The Politics of Coherence: 
the formation of a new orthodoxy on linking aid and political responses to chronic political emergencies

Joanna Macrae, Research Fellow, Humanitarian Policy Group, ODI

This paper is about the changing relationship between humanitarian aid and ‘politics’. Specifically, it is concerned to unpack the much touted calls for increased ‘coherence’ between political and humanitarian responses to complex emergencies. It argues that by sleight of hand, the coherence agenda has been reinterpreted such that humanitarian action has become the primary form of political action, rather than merely a substitute for it. The paper argues that this integrationist approach has been driven by geopolitical events, domestic policy considerations in donor countries and more parochial concerns of aid policy, and is reflected in a number of significant changes in the architecture of the humanitarian system. Importantly, many of the tenets of this new ‘humanitarianism’ have been embraced by the majority of relief agencies, so legitimising it.

The work discussed here was conducted in collaboration with Nicholas Leader and is reported fully in a number of ODI publications, which are available here. Time allows only a brief sketch of what is necessarily a complex and subtle picture, so forgive what may appear to be overgeneralisations.

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Arguably, there is little that is new regarding the relationship between humanitarian relief and politics. Humanitarian assistance has always been a highly political activity. It has always relied upon engaging with political authorities in conflict affected countries, and thus has always influenced the political economy of conflict. The provision of humanitarian assistance by donor governments has also been influenced by political considerations, reflected in the differential volume of assistance provided to different countries and different groups.

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However, there is a growing sense that the aid-politics relationship has changed in the post-Cold War era, and that as a result humanitarian action is becoming
'politicised'. In other words, that it has become incorporated into the political response of donor countries to complex political emergencies.

This 'politicisation' is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it can be seen to reflect the calls issued throughout the early-mid-1990s for increased coherence between humanitarian and conflict management objectives.

These calls for increased coherence emerged amidst complex changes in the geopolitical landscape, and as a result of more parochial changes in the domestic public policy landscape and aid thinking in donor countries.

At a geopolitical level a number of important changes have taken place since the mid-1980s that have set the stage for 'coherence'.

First, the ending of the Cold War provided for political disengagement from the geopolitical periphery, leaving development actors as virtually the sole representatives of the West.

At the same time, the political conditions that had encouraged unconditional respect for states' sovereignty ended. This provided for a much more interventionist approach to international relations.

In 1992, at the request of the Security Council, the UN published an Agenda for Peace. This mapped out a new vision of security that extended beyond defence and diplomacy, to embrace economic and social determinants of peace and stability. This provided for aid actors to be included alongside their counterparts in ministries of foreign affairs and defence in a cross-cutting effort to promote peace and security. As in the immediate post-war years, development of poor countries was seen as an important investment in peace.
Combined, these two trends allowed for the artificial distinction that had prevailed between aid and politics to be collapsed. No longer did aid agencies have to confine themselves to the sphere of economics: on technocratic and human rights grounds it was now permissible for aid agencies to concern themselves with the internal political affairs of recipient governments. This included renewed powers to judge the quality of governance and, if necessary, withhold resources on political grounds.

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Thus, as the 1990s progressed, and aid became both the representative of international policy, and to constitute part of the mainstream political agenda of peace and security, so the distinction between aid policy and foreign policy became increasingly blurred.

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During the late 1980s/early 1990s, aid flows began to decline sharply. No longer required to buttress the sovereignty of superpower allies, sustaining the aid enterprise required a new justification.

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The increased prominence of conflict-related emergencies, combined with the increased scope for intervention in them meant that the late 1980s/early 1990s saw a significant increase in the absolute and relative amounts of aid spent on relief.

As the decade progressed, so more questions began to be asked about the efficacy of this spending. Two critiques began to emerge.

First, relief was not helping to reduce vulnerability of populations. Emergencies were dragging on without any obvious end in sight and there was concern was that relief responses were neither sustainable nor the most effective way of helping populations.

Second, evidence began to mount that as international financial support for proxy
wars was being reduced, so relief was being incorporated into the war economy in order to sustain conflict.

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From the early 1990s bodies such as the UN and the DAC proposed that aid could be used as part of a process of a strategy for conflict reduction. Aid was promising to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of diplomacy.

Initially, this promise was made primarily in relation to the role of development assistance in addressing the root causes of conflict. Gradually, however, the distinction between conflict prevention and conflict resolution, and between development and humanitarian aid was blurred. De facto humanitarian assistance was being given a role in conflict reduction. Significantly, donor governments were not alone, nor indeed the first to make these claims: rather it was operational agencies in the UN and the Non-governmental sector who first advocated for a stronger role for aid in conflict reduction.

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The change in the geopolitical environment and in the aid discourse have shaped, and been shaped by changes in the domestic context in donor countries which have also encouraged coherence in humanitarian-politics domain.

Specifically, the idea of joined up government has become a feature of modern democracies concerned to increase the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of public policy.

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At the same time, pressures of globalisation meant that it was no longer easy to define the boundaries between domestic and international policy.

On the one hand the near disappearance of conventional military threats meant that states international interests were defined in terms of protecting against narcotics, terrorism and large refugee flows.

At the same time, the new wave of international regulation meant that all aspects of
domestic policy - from agriculture to social security and employment law all had international dimensions. This required reshaping government departments to ensure effective international representation.

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The changed geopolitical context also coincided with a redefinition of partisan politics in many Western democracies. In the UK, for example, the emergence of Third Way politics collapsed the distinction between the realism of the right, and the leftist liberal internationalism. In its place, was a Third Way foreign policy that defined national self-interest in terms of good international citizenship.

An important implication of the rights-based approach to foreign policy is that states that abuse human rights forego the right to be treated as legitimate members of the international community, and become the object of international scrutiny, censure and occasionally military intervention.

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To recap, three sets of factors converged in the mid-1990s to promote the idea of coherence between aid and political responses to complex emergencies: geopolitical, aid-related and domestic policy pressures in donor countries.

Striking about this list of factors driving the coherence agenda is the diversity of factors and actors that have driven it - and it is this is part that has ensured that its objectives are often unclear and its implementation in practice confused and confusing.

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The framework of coherence has been important in influencing the architecture of international relations.

The UK government has experimented perhaps more than any other European government in seeking to integrate aid and political responses to chronic political emergencies. At first sight it is paradoxical that experiments these have taken place in a context where aid and politics has been separated, ie when DFID has gained its autonomy from FCO.
However, this institutional separation is less baffling when one realises that in fact there has probably never been greater unity between aid and foreign affairs than at present, since both share the principles of international good citizenship and liberal peace.

What is important about the separation of DFID and FCO is that it has provided for the redivision of international division of labour along a new axis. Now that the aid/politics divide is no longer sustainable, a new division of labour has emerged. Essentially, DFID has become the Ministry for International Policy in Non-strategic Countries, able to assume responsibility not only for the delivery of economic aid, but also to initiate and promote a political strategy. This leaves the FCO free to concentrate on areas of greatest strategic importance - EU, US etc.

This pattern is echoed in other contexts, eg in the Netherlands, it is aid driven desks/embassies that have responsibility for the formulation and execution of international policy in the Third World.

These experiments in coherence were signalled in the 1997 White Paper and were to an extent underwritten by an emerging consensus within the UN, donor and NGO communities that the separation of humanitarian aid from political action was untenable, particularly in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

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As aid ministries have assumed more importance as international policy actors, they too have sought to concentrate their energies. The era of 'partnership' represents a new generation of conditionality on development assistance. In order to qualify for a discussion regarding the conditions under which development aid is provided, countries have to first prove that they subscribe to the paradigm of poverty reduction and economic and political liberalisation advocated by the West.

Those who fail to do so are excluded from the mainstream of development assistance, and from mainstream international relations. Responsibility for managing international policy in these ‘pariah’ states has increasingly shifted not simply into the aid domain, but into that of humanitarian assistance. Thus, in the UK, EMAD/CHAD has assumed significant responsibility in key complex emergencies, while in the Netherlands, humanitarian assistance budgets provided the most flexible...
tools for policy engagement in conflict-affected areas of Africa in particular.

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What difference has all of this made to official aid policy? In our research, we looked at two donor governments as case studies, the Netherlands and the UK, here I'll focus on the findings of the latter study. In common with other official donors, until the early 1990s, the UK's emergency aid programme was small and widely seen as the poor relation to 'real' development aid. The task of emergency aid departments was confined largely to writing cheques to partner organisations, enabling them to send goods and services to alleviate what was seen as temporary suffering. The administrative procedures and the conditions under which aid was provided reflected this analysis of the short-term nature of disasters and the unconditional character of relief assistance. The emphasis was on enabling rapid response and, by channelling resources through non-governmental channels, maintaining political distance in conflict-affected countries.

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By the mid-1990s, the relief as chequebook approach was no longer sustainable. The creation of DFID enabled the Emergency Aid Department to build upon its small advances into conflict management made under the previous government. In particular, as the body responsible for the formulation of UK international policy in many CPEs, it was able to pursue an integrationist interpretation of the coherence agenda.

Specifically, this meant analysing whether and how the provision of relief affected the dynamics of conflict, and on the basis of this analysis deciding whether and how to provide humanitarian assistance. This conditional approach to humanitarian assistance was the subject of most controversy in Sierra Leone in 1997. 1998 saw sustained defence of this position and its codification in DFID's humanitarian principles and successive ministerial statements.

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By early 1999 unequivocal support for the new humanitarianism was looking more tempered. The tensions between conflict management and developmental objectives and humanitarian principles were now being acknowledged by the
Secretary of State, as was the need for securing clarity regarding the DFID-FCO relationship in this area.

Some restructuring within CHAD also meant that, rather than pursuing an integrationist approach, rather than pursuing an integrationist approach explicitly to achieve conflict reduction objectives, greater emphasis was placed on ensuring complementarity. In other words, administratively, the conflict half of the CHAD equation was separated from the relief-management half.

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However, there remains room for misunderstanding and confusion regarding the UK’s analysis and interpretation of the coherence agenda. In particular, the new emphasis on accountability and do no harm means identifying the conditions required for the effective delivery of humanitarian aid and in particular whose responsibility it should be to establish whether or not these conditions are in place. For example, should DFID or NGOs decide whether security conditions in Afghanistan are such as to enable safe and effective access for UK-funded NGOs. Should DFID or its NGO partners decide which partners to work through in Serbia? In the absence of transparent criteria mapping out these conditions there continues to be the sense that selective scrutiny of operating conditions is in fact political conditionality through the technocratic backdoor.

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In terms of realising the new vision of coherence a number of innovations have taken place within the humanitarian system globally.

At its most minimal, coherence has demanded a new set of conversations. There has been a proliferation of mechanisms to facilitate cross-agency and cross-departmental discussions regarding international responses to complex political emergencies. This is particularly evident in the UN, with the creation in 1997 of the Executive Committee structures. With rare exceptions these structures have not provided a mechanism for joint policy-making: but have rather been concerned with information sharing.

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A second important mechanism for enhancing coherence has been the rise of so-called bilateralisation of humanitarian response. By bilateralisation, we mean donors participating more directly in operational decision-making. This has been driven in considerable part by the perceived failure of operational agencies to be able to account adequately for their impact - positive and negative. Demands for increased accountability have thus coincided with a renewed assertiveness within donor governments regarding the role of aid in conflict prevention/resolution.

Different governments have different takes on the bilateralisation of humanitarian aid, but most are going down this route to a greater or lesser degree. Bilateralisation spans a continuum from contributing to donor coordination bodies (such as the Afghan Support Group, SACB) to earmarking of funds for multilateral action, to more careful definition and monitoring of donor-partner contracts; to increasing donors’ own operational capacity.

Our study, in common with others, concluded that bilateralisation is likely to continue as an important trend in the humanitarian sphere. It provides further weight to those who claim that the distinction is being blurred between conditions for effective humanitarian action and political conditionality. While recognising that there are genuine problems of accountability and performance of multilateral, international and non-governmental organisations, bilateralisation of itself is unlikely to resolve these.

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The UK’s experiment in integrating political and humanitarian objectives has not been isolated, but is reflected across international policy in relation to complex emergencies. Analysis of UN and Dutch policy in this area revealed that they too had assumed the value of an integrationist approach, and that these assumptions had proven problematic ethically and technically.

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Ethically, two aspects of the integrationist approach are worth highlighting here.

First, the blurring of humanitarian and political objectives has meant that the motivation behind humanitarian decision-making has become much less clear. It has become easy for conditions for effective humanitarian action to be, or be seen to be, de facto political conditionality. This has been the case with regard to the UK/US
approach to security in Afghanistan, and in relation to energy needs in Serbia.

Importantly, this blurring is not just the result of 'bad' foreign policy guys trying to manipulate humanitarian aid, but follows from the logic of integrating developmental and conflict management objectives also advocated by NGOs and the UN. Such integration implies having to prioritise between short-term humanitarian imperatives and longer term goals of sustainability and peace. In other words, the lack of clarity regarding objectives of assistance confuses ethical basis of humanitarian action, and hence risks its legitimacy. This legitimacy is of crucial value in determining the security and scope of humanitarian space. Casual compromise of principles of neutrality and impartiality can thus have important operational consequences.

Second, the integrationist approach assumed that because conditional humanitarianism is being implemented as part of a wider ethical international policy framework it too is necessarily ethical. However, what this misses out is the question of who is defining this ethical framework and what to do when it is not shared. Not only does it assume that responsibility for violations of human rights are located solely within the conflict-affected country, but it assumes that NOT engaging on humanitarian issues with certain parties because of their human rights records is an ethical approach.

The problems with such a position become evident perhaps by analogy. In the early days of structural adjustment, the assumption was that its single economic prescription would necessarily benefit Third World economies and that those who did not subscribe to this model were negligent and so should not benefit from aid. The mono-economics of adjustment have now been succeeded by the mono-politics and mono-ethics of a liberal peace. The effects of this are to associate humanitarian assistance with a particular Western political framework (most obviously in the Balkans). At the same time the idea of the 'bad victim' becomes legitimised.

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At a technical level, the integrationist approach has also proved problematic. Again, there are two reasons for this:

First, it is important to emphasise that integration has not usually meant having a clear political strategy defined and implemented by specialist political actors, so
securing more humanitarian space and promoting conflict resolution. Rather, the new humanitarianism adopted by DFID, but also in modified form by the UN, ECHO and the Dutch government, has become the primary form of political engagement in conflict-affected countries.

Evidence collected by our study and others suggests that the leverage exerted by aid over the course of a conflict appears to be marginal at best. This suggests that seen either as a new tool in the diplomatic armoury, or as a legitimate objective for aid, the integrationist approach to coherence is unlikely to work.

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The idea of coherence was developed after the crisis in Rwanda, as a way of breaking down what were seen as unhelpful barriers between aid and politics, relief and development, relief and peace-building, so that both root causes and symptoms could be dealt with. A key assumption was that a more vigorous and ‘humanitarian’ international politics would be developed.

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In fact what seems to have happened is that this politics has not developed, what has happened is that, through the idea of coherence, humanitarian aid has been re-named and re-packed as politics. Thus by funding for example the Strategic Framework, donors can claim they are supporting the peace process in Afghanistan, while expending very little diplomatic energy on a real peace process.

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Thus, through a conceptual sleight of hand, aid has become not a substitute for politics, but the primary form of engagement in conflict in un-strategic countries. It has evolved from a short-term palliative to a way of building liberal peace on the periphery. The rich get diplomats, the poor get aid workers.

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As we have seen, this is problematic both ethically and practically. In short, ignoring these conflicts, leaving them to aid workers, is not dealing with them. The re-definition of security and an ‘ethical dimension to foreign policy needs diplomats, as
much as, if not more than aid workers. What is needed is not an integrationist, coherence approach, but one that emphasises complementarity, an approach that emphasises the different tasks and roles of different actors.

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There are opportunities as well as threats in this situation. There are two broad areas that need attention

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The first is re-investing in politics, taking the diplomatic and political tasks seriously. Conventional diplomatic tools of analysis and intervention are being challenged by new forms of conflict in the post-cold War era. The major powers now have fewer points of leverage over belligerents in many conflicts than previously. Identifying new and effective ways for political intervention is therefore a priority. There is an important advocacy task for NGOs and human rights groups to encourage greater investment in effective diplomacy in non-strategic areas.

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The second is working out the proper relationship between aid and politics, establishing rules that will ensure complementarity. The report outlines a number of recommendations in this regard, including clearer definition in law of the scope and limitations of humanitarian assistance; clarification of the administrative and managerial relationship between political and humanitarian actors. It also implies that humanitarian organisations need to ensure that they are not sending equivocal messages to donor governments - criticising the politicisation of aid, while also claiming that their own interventions can and should play a role in the process of conflict resolution. There is thus a need for much clearer understanding by humanitarian agencies of the real conflict that exists between the principle of neutrality and impartiality and conflict management work.