

The humanitarian–development nexus in Northern Uganda

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Humanitarian action and development aid constitute two important segments of the international apparatus. While they generally share the objective of aiding civilians, the two segments consist of different actors with distinct rationales receiving funding from separate donor drawers. Much has been written on the conflicting interests and interface of military rationales on the one side, and the joint civilian dimensions of humanitarianism and development on the other,¹ particularly in hotspot areas such as Afghanistan, Darfur and Iraq. While their cooperation are warranted as a way to ease the war-to-peace transition, humanitarian actors remain cautious of being too closely associated with military and political actors in fear of jeopardising the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence that guide their work. Similar dynamics and boundary work occur in the interface between humanitarianism and development, but it is less frequently attended to as they to outsiders are understood merely as a composite, civilian segment. This policy note considers this dynamics in light of the recent transition from humanitarian action to development aid in northern Uganda.

Decades of civil war in Northern Uganda produced a protracted humanitarian crisis, which saw the internal displacement of nearly two million civilians and the involvement of a plethora of humanitarian actors. Although the notorious rebel group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has been pushed out of Uganda, humanitarian concerns and challenges are still lingering today. Yet, 2008 arguably marked the beginning of the end of the humanitarian crisis and involvement in Northern Uganda. The Government of Uganda started to recast the former crisis as being one of recovery and development. This weakened the operational consent to and financial basis of the humanitarian apparatus providing civilian protection and basic services. The discursive recast was more a result of the government's ambition to reassert its humanitarian sovereignty in the area than a reflection of significant improvements in the region and the civilian's livelihood in the post-conflict era and area.

Responding to the depleted funding situation, most humanitarian actors started to withdraw, phasing out their activities – arguably “too soon, too fast and with too much unfinished business”, as stated by an informant. Other humanitarian actors, however, recognising the persistent humanitarian needs and concerns instead reoriented their support. They reframed their engagement as development to maintain what they saw as their key mission – helping civilians, regardless the situation's formal rendering, forms of funding and whether it potentially infringes on the humanitarian principles.

The case of the transition from humanitarian action to development aid in Northern Uganda demonstrates institutional inconsistencies and a discrepancy between how the humanitarian principles are being practiced by various actors. The case invites reflection over the nature and future of humanitarianism and how humanitarian challenges are changing humanitarian practice, or, conversely, how humanitarian changes are challenging the instituted orders of humanitarian practice and principles. The case stimulates reflecting over when and who to draw the line for what constitutes a humanitarian crisis, and how humanitarian actors relate and respond to changes in their operational environment. More profoundly, it raises the question: to what extent is there a hierarchy, or contradiction, between the humanitarian principles and more pragmatic approaches to save lives and protect civilians regardless how the situation is formally defined?

Humanitarianism and Development – Worlds apart?

The segments of humanitarian action and development aid largely draw on two distinct logics that often appear at odds with each other. Humanitarianism's ethics and imminent needs-based approaches building the principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence – together providing for the physical and conceptual ‘humanitarian space’ in which humanitarian actors operate – are fundamentally different from the more long-term, political, rights-based development approaches. While the intended beneficiaries of international aid tend to be indifferent or unaware of these differences, their distinctiveness matter for practitioners and operational activi-

¹ See e.g. Duffield, M. (2007). *Development, security and unending war. Governing the world of peoples*. Cambridge, Polity Press; McNeish, John and Jon Harald Sande Lie, Eds. (2010). *Security and Development*. New York, Berghahn Books.

ties, causing for great philosophical disputes in the conference rooms. This, in turn, has effects for the beneficiaries and operational humanitarian activities. These nominal schisms are less conspicuous in practical, operational work.

Increasingly the humanitarian and development segments of the international system rub shoulders, sometimes even overlapping and challenging each other, causing for what has been described as a humanitarian mission creep, i.e. the expansion of the humanitarian project beyond its original remit. For instance, this is witnessed in how humanitarian action has moved from its rationale of saving lives there and then (i.e. the humanitarian present), during a crisis, regardless of who and where, to activities and interventions taking place before and after the crisis. Prevention and recovery activities to build lasting peace are increasingly seen to be integral to humanitarian action – but “as humanitarians began imagining how to build peace after [or before] war, they slipped into building states”² – a highly political activity typically the domain of development actors. The humanitarian mission creep challenges the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence and, in turn, humanitarian organisations’ legitimacy.

The humanitarian mission creep is far from driven only by organisations’ greater ambitions or as a way to increase their budgets. It is partly also due to how the war-to-peace transition increasingly is being seen as a continuum and not as consisting of compartmentalised phases calling for distinct actors. But more importantly, the mission creep is also driven by changing contextual factors, new conflict formations and dynamics in the field in which humanitarian actors operate. The case of Uganda illustrates well how humanitarian organizations navigate this challenging terrain, balancing between pragmatic approaches and the more idealized understandings of humanitarianism.

Northern Uganda: conflict to recovery; humanitarianism to development?

In 2005, at the peak of the civil war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) there were roughly 1,8 million internally displaced people (IDPs) living in 251 different ‘protected camps’ across 11 districts in Northern Uganda. The roots of the conflict dates back to 1986 when current President Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army (MRA) overthrew former president Tito Okello, who came from the northern Acholi tribe. Museveni came to power promising to restore stability, security and respect for human rights. People from the northern parts were, however, antagonistic to a government led by a person from the south. Museveni’s policies of downplaying ethnicity as a political, organising principle were seen as a way to undermine the political voices of the north, creating further trepidation in the north, causing rebel groups to emerge. Multiple insurgencies emerged from Acholiland, of which the Joseph Kony-led LRA would eventually rise as the most enduring and destructive rebel movement.

In response, the government in 1996 escalated its fight against the LRA through its scorched-earth policy. This included ordering all Acholis to vacate their homes in 48 hours, forcing

them to resettle in ‘protected camps’, thus swiftly turning the citizens into internally displaced people (IDPs). The rationale was to separate civilians and combatants in order for the Ugandan People’s Defence Force (UPDF) to identify and target the combatants. The government invoked a humanitarian reasoning for the encampment process, arguing the camps would enable the UPDF to better offer physical protection. Seeing the political aspects of the insurgency, however, allows analysing the encampment and recasting the civilians as IDPs deprived of their civil rights as a way to control and quell political opposition from arising in the north, thus being instrumental in the Kampala-based state formation process.

The so-called ‘protected camps’ did not receive sufficient physical protection as the UPDF used its limited resources to focus on fighting the LRA and not protecting the civilians. This left the camp borders porous, allowing the LRA to hide and attack within the camps. The civilians, moreover, were forced to move outside the camps to maintain agricultural production, collect firewood, go to the markets and so on, as there was a critical lack of services and provisions within the camp. Leaving the camps to sustain their livelihood, the civilians feared not only being attacked by the LRA, but also being associated with the LRA and consequently reprimanded by the UPDF since the government’s policy criminalised out-of-camp activities. Together, the LRA atrocities, the UPDF’s response to the LRA and the government’s encampment policies and poor camp management produced a massive humanitarian crisis.

International humanitarian assistance was gradually phased in to help respond to the ensuing humanitarian crisis and to provide camp management and basic services. In response, the government reallocated its camp funding into the UPDF, making the humanitarian involvement at least partly complicit in sustaining the conflict as it allowed the government to focus on a military and not political solution to the conflict, while international humanitarian actors assumed responsibility for managing the camps. Meanwhile, most state building and development activities in the north were lying fallow with neither funding nor focus from the government and international actors.

Northern Uganda experienced a dramatic expansion of externally funded, humanitarian civil society organisations from the late 1990. The intervening humanitarian regime had its primary function in administrating camp populations, causing civilians to be self-disciplined into non-political forms of organisation rather than empowered to pursue their own aspiration. The massive influx of humanitarian actors proliferated after the head of UN OCHA, Jan Egeland, in 2003 brought attention to the conflict, describing it as the worst forgotten humanitarian crisis on earth, followed by pledges and appeals to beef up relief operations. The ensuing CNN-effect made humanitarian funding skyrocket, from \$34 million in 2002 to its 2008 peak of \$238 million, causing Northern Uganda, in the words of an informant, to suffer from NGO-obesity, creating an aid-based civil society and an economy almost entirely determined by external funding.

The peak of the external involvement in 2008 also marked the beginning of the end of the humanitarian crisis – at least

² Barnett, Michael, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p: 3.

nominally – as the government started a process of recasting the situation from being one of humanitarian crisis to one of recovery and development in order to reclaim its sovereignty in Northern Uganda. Instrumental in this move was the government's closure of the 'protected camps', thus forcing the internally displaced population to return to their ancestral fields which had been lying fallow for over a decade. The government's discursive recast of the situation happened partly in response to how the humanitarian actors undermined the state through their comprehensive operations and antagonising advocacy work, and partly because the UPDF had pushed the LRA out of Uganda. The government took the Kampala-based donors to the north, showing them that people were returning home, that the camps were being closed and that the conflict was over as the LRA had been pushed into the neighbouring countries. Only seeing the surface of the situation, the donors were persuaded that the crisis was over and to move their funding from humanitarian activities into development aid, notably in the form of budget support to the government's own recovery and reconstruction plans in the north.

The transition happened in spite of the persistent humanitarian sufferings and needs in the post-conflict period. The recast had detrimental effects for ongoing activities – "too many NGOs withdrew too soon with too much unfinished business", an informant claimed, arguably leaving a humanitarian vacuum for the many civilians who after years in the protected camps were forced to leave, returning to their homelands and districts which in the meantime had received minimal government and donor attention regarding social and infrastructure development.

Admittedly, representatives of local authorities, humanitarian and development NGOs and community leaders all expressed that there no longer was an ongoing crisis per se given that the armed conflict had ended, which warranted a move into recovery and development. Yet, they held there were numerous concerns with the immediate camp closure and the depleting humanitarian funding. Although the LRA had been pushed out of Uganda, it still waged attacks from neighbouring DRC and South Sudan, although the frequency was gradually reduced as the LRA was pushed further into these countries, including the Central African Republic.

The sudden decommissioning of the IDP-camps undermined the sustainability of the humanitarian's work. The process of replacement was, moreover, full of tensions as the IDPs themselves was never consulted about their repatriation as stated by the principles of Durable Solutions for IDPs. Formally, the government subscribed to these principles. In practice, however, the authorities wanted the displaced people to return to their rural homes as quickly as possible, arguably as a way to reclaim its humanitarian sovereignty and as a token of stability and the transition to recovery.

The returning IDPs, however, were faced with a collapsed state apparatus that had received little attention from both donors and the central state during the decades of armed conflict, during which the many NGOs in effect had replaced the state in terms of service delivery and protection efforts. The humanitarian activities during the crisis had, moreover,

addressed the immediate and present concerns, but in so doing the intervening actors neglected foreseeing the future, post-conflict needs and concerns. Land rights, in particular, became a critical hotspot causing for violent conflict. Many families saw their land they were forced to move from appropriated when returning from the camps, causing for legal disputes erupting into violent conflict due to the lack of formalised tenure and a penal system to settle the conflicts.

The camp closure not only degraded the livelihood fundament and basic services provided by the humanitarian actors. The ensuing forced resettlement also deconstructed the social fabric that had been established within the camps. Together, this exacerbated humanitarian concerns and needs in the post-camp, recovery phase – a phase ordinary characterised by hope and optimism. As reported by representatives of the community, civil society and local authorities, basic health and social protection services remained extremely weak in areas recovering from decades of armed conflict, particularly as the humanitarian actors were phasing out after losing their rationale and operational consent. Other concerns invariably reported include children's rights, sexual and gender based violence, poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, violence, conflict over access and rights to land, unexploded ordnances and weapons, illiteracy and a general lack of basic services such as health, education and water.

Responding to the transition – principles and pragmatics

Are these concerns of a humanitarian or development character? Within which realm do they fall – or does it matter? These post-conflict concerns are not endemic or limited to Northern Uganda. Indeed, perhaps with the exemption of the contentious land rights, all other issues are found throughout the country where they are seen as tokens of underdevelopment. The main difference, however, is the magnitude and complexity of these issues caused by decades of conflict. These issues, moreover, became exacerbated due to limited attention given to infrastructure development and state building during the conflict, together giving these concerns both a temporal and spatial diffusion outreaching any other national context.

Generally, the humanitarians' response can be grouped in three categories: 1) those who withdrew according to their mandate; 2) those who relocated their operations; and 3) those who refocused and reorganised their aid activities. Of the first category, one typically finds the UNHCR, the ICRC and the MSF. UNHCR had to withdraw as it is dependent on both the government's consent and the donors' finances. The ICRC and MSF, who are seen as gatekeepers and guardians of the humanitarian principles, withdrew with reference to their mandate as they situation moved into recovery and development. They acknowledged the critical situation and the persistent needs, but feared breaching humanitarian principles, explicitly invoking a hierarchy by holding humanitarian principles over pragmatic approaches. The second category involved several larger, international NGOs that sought to pay heed to the humanitarian principles while remaining operational in Uganda, which were enabled by relocating to the north-eastern Karamoja-region where the indigenous pastoralists' cattle raiding dynamics, climate change, land scarcity and nomadic transborder movement were seen as an

emerging humanitarian hotspot requiring intervention. The third category involves organisations that took a more pragmatic stance to the discursive recast of the situation in the north and its consent and funding implications. Disagreeing about the underpinning assessment and recognising the persistent concerns, some actors reframed their support in terms of development aid, which warranted both operational legitimacy and external, financial support. Despite scaling down their activities due to the plummeting funds, these organisations gradually aligned themselves with regular development activities, such as building schools, education, reproductive health, vocational and livelihood training, agricultural extension programmes, and reintegration projects.

To some, notably those in the first category, this ‘third way’ response was seen as somewhat controversial and a hollowing of the humanitarian space and principles, as it connected erstwhile humanitarian actors not only to the politics of aid but also to the government’s state building and recovery programme. In the words of an informant responding to this critique, “we are committed to helping people in need, not to maintaining some abstract principles”.. These different responses alert us to the heterogeneity of humanitarianism: multiple organisations operate under the same humanitarian umbrella and lend legitimacy from its morally charged principles and values, although the organisations might not share the same interpretation and understanding of what these principles mean and entail in practice.³ The malleability of the humanitarian principles and concepts make for a knowledge battlefield where different actors representing different organizational cultures and mandates vie over humanitarianism’s meaning, interpretation and application in practice. This malleability is to some seen as a way to be pragmatic about humanitarian challenges and principles

by enabling more diverse and context sensitive operational action – meaning that the end justifies the mean. Conversely, others see the malleability as undermining the humanitarian principles and the legitimacy they provide for, thus curtailing room to manoeuvre on the basis of humanitarianism.

Conclusion

The instituted orders and structures of humanitarianism are changing. Forces both external and internal to humanitarianism are significantly challenging the humanitarian principles’ regulatory hold over humanitarian practice. The case of the transition from humanitarian action to development aid in Northern Uganda illustrates important humanitarian changes and challenges. As the case demonstrates, the humanitarian mission creep is driven by interrelated factors both external and internal to the humanitarian field. Externally, the recast of the situation into one of recovery impinged on the government’s consent and donors’ funding of the humanitarian activities. Internally, realising the lingering and persistent effects of the Civil War, several humanitarian organisations reoriented their support in terms of development in order to continue to assist the civilian population, thus taking a pragmatic stance favouring the civilians’ needs.

The discursive recast of the situation in Northern Uganda as being one of recovery and development instead of crisis not only demonstrates the troublesome transition between two, at times, distinct institutional realms of the international system. The way in which various humanitarian organisations responded differently to this discursive recast also demonstrate a burgeoning humanitarian–development nexus and the way in which this nexus is driven by factors both internal and external to the field of humanitarianism itself. These factors are inter-related, meaning that the evolving humanitarian–development nexus is driven by both the organisations’ expanding scope as a response to new and changing field circumstances. This, in turn, thus relates to the more general and ongoing debates about the evolving humanitarian mission creep, questioning the hierarchy between the humanitarian ethos of helping civilians and the sanctity of the humanitarian principles.

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³ Benjamin de Carvalho and Jon Harald Sande Lie, “Chronicle of a Frustration Foretold? The Implementation of a broad Protection Agenda in the United Nations”, *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 3–4 (2011): 341–362; Lie, Jon Harald Sande and Benjamin de Carvalho (2010). “Between culture and concept: the protection of civilians in Sudan.” *Journal of International Peacekeeping* 14(1-2): 60-85

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