

Helge Ronning gives a tough critique

of 'disaster reporting' and the media-aid organisation partnership...

the Unholy Alliance

We've all seen pictures of a white nurse holding a starving black child in her arms, trying to feed it in the midst of other women and children desperately waiting to be fed, to be helped, to receive what may keep them alive one more day. With a tired smile the nurse turns to the camera and appeals for more support. The reporter then enters the picture and gives a harrowing description of the suffering, interspersed by images of death, famine, war and more death. The white nurse and white reporter are active, the black 'victims' are passive – objects of both charity and journalism.

Western relief workers in Third World disasters have become symbols of the fundamental decency of international aid and the work done by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They are often portrayed as modern-day saints, possessing an immense knowledge of what they are doing and of the areas in which they work. But the Northern relief workers get the coverage; local people doing most of the menial work – like burying the dead or disinfecting mass graves – and experiencing the suffering firsthand receive scant attention. They are portrayed as part of the suffering, the passive recipients of Northern charity.

The big charities are institutions that maintain sizeable bureaucracies. They have permanent staffs and operate as part of international networks which have to be maintained and financed. As cynical as it may sound, disasters are good for the NGO business – a key source of income generation. To put it misanthropically: there seems to be an increasing need for new crises to maintain the organisational levels and apparatus of the aid organisations.

The charitable NGOs are surrounded by such an aura of sanctity that to question their role is tantamount to sacrilege. This attitude, however, stifles analysis of how the money is being used and who benefits from what.

Since the end of the Cold War, international NGOs have become important policy makers in many of the crises-ridden parts of the world. When the superpowers pulled out the aid agencies went in. Their activities and interpretations have tended to shape the understanding of conflicts, offering international journalists 'access' to seemingly impenetrable and complex issues. The NGO analysis, in many cases, has become the accepted truth.

Often the only way for media personnel to get into the disaster areas is courtesy of the aid organisations. They travel on their planes, in their convoys and with their officials as guides and primary sources. The reporters get powerful stories, dramatic pictures. The NGOs get their message about the suffering through to millions of viewers and readers in the North, which again generates millions of dollars for the NGOs and their operations. This symbiotic relationship between the world's media and the international aid organisations is a serious threat to the principle of independent journalism and a critical challenge to fundamental journalistic ethics.



PHOTO: (REUTERS)/AFRICA

International media and the NGOs

In situations such as these journalists seem to forget the basics of their trade, such as questioning the partiality of their sources, securing the views of more than one informant and so on. The political judgments of relief agency workers are often coloured by one particular perspective, yet such workers are often quoted as the 'true and objective' voice. Their judgments are seldom questioned or offset by other sources. Since this kind of 'disaster journalism' is a form of action reporting, the point is to relay the story back home as it happens in its most graphic horror, and this implies that analytical questions are not asked.

One of the most problematic aspects is that aid workers are often dependent on officials and soldiers in the countries in which they work. This may be a serious obstacle to the efficiency of relief campaigns as such. Questions regarding the political agendas behind the conflicts where aid organisations operate are rarely asked by the mainstream popular media. Uncomfortable issues such as how part of the aid may be hijacked or even given to soldiers, and how the struggle may be prolonged by humanitarian aid, are regarded as confusing the public and compromising the dominant image of the charitable and disinterested Northern relief organisations.

Reporters fly in and are literally dropped

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in the midst of the suffering, and then they are lifted out with a story which is strong on human interest and emotional appeal but lacking in insight and context. Who are the players in the conflict? Who is responsible for what? What are the familiar patterns?

In all disasters, even those caused by nature, there is the politics and business of aid involved. But the majority of foreign reporters covering Africa's crises know too little. They rely on each other and on what the aid workers and Northern diplomats tell them, rather than on the people who live and die in African societies. It is not surprising, then, how remarkably few African journalists cover the continent for the international media.

This 'unholy alliance' amounts to competition between the aid organisations over prestige and size, and to journalists competing for the 'best' and most striking story, even though 'getting it' may cause increased suffering.

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Although many are well intentioned, many relief workers from the North steal the media limelight and become dubious 'authorities' on a given conflict.