that you show your support and say enough is enough’.

This approach runs the risk of rendering such campaigns vacuous. A student involved in the MPH campaign at the University of Nottingham alerted me to the potential frustrations:

*I thought the whole white wristband idea for MPH was a really good idea [...] to make charity ‘cool’, but in fact since doing some campaigning on campus for the trade justice part of the MPH campaign I’m left very much undecided [...] On the stall we had people coming up asking to buy the white bands saying ‘Oh I’ve been looking for these everywhere’ but actually they knew nothing about the campaign, what it stood for or what we were doing. A lot couldn’t even take the time to tick a box to vote for trade justice, let alone ask or be told what it was all about. [...] Charity wristbands are the new cool, and yet no one knows or cares anything about what the charities stand for or who they help.1*

So the campaign’s endorsement of minimalist gestures masquerading as participation risks demoralising those who want serious engagement with the issues and want to engage others meaningfully.

This lowest-common-denominator type of politics is somewhat at odds with the impression that NGOs have created a vibrant mass movement in support of their activities. Rather, they appear to be trying to will into existence a mass movement by projecting the image that it exists. This simulation trivialises the idea of political struggle and invokes a false universal community and a *faux* political movement. Talking up the symbolic gesture of buying and wearing a wristband as a form of political engagement both patronises individuals and also flatters the organisations involved into believing that they are leading a political movement, while at the same time trivialising the causes that they have embraced. Stopping poverty is treated as merely an act of will, embodying the consumer expectations of instant gratification whereby desire is equated with realisation. Popular campaigns, rather like Western politics more generally, may be good at projecting themselves, but often at the expense of substance. Analysis is kept to the minimum, as are the expectations of people’s capacity to be politically engaged, in what amounts to an expression of disenchantment with the possibilities of political action. Rather than engaging people through analysis, the focus is on sensationalist accounts. The approach implies a dim view of people and does nothing to arrest the erosion of progressive politics. The superficial nature of people’s engagement suggests that rather than being genuinely involved in grassroots advocacy, some NGOs are now much more comfortable with lobbying in official circles.
Concluding remarks

In this article, I have criticised the nature of much existing humanitarian advocacy as tending to reinforce international inequalities rather than overturning them, by casting conditions in the developing world as moral rather than political and material issues, with dubious results for those in whose name the advocacy is conducted.

Insecurity is an inevitable condition for most people in developing countries, because a weak state without a developed economy and infrastructure will lack the capacity to guarantee their welfare and rights, whatever its political hue and whatever the level of international supervision. Humanitarianism is ultimately concerned with affirming a universal humanity and recognising the humanity of every individual. International inequalities make humanitarian relief necessary, but inherently difficult to get right, and also inadequate when most of the world’s population is governed by necessity. Humanitarian aid is an important symbolic act of empathy in an unequal world. It can also alleviate suffering. But it remains at best a gift that can be given or withheld. Premature declarations of membership of a global community cloud the reality of unequal relations and the significance of sharply divergent material conditions of existence. And such declarations are belied by the minimalist engagement with the Western domestic public established by NGO advocacy, while humanitarian advocacy offers the temptation to project a sense of moral purpose against conditions in developing countries – without the responsibility of potentially getting it wrong.

Note

1. Frances Wakefield, email correspondence, 29 June 2005.

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