

Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur: the challenge of neutrality

Aid agencies are grappling with familiar problems around advocacy in Darfur. Long-recognised as a crisis of protection, and not solely of humanitarian relief, difficult issues have emerged as to the roles aid actors should play in advocating for measures to address civilian insecurity and conflict resolution. Where does the boundary lie between humanitarian questions and political or military ones? Should agencies call attention to these issues, or should they also advocate for specific political or military measures? As Barbara Stocking, Oxfam's chief executive, put it in a recent interview: 'we think we've got to save lives today while trying to get the international community to sort out the bigger problem. Now we will do our absolute utmost to go to the edge of that. We will try to give as much information out, but not in ways that are challenging to the Khartoum government' (Cohen, 2007).

The difficulty lies in determining where Stocking's 'edge' lies. Aid actors have different mandates, but certain principles – in particular humanity, impartiality and neutrality – are widely accepted as intrinsic to humanitarian action. Neutrality is often said to be a 'pragmatic' principle: in order to gain access to communities affected by war, humanitarians should not engage publicly in matters of political controversy. However, this strict notion of neutrality has been much eroded. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) views acting as an agent of change as central to its work, including highlighting the responsibilities of the various actors involved. For MSF, neutrality means being non-partisan, and not siding with any warring party. Other agencies go further, particularly those with mandates that extend beyond emergency action to include recovery and development. These agencies advocate a form of 'politicised' humanitarianism, where humanitarians seek to influence the political root causes of conflict and poverty.

Key messages

- Humanitarian agencies have compromised strict neutrality in order to advocate on issues related to civilian insecurity in Darfur. A more 'pragmatic' form of neutrality is emerging: sufficiently non-partisan to facilitate access to affected communities, while also sufficiently flexible to allow advocacy.
- Aid actors concerned to retain access to affected communities should do more to define and safeguard this new form of neutrality. This may involve distancing themselves from other non-neutral campaigners.
- There is a lack of clarity around humanitarian actors' role in advocacy. This can lead to aid actors overstepping humanitarian boundaries and being drawn into discussions in which they have limited competence or expertise. More discussion and evaluation of the role of advocacy, and its effectiveness in humanitarian action, is required.

Darfur demonstrates many of the classic characteristics of a non-permissive advocacy environment: high levels of insecurity for aid workers, continuous efforts by the Sudanese government to curtail what it perceives as 'political' activities and inconsistent levels of humanitarian access. There are thus serious operational considerations to be taken into account when undertaking advocacy. Finally, there are issues of competence and expertise.

This HPG Policy Brief reviews operational aid actors' international advocacy on Darfur since the outbreak of the conflict in 2003. It draws on secondary data available in the public

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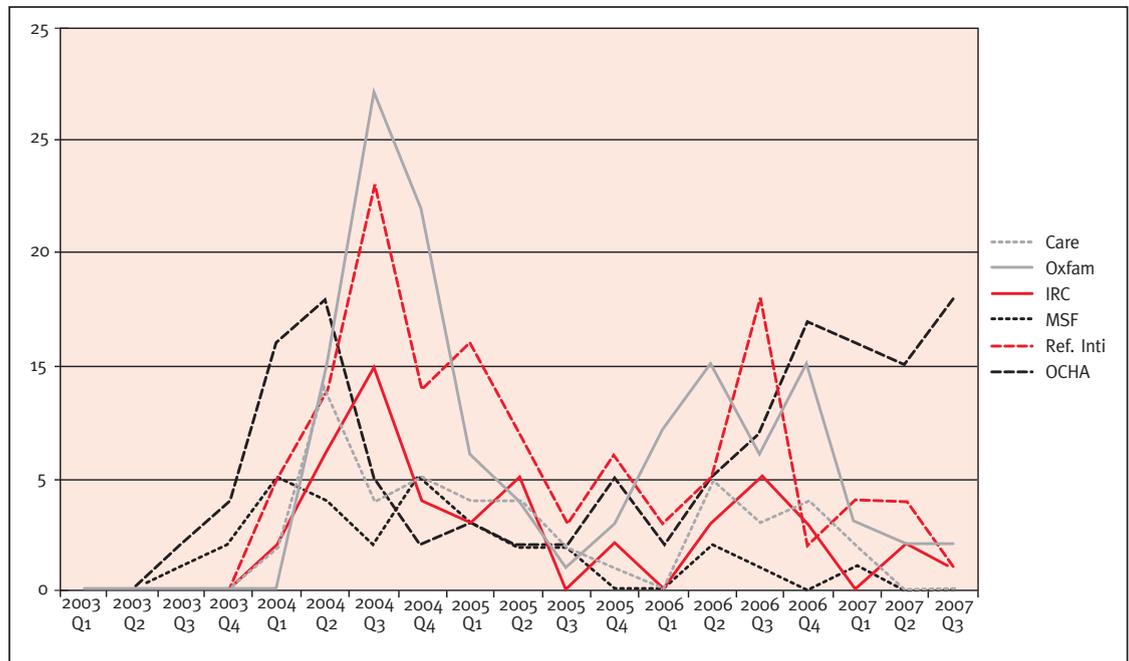
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Figure 1: Frequency of press statements on Darfur by select humanitarian agencies, 2003–2007¹



sphere, as well as a select number of interviews with representatives of aid agencies, campaigning groups and international policy-makers.

Silenced by insecurity?

Advocacy by operational aid actors is frequently juxtaposed with programming, with speaking out weighed against potential costs to programmes, staff and beneficiaries. This relationship between advocacy and access and security appears to have been an important determinant in the quantity and quality of advocacy efforts on Darfur.

Figure 1 charts the frequency of public statements on Darfur by a select group of six humanitarian organisations. It shows that these organisations were slow to raise the alarm, at least in their public statements. The conflict was at its most intense in 2003 and early 2004, with villages razed to the ground and hundreds of thousands of people killed or displaced. During this period, most international organisations were either unable to gain access to Darfur or were publicly silent. With a few exceptions, most notably the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and MSF, public advocacy on Darfur commenced in 2004. Many attribute the raising of the alarm to the

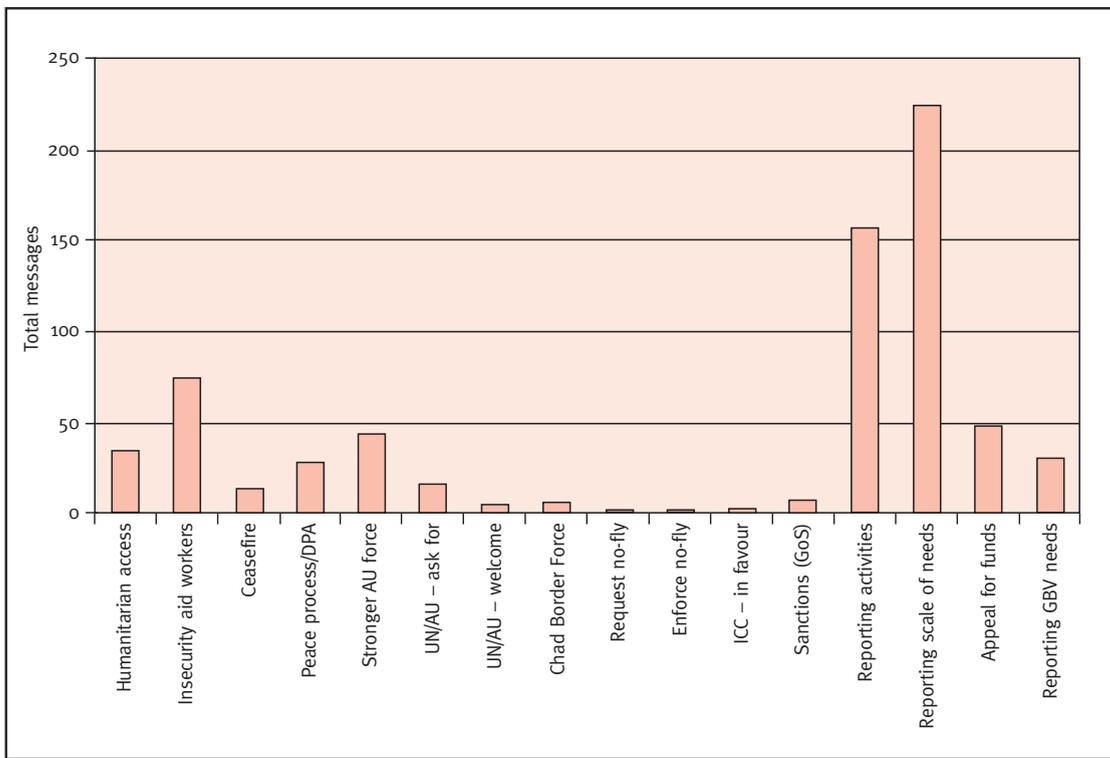
outgoing UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator to Sudan, Mukesh Kapila, who in March 2004 compared the situation to Rwanda in 1994. Earlier, the then Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egleland, had called Darfur the world’s worst humanitarian disaster (IRIN, 22 March 2004). From that point on, the crisis attracted significantly increased attention.

Bureaucratic impediments to humanitarian access were first eased in February 2004, with greater concessions in May and again in July. This corresponded with a period of intense public advocacy. Initially, humanitarian organisations concentrated heavily on the humanitarian situation, calling for additional funding and enhanced access. Figure 2 shows the overall substance of our sample aid agencies’ public advocacy between 2003 and 2007. It highlights the heavy emphasis on issues related to humanitarian assistance and delivery, including reports on the humanitarian context, response and funding needs, humanitarian access and aid worker insecurity. However, as the crisis extended throughout 2004, and ceasefire and demobilisation commitments were not met, the content of press statements changed, with increasing emphasis on insecurity and demands for international action to resolve the crisis. Sexual and gender-based violence and the need for stronger peacekeeping were particularly emphasised.

As aid agencies began to advocate on sensitive civilian protection issues, the risks associated with

¹ This figure has been generated from an analysis of 435 press statements with an information or advocacy component, released to ReliefWeb since 2003. Statements on Sudan-wide issues; gratitude to donors; photo montages; and comprehensive reports on Darfur were excluded (accompanying press statements were included).

Figure 2: Content of press statements on Darfur by select humanitarian organisations, 2003 – 2007²



advocacy appeared. As agencies began to press for a strengthened mandate and increased manpower for the African Union peacekeeping mission, AMIS, the president of the Sudanese national assembly announced the dispatch of a parliamentary commission 'to investigate the work of humanitarian organizations [which] are trying to gain control of the camps'. The Sudanese president, President Omar al-Bashir, declared that 'humanitarian organizations were the real enemies' of Sudan (AFP, 29 October 2004). A press release by Save the Children-UK, reporting the aerial bombardment of Tawila in North Darfur, resulted in a threat to expel the agency's head. Similar steps were taken against Oxfam GB in November 2004 when it publicly berated what it saw as the UN Security Council's 'diplomatic dithering' over Darfur. Between December 2004 and April 2005, at least 20 aid workers, most of them from organisations publicly advocating on IDP issues, were arrested or detained (Human Rights Watch, 2005).

This increase in the harassment and intimidation of aid actors also corresponded with rising insecurity. According to OCHA, reported security incidents involving aid workers (including theft, detention, physical/sexual assault and death) increased by

59% between 2005 and 2006, and by a further 53% in the first half of 2007. While the effects of insecurity are felt across the humanitarian sector, operational NGOs and other non-UN agencies have borne the brunt, with a 69% rise in the number of security incidents between 2005 and 2006, compared to a 28% increase for UN agencies. Over this period, and particularly during 2007, field workers also indicated an increase in the number of expulsions and greater difficulties in renewing working papers, particularly for agencies engaged in policy or protection activities.

Public advocacy by aid organisations decreased markedly during this period, especially in the latter half of 2005. This coincided with a period of (relative) calm in Darfur, when the peace talks at Abuja were ongoing and rebel movements had retreated to their strongholds. Since then, public advocacy by the six aid organisations reviewed in this paper has remained limited. There was a spike in activity around May 2006, when the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was signed. A smaller spike in August 2006 focused on sexual violence in South Darfur. From the end of 2006, however, operational NGOs have been all but silent. The content of public advocacy has also changed since 2005. With some exceptions, agencies have returned to speaking about issues relating to humanitarian assistance.

² This figure draws on the same statements as used in Figure 1. Where more than one issue was included in a press statement (for example, reporting need and calling for humanitarian access), both issues were included.

Those interviewed claim that fear of repercussions has played a role in the downturn in public advocacy, though the precise relationship between advocacy and risk is unclear. Changes in public advocacy can also be influenced by institutional strategy, profiling or funding requirements or staff turnover. Field staff spoke of pressure from headquarters to be active and outspoken. In any case, seasoned advocates claim that time-strapped managers often do not have the time, knowledge or ability to judge a situation fully. The enormous task of maintaining operations in a difficult environment such as Darfur monopolises senior management attention, with sensitive public advocacy often regarded as too difficult.

Out of the spotlight: the role of private advocacy

While our review of public advocacy on Darfur suggests that risk – perceived or actual – influences the level of public advocacy, many advocates challenge the assumption that advocacy and programming are irreconcilable. They focus instead on the complementarities between advocacy and programming, and highlight the availability of less vocal and attributable modes of advocacy.

Such an evolution in thinking has certainly been evident in Darfur. Agencies have sought to continue advocacy efforts through a combination of three tactics. First, they have sought to reduce the visibility and sensitivity of their statements by using more private methods. Indeed, the level of private advocacy has been such that some observers have claimed that it has undermined the capacity of aid organisations to respond to needs on the ground (Minear, 2005; Stoddard, 2006: 61). Second, agencies have sought to reduce the extent to which they are uniquely or directly identified with advocacy messages, instead using collective approaches. One example is the Sudan Advocacy Coalition, a consortium of six NGOs, which was an active advocate in the early phase of the crisis. More recently, agencies have used local coordination mechanisms and have released joint press releases.³ Third, they have turned to other advocates, including OCHA, Western donor governments and human rights organisations and pressure campaigns like the Save Darfur Coalition.

The issue of humanitarian access provides a good example of both private and indirect advocacy

³ For instance, a group of NGOs (CAFOD, CARE International, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Islamic Relief, IRC, Oxfam and Tearfund) demanded more funding for the African Union force following a Darfur donors' conference.

efforts on a core humanitarian issue. Far from advocacy being pursued at the expense of operations, many interviewees believe that the fact that agencies have access to Darfur at all is as a result of this work. In early 2004, when air and ground attacks were at their most intense, humanitarian visas and customs clearances for Darfur were taking up to three months to process, and humanitarian organisations were able to reach only a small fraction of those in need. High-level advocacy, most of it behind the scenes, is thought to have resulted in a progressive easing of these restrictions. Agencies relied on other actors with greater or different leverage over the national authorities to put forward their concerns. Private advocacy towards Western donor governments and OCHA, often institutionalised through regular meetings at field level, in Khartoum and in donor capitals, has been vital in maintaining access as a priority issue.

The need to work privately or through alternative channels increases with the sensitivity of the subject matter. This has been particularly the case in relation to the protection and security of civilian populations in Darfur. The Darfur crisis erupted just as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine was gaining currency in international political debate, and for many Darfur has become its first test-case. The fact that discussion of the crisis was couched in the language of protection from the start has in itself been significant in guarding against humanitarian assistance being used as a substitute for more concerted political action, as was the case in Bosnia, for instance. However, whilst usefully highlighting the limits of humanitarian action and the need for action by other (political/military) players, the protection debate has also drawn humanitarians into highly technical political and military discussions.

Many agencies have become engaged in R2P discussions generally, as well as specifically in relation to Darfur. Some have been central in calls for more effective peacekeeping in Darfur. Others, such as MSF-France, have publicly voiced concerns about non-consensual intervention (MSF, 2007). However, beyond highlighting the need for protection (and, in the view of some, the need for peacekeepers), many humanitarian representatives were uncertain about the limits of their responsibility to describe the type of political or military response that was required, and spoke of being drawn into discussions in which they have little authority, and frequently less expertise. The question of the legitimate role of aid actors in engaging in and informing these debates is difficult. On the one hand, aid organisations are perceived as having expertise by virtue of their on-the-ground

information on the crisis and, at least to some degree, their understanding of the perspectives of local actors. Many aid organisations are also ‘multi-mandate’ actors, combining humanitarian concerns with developmental and other aims. With well-established relationships with Western governments, they have also become trusted sources of information and analysis.

While there are different perspectives in different agencies, most of the field staff consulted believe that humanitarian agencies have the legitimacy and competency to present the facts as they exist on the ground, but that the details of a political or military response are a matter for military or political experts. Others, and particularly those in headquarters, have engaged more deeply in technical discussions in an effort to reach policy recommendations which will have an impact on the humanitarian and protection conditions on the ground. These actors call for stronger local analysis, greater investment in expertise to substantiate policy recommendations and the development of more sophisticated advocacy strategies. In this perspective, all humanitarian action is political; the issue is not whether agencies are engaging in politics, but rather whether they are doing so in a partisan way.

New alliances, new challenges

Advocacy by individual aid agencies is necessarily limited. It is generally secondary to the provision of relief assistance, and capacity is constrained. Some aid organisations are attempting to broaden their field of influence, for example by establishing policy positions in Addis Ababa to influence the African Union, or using field offices in neighbouring countries to influence regional policies. However, their main leverage is over Western governments, media and publics. Experience from development practices, for example on landmines or on the ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign, has shown the potential for policy impact when working in alliances, whether with other groups or through grass-roots mobilisation. Many aid organisations have drawn on these experiences to inform their approach in Darfur, whether sharing platforms, working in coalitions or forming partnerships with different groups.

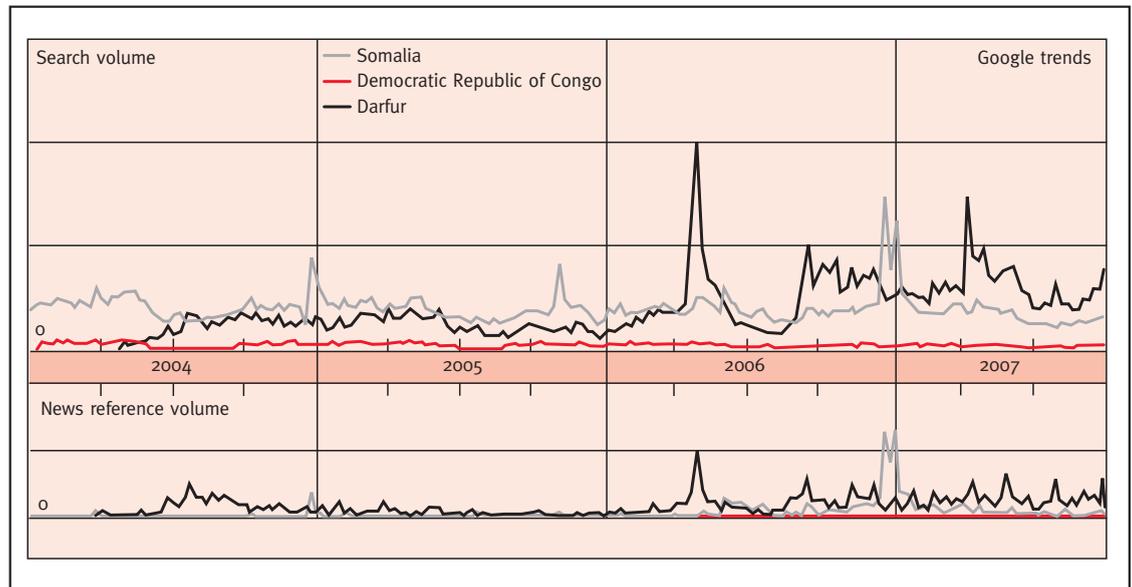
As with aid organisations, Darfur is a priority for many human rights groups and policy think-tanks. In 2003, Amnesty International issued a number of alerts on Darfur; it has since been joined by Human Rights Watch and other human rights organisations. The International Crisis Group has also been a consistent voice on Darfur. Focusing on questions of peace, security and justice and unrestricted by in-country presence, these organisations have publicly called for strong international action on Darfur,

including recommending measures such as UN peacekeeping, no-fly zones and sanctions. While some aid organisations guard their independence fiercely and remain cautious about sharing platforms with these groups, others are less reticent. In addition to the informal channels of communication that have always existed, new coordination groups, such as Crisis Action in the UK, reflect a trend towards collective action based on shared analysis.

The crisis in Darfur has triggered what has been described as the greatest level of global activism witnessed since the end of apartheid in 1991. Concern that genocide was taking place resulted in the creation of an unlikely alliance of the American liberal left and Christian right, the Black Caucus, European think-tanks, human rights campaigners and grass-roots activists. Using a powerful mix of high-profile public rallies, media advertising, popular campaigning and celebrity endorsements, these groups have invoked the ‘never again’ formula to justify a series of confrontational policy recommendations. The emergence of this transnational activism has presented new possibilities for humanitarians. Many, particularly those in headquarters, welcome the attention to Darfur that this high-profile campaigning has achieved, and point to the increase both in media coverage and in public engagement in the Darfur crisis (see Figure 3 (page 6), which depicts the frequency of online searches and online print coverage of different crises). They attribute the increased engagement of China, and its agreement to stronger UN action against Sudan, to the campaigning efforts of these coalitions, in particular the ‘Genocide Olympics’ initiative, where campaigners threatened to mount an international boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games unless China used its influence on Sudan to induce it to accept UN peacekeepers.

The apparent success of these campaign groups in increasing the profile of the Darfur crisis has led some humanitarian organisations to join forces with these coalitions. Others have received support from campaigning groups, either directly in the form of financial assistance, or indirectly, to the extent that these organisations highlight humanitarian needs. Many have also shared campaigning tactics with these groups, participating directly in their international rallies, such as the Day for Darfur, or employing similar techniques. UNICEF and the International Rescue Committee, for instance, have each hosted high-profile visits to Sudan by actors Mia Farrow and George Clooney, prominent figures in the US Save Darfur campaign. However, critics are concerned that the bluntness of the campaign has led to an over-simplification of the conflict, encouraged ‘deadline diplomacy’ in relation to the negotiation of the DPA and placed undue emphasis

Figure 3: Comparison of online print coverage and public searches on Darfur, DRC and Somalia, 2004–2007



Source: <http://www.google.com>

on an international peacekeeping presence which is unlikely to resolve the crisis. It has also posed a number of specific challenges for humanitarians. One high-profile difficulty emerged when campaigning groups advocated for the enforcement of no-fly zones over Darfur. A number of aid organisations complained that the measure would place humanitarians and their work at risk given their reliance on aircraft to reach affected populations. MSF and Action Contre la Faim also publicly argued that non-consensual enforcement of such a measure could trigger a further escalation in violence.

The fact that the campaign groups have different objectives and approaches can also be problematic. While the main thrust of the campaign – ensuring security and humanitarian access and pressing for a political resolution of the conflict – is broadly in line with the objectives of humanitarian organisations, its public messages are much more robust. Advocacy officials in aid organisations in the US in particular have claimed that their efforts to raise humanitarian concerns have been drowned out by the louder, more emotive campaigning groups. Humanitarian agencies therefore are caught in a dilemma: they seek to attract high-level attention to the Darfur crisis, but are then unable to control the direction of the campaign. This has led some agencies to adopt public positions opposing the dominant campaign, with MSF-France for instance insisting that the crisis in Darfur did not amount to genocide.

Furthermore, campaigning groups have almost exclusively targeted the Sudanese government,

including specific adverts attacking Bashir. While this level of partisanship may be appropriate for campaigning organisations that believe that one party to the conflict bears greater responsibility, it is problematic for aid organisations concerned to maintain access to affected populations. Whether working in alliance with these groups actually protects aid organisations is also questionable. Senior aid officials in Khartoum claim that the Sudanese authorities are convinced that anglophone aid actors in particular are fuelling the campaign against them.

Teetering on the edge?

The experience of advocacy in Darfur indicates a lack of consensus about where the ‘edge’ of humanitarianism lies. Different agencies have adopted different approaches, but in general there has been a willingness to compromise strict neutrality in order to address questions of civilian insecurity and/or conflict resolution. This reflects a growing acceptance of the role that humanitarian agencies can play in influencing political debates. However, what has yet to emerge is an articulation of the humanitarian agenda in these debates. While MSF’s approach tends to be more closely defined – focusing on catalysing attention to injustice, rather than prescribing solutions – this is not always consistent. Certainly, by raising concerns about non-consensual military intervention MSF-France implied that it supported, even if it did not propose, non-intervention. The scope of legitimate involvement in these questions currently

appears to extend to whatever is considered likely to improve the humanitarian condition of affected populations. This could potentially be limitless in its range.

While neutrality appears to have been compromised, it has not been entirely discarded. The 'new neutrality' of humanitarian agencies is not the same as that of human rights actors, which operate under what de Waal has called 'neutrality of principle', or objectivity (de Waal, 1994). This means assessing the parties to a conflict according to the same standards, so that the more abusive party faces greater condemnation than others. Instead, humanitarians are testing a form of 'relative' or 'pragmatic' neutrality, sufficient to maintain the appearance of general non-involvement in the politics of war, thereby retaining access to affected populations in order to provide relief, but flexible enough to allow different forms of advocacy to respond to life-threatening situations.

But this 'pragmatic neutrality' is not without risks. It is unclear whether these risks correlate directly with the advocacy efforts of individual aid actors, or their (perceived) association with the advocacy of other groups, or is a consequence of more general perceptions of aid actors' alignment with the values and objectives of Western governments. Whatever the causes, if aid actors are unclear about their neutrality, it is not surprising that others are too. Operating in a political arena occupied by a range of other actors – actors who often take far more politicised and partisan stances – compels aid agencies to define and advocate for their own form of neutrality. Thus, while some aid actors have raised concerns about publicly highlighting divisions between humanitarian and human rights campaigners, for those agencies concerned to retain some measure of neutrality such distance may be an operational necessity.

Aside from whether aid actors can legitimately present policy suggestions, there is the question of whether they have the competency to do so. Aid actors can certainly highlight the level of need and risk that civilian populations face, but this does not necessarily mean proposing solutions. Humanitarian agencies do not and cannot have unlimited expertise. Ad hoc propositions put forward by advocates in order to maintain a 'place at the policy table' are not satisfactory. Clearer definition of the boundaries of humanitarian discussions is required to guide advocates. Above all, humanitarian organisations need to assess very carefully their reasons for undertaking advocacy. In the absence of greater clarity on objectives, advocacy may be more easily undertaken for non-humanitarian reasons, whether institutional visibility, fundraising,

competition between organisations for media space or even rivalry between career advocates seeking to raise their profile.

Finally, a lack of clarity on the part of aid actors as to the purpose of advocacy and how it relates to programming makes it difficult to judge potential impacts and risks. It appears that, in Darfur, there has been a trade-off between access and the level and type of public advocacy that aid agencies have undertaken. While operational agencies are rightly very wary of speaking publicly and individually on sensitive issues, more work is needed to better understand the nuances of this relationship for all forms of advocacy work, not simply that undertaken publicly. If aid actors genuinely believe, as Stocking does, that they must do their utmost 'to sort out the bigger problem', then this should, in certain contexts, include jeopardising programmes where they are of limited impact. In others, it should also include abjuring advocacy in order to save lives. However, these decisions rest on the assumption that advocacy by humanitarian agencies has a positive impact on the needs and safety of populations affected by crises. In the absence of debate, discussion and evaluation of advocacy as a form of humanitarian action, this is by no means proven.

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