



Choosing the Lesser Evil

Understanding Decision Making in Humanitarian Aid NGOs

Liesbet Heyse

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CHOOSING THE LESSER EVIL

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Understanding Decision Making in Humanitarian Aid NGOs

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Preface

This book is anything but a product of hours of isolated work in ‘the ivory towers of academia’, although the arguments made and the line of reasoning presented are my sole responsibility. This book is the result of the input and support of many people.

I first and foremost thank the employees of the two NGOs that I studied. This book would not exist without their cooperation, which was extraordinary considering their hectic jobs. I thank Jacques Willemse for welcoming me at ACT Netherlands and Austen Davis for opening MSF’s doors to me in Amsterdam and the field. I am grateful to all the ACT and MSF employees who granted me interviews or helped me otherwise. I owe special thanks to Arjan and Farida, Ayam, and Kostas for their hospitality and open attitude in the field.

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July 2006

In Memory of Arjan Bons

Chapter 1

Choosing the Lesser Evil: Selecting Humanitarian Aid Projects

Deciding on humanitarian aid projects involves difficult choices about life and death. Humanitarian aid providers permanently face violent conflicts, famines, and natural disasters, all of which concern people in need of food, medical treatment, and shelter. Yearly reports of the United Nations, International Red Cross (ICRC), and other international organizations show proof of large numbers of people in need. For example, in the year 2005 alone, more than twenty million people had either fled their country or were internally displaced (UNHCR, 2005:14).

As a result, humanitarian aid organizations need to select where to go and what to do, if only because the demand for humanitarian aid often exceeds the supply of humanitarian aid activities (in terms of money and manpower). Humanitarian aid organizations therefore constantly face difficult decisions about whom to help and what to do in a situation of serious time constraints. This forces humanitarian aid organizations to select locations and groups for aid provision on a daily basis, making humanitarian aid provision a continuous selection process. In this sense, it could be argued that humanitarian aid organizations always face ‘tragic choices’ (Calabresi & Bobbitt, 1978). The aim of this study is to gain more insight in the way these difficult decisions are taken.

Humanitarian aid provision as constrained decision-making processes

Selecting humanitarian aid projects requires decisions about where to go (location), what to do (activities), when to start (initiation) or not (rejection), and when to extend or end activities (prolongation and termination). These decisions need to be made in contexts which can be characterized as ‘complex humanitarian crises’, referring to the fact that these crises are both complex in cause and consequence (Duffield & Prendergast, 1994; Harriss (ed.) 1995; Albala-Bertrand, 2000). Most humanitarian crises develop from a series of interrelated causes, such as inter- or intrasocietal tensions, a colonial heritage, environmental degradation, economic decline, and an unequal distribution of power and economic resources (see for example, Field (ed.), 1993; Duffield & Prendergast, 1994). These often result in conflict, hunger, destruction of political, social and economic infrastructures, and population movements within or crossing the national borders.

In such a complex context, the decision-making process about humanitarian aid interventions is constrained by many obstacles (see for example, Cuny, 1983; Smillie, 1995). Access is the first obstacle to conquer, obstructing humanitarian aid organizations to independently decide about their project locations. Humanitarian aid organizations often have to deal with the absence of political structures and regularly have to negotiate and renegotiate their access. Besides, the local ruling elite sometimes tries to use the aid organization for its own benefit by allowing the organization to provide aid to some groups while not to others.

If access is granted, infrastructural and security problems regularly hamper access to the populations in need, thereby further restricting the range of alternatives for humanitarian aid provision. Roads may be destroyed or covered with landmines, and the air not safe enough to organize an airlift (aside from the fact that an airlift is extremely expensive). Even if it is possible to travel by road, violence is another impediment. Becoming hostages, being killed, being bribed or looted are all risks which humanitarian aid workers regularly have to face. In addition, rivaling factions regularly steal aid to feed their soldiers, which indirectly can contribute to the continuation or the exacerbation of the conflict (Anderson 1999; Aall *et al.*, 2000).

A massive influx of humanitarian aid agencies can complicate the decision-making process regarding humanitarian aid provision even more. Agencies of the United Nations (UN) – such as the UNHCR, Unicef and WFP – sometimes enter the country together with governmental humanitarian aid agencies of the European Union (ECHO) and national governments (for example, USAID, Danida, SIDA).¹ National and international non-governmental organizations also make their entry on the scene. Finally, the UN may be present in the form of UN peacekeeping or peace enforcing troops. This often creates coordination problems due to differences in mandate and work methods. It sometimes even results in rivalry among the many actors in humanitarian aid provision (Smillie, 1995).

Humanitarian aid organizations also have to take into account a set of organizational factors such as the wishes and conditions of their national or international donors (governments, EU, or the UN); the expectations of the public at home; the sensitive relationship with the press; their budget, human resources, expertise, and mandate; and the need to create a distinctive image compared to other aid agencies for the sake of funding (Burnell, 1991; Benthall, 1993; and De Waal, 1997). Donors sometimes provide funds for aid conditionally, demanding aid organizations to give aid to those groups or areas that donors favor for political reasons (Weiss & Gordenker, 1996:32). Another constraint is related to the ‘funding game’. Crises that are neglected by the press, and therefore do not reach the public, raise less funds than those extensively covered by the media (Seaman, 1996).

The above organizational and situational constraints are part and parcel of the reality of humanitarian aid provision. This results in a complex context – both in the country of the headquarters and in the receiving country – in which decisions have to be made about the aid activities to employ and the target groups to reach. As a result, decision-making concerning humanitarian aid provision is not only difficult because it involves hard choices about life and death in a context of scarcity, but the

difficulties are not over once a country or a target group has been selected. The next dilemma is how to distribute the aid. Should one stay out of specific areas because effective aid provision is difficult to achieve and this would be problematic for the organizational image and future fundraising? Or should one decide to provide aid, knowing that part of the relief effort may create adverse effects, which the donors, the public, and the press may feel is unacceptable?

In past decades, we have learnt a lot about the constraints of humanitarian aid provision as well as about their causes and consequences. A start has been made to find ways to better cope with these constraints (see for example Anderson, 1999; Wood *et al.*, 2001; ALNAP, 2002). What we do not know much about is how humanitarian aid agencies deal with these complex organizational and situational constraints when deciding about their humanitarian aid projects. Although there is a vast literature about humanitarian aid provision,² selection and decision-making processes of humanitarian aid actors are not often touched upon in detail. The central question of this book therefore is:

How do humanitarian aid organizations decide on the selection of aid locations, target groups, and aid activities and why do they do so in a particular way?

This question is studied for one particular category of humanitarian aid agencies: international non-governmental organizations (INGOS).

NGOs: dominant players in the humanitarian aid community

The NGO sector is an important part of the international humanitarian aid community (West, 2001). NGOs are not-for-profit, private, self-governing organizations aiming at 'improving the life of disadvantaged people' (Vakil, 1997; see also Barrow & Jennings, 2001). Important characteristics shared by NGOs are the fact that they are 'organized, private, non profit distributing, self-governing' and of some voluntary character (Salamon & Anheier, 1997a; 1997b).³

As of 1996, over a thousand NGOs provide humanitarian aid (Haghebaert 1996). The participation of NGOs in humanitarian aid operations has substantially increased in the past decade. For example, during the emergency situation in Somalia (1991–1993) over fifty NGOs were involved in humanitarian aid activities (IOV 1994:100), whereas during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, already more than 400 NGOs participated in the humanitarian relief effort (Fitz-Gerald & Walthall, 1999). Currently, UNHCR efforts are implemented by more than 600 NGOs, receiving almost 270 million dollars, more than one fifth of UNHCR's annual budget (UNHCR, 2005:65).

Apart from the sheer number of NGOs involved in humanitarian aid activities, a further development makes these organizations of interest for this research: NGOs are often funded by government agencies. From 1975 to 1992, global government contributions to NGOs rose from 1 percent to 28 percent of total government expenditures for humanitarian aid (Borton 1993:192). The European Union is another important money source for NGOs: in the year 2005, for example, the EU spent

more than €653 million on humanitarian aid, of which 51 percent was distributed through NGOs from within the EU (European Commission, 2005; http://ec.europa.eu/echo/statistics/echo_en.htm, date of entry 17 July 2006).

Humanitarian aid projects can hence be characterized as partially public projects, paid for by taxpayers' money. It is remarkable in this respect that NGOs do not have to account for their activities to the general public the way governmental organizations (Ministries of Foreign Affairs, agencies of the United Nations, and the European Union) are supposed to. For example, the agencies of the United Nations have been scrutinized extensively concerning their humanitarian aid performances in countries such as Somalia and Rwanda (Sommer, 1994; Whitman & Pocock, 1996).

In addition, more information seems to be available about selection processes and outcomes within governmental organizations, such as with regard to the UN and the United States in the Cambodian case (Shawcross, 1983), the WFP (Charlton, 1997) and bilateral humanitarian aid (ODI, 2000).⁴ Little is known about the way non-governmental actors select their humanitarian aid activities, since the literature that touches upon NGOs in humanitarian crises does not focus on the internal work processes of these organizations in detail.⁵

Filling a void in NGO research: A study of diversity in NGO behavior

The lack of knowledge on internal work processes of NGOs does not only exist with concern to *humanitarian* NGOs, it is characteristic for the NGO literature in general (Lewis, 2001; Dijkzeul & Beigbeder, 2001). The NGO literature focuses on explaining the existence, growth, role, and behavior of the NGO community as a whole in comparison to state and market organizations. In these explanations, NGOs are often presented as a coherent group of actors that are similar in nature and behavior. For example, NGOs are presented to be better in providing some services than state and market organizations because they are better suited to accommodate information asymmetry or they are better able to reach persons in need (Hansmann, 1987; Douglas, 1987; James, 1990; Anheier, 1990). The other way around, it is regularly argued that problems in NGO performance are the result of their common nature: NGOs are characterized by multiple stakeholders and goals that result in internal conflicts and an internal structure that is loosely coupled (DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990; Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

One could wonder to what extent this unified picture of NGOs is suitable for the purposes of our study, because the two NGOs of this study differ in decision-making outcomes, such as will be shown in the following sections. Hence, we looked for clues in the NGO literature that could guide our attempt to understand differences between these two NGOs. This part of the literature is much less developed; it predominantly focuses on differences in national contexts and fields of expertise. Such differences are argued to be of influence of an NGO's structures, goals, and work methods (see, for example, DiMaggio & Anheier, 1990). However, this relationship is not explored explicitly and the impact of these differences on the decisions and performance of

NGOs is hardly studied. It is also suggested that the organizational set up of NGOs in terms of field of expertise, level of operation, work method, and ideology is related to the decisions and operations of NGOs as well (Fisher, 1997; Vakil, 1997). Unfortunately, explicit hypotheses about this relationship are lacking as well.

This study aims to fill this void in knowledge by studying differences in NGO decisions regarding one specific field of expertise: humanitarian aid provision. This study departs from the assumption that NGO structures are related to the outcomes of such organizations, such as suggested in the NGO literature. By studying NGOs in this way, this study hopes to contribute to the knowledge about the internal work processes of NGOs in general, and to the understanding of the assumed relationship between NGO structures and NGO decision outcomes in humanitarian aid in particular (see also Chapter 2).

Exploring NGO diversity: Research design

In order to accomplish the abovementioned aims, we have conducted an exploratory study of the Dutch branches of two non-governmental international humanitarian aid organizations – Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) and Acting with Churches Together (ACT). MSF Holland and ACT Netherlands represent two extremes in the diverse community of humanitarian aid NGOs (see Figure 1.1), except for the fact that they both participate in larger international networks of humanitarian aid organizations.⁶

MSF Holland

MSF Holland belongs to the category of the *operational* NGO that focuses on a *specialized form of aid* provision and on *one phase* in particular, i.e. the immediate emergency phase. MSF Holland is a medical organization that mainly provides medical aid directly to populations in need. The organization therefore has its own teams on the ground manned by expatriate and local team members. The organization was founded on the idea that proximity to people in need is a way to express solidarity. The aim of aid provision is to help people to safeguard or re-establish their human dignity and to make their situation known to the world. At the time of the study, more than 160 people worked in the Amsterdam headquarters and another 4 to 500 expats work in the field. In 2000, the total expenditures exceeded €50 million. In 2004, the expenditures had risen to more than €75 million.

Act Netherlands

ACT Netherlands fits the category of the *non-operational* NGO that subsidizes local organizations and the humanitarian aid projects they implement. The organization believes that solidarity to people in need should be expressed by providing local organizations the means to develop their own capacities and skills to prevent and battle humanitarian emergencies. By funding the humanitarian aid projects of these local

organizations, these NGOs hope to contribute to more resilient Third World societies. The local partner organizations therefore often receive *a more permanent form of aid*, even though there is no immediate humanitarian emergency. ACT Netherlands supports *various kinds of aid* efforts, such as shelter, food, education, prevention, and preparedness. During the case study period, ACT Netherlands consisted of seven project officers in charge of geographically divided project portfolios. Another three persons provided administrative assistance. ACT Netherlands spent a little less than €12 million on its projects in the year 2000. In 2004, this was approximately €7,5 million.

	MSF Holland	ACT Netherlands
Founding members	Medical professionals	Protestant churches and the old catholic churches
Founding year	1984	1952
Solidarity through	Proximity and ensuring human dignity of people in need	Support of local organizations
Work method	Operational teams of expats in the field	Transfer of money to local partner organizations
Principal focus in phase	Acute emergency + some prevention and rehabilitation activities	Prevention & preparedness, emergency, rehabilitation and development
Principal focus in aid	Medical/medically related such as vaccination, supplementary feeding, water and sanitation, education & training	All kinds of aid, such as food, shelter, organizational development, training and education, human rights
Aid budget	± €50 million in 2000	± €12 million in 2000
Number of employees	160 in headquarters 500 expats in the field thousands of local workers in the field	7 project officers 3 administrative assistants 1 head of department 3 liaison officers

Figure 1.1 The two NGOs selected for this study

These two organizations were selected from a population of a group of ten humanitarian aid NGOs in The Netherlands.⁷ The selection of these two NGOs represents a form of maximum variation sampling. Maximum variation sampling has the advantage that it allows the researcher to ‘describe the variation in the group and to understand variations in experiences while also investigating core elements and shared outcomes’ (Patton, 1990:172). This case selection method is particularly useful in exploratory studies like this, since the study of these two ‘extreme’ NGOs will offer us a broad and diverse picture of decision-making processes regarding humanitarian aid provision, while at the same time providing us the opportunity to check for common patterns, there where they are to be expected least (see further the Appendix).

The two cases selected also offer the possibility to systematically study the relationship between NGO organizational set up and selection outcomes in order to fill the gap in knowledge about internal work processes in NGOs. The two NGOs selected for this study represent two common NGO categories in the humanitarian aid community (Natsios, 1994): MSF Holland represents the operational, specialist humanitarian aid NGO whereas ACT Holland represents the non-operational (more developmental) generalist humanitarian aid NGO. These two international NGOs operate in the same field of expertise (humanitarian aid) and in the same national headquarters context (The Netherlands). We can therefore explore to what extent differences in the organizational set up influences the organization's selection outcomes, since the variables 'field of expertise' and 'national context' – also believed to be of influence on the decisions and performance of NGOs – are kept constant (see also Chapter 2).

Hence, this research design allows theoretical generalization, meaning that the results of the study of these two cases may have wider theoretical implications for the study of (humanitarian aid) NGOs in general (Yin, 1994). The theoretical replication logic of this study is to explore whether differences in the organizational setting of humanitarian NGOs is related to differences in decision-making outcomes.

The data used in this study have been collected by means of qualitative interviewing (Weiss, 1994), document analysis of policy papers and project files, and observation of decision-making in practice, especially at the headquarters level. The data collection took place from the beginning of 1998 to the end of 2001 and was concluded by a two month observation period in each organization (two months per organization). In addition, the decision-making practices of both organizations were followed somewhere in Africa in the fall of 2001.

Different as night and day: MSF and ACT selection outcomes

Studying the expenditures of the two NGOs selected for this study, we see how these organizations not only differ in their outlook and work methods, but also in their focus on countries and continents that receive aid.⁸

First, the organizations prioritize the four continents differently throughout the years. During the Kosovo crisis in 1999, for example, ACT Netherlands spent 44,1 percent of its budget on Europe and the Middle East and 24,2 percent on Africa, whereas MSF Holland spent 19,4 percent of its budget on the former continent and 43,2 percent on the latter (see Table 1a and 1b). Apparently, both organizations focus on different continents.

Secondly, there are differences in expenditure trends throughout the years. If we look at the expenditures for Africa per organization for the years 1996–2000 (see Figure 1.2), we can conclude that MSF Holland has a pretty stable budget for Africa ranging between 43,1 percent and 54,6 percent of the total aid budget. ACT Netherlands is less stable (though declining) with budgets ranging between 24,2 percent to 74,2 percent of their total aid budget.