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Because the word 'humanitarian' is loaded, assumed to be a benevolent force, it is not surprising that literature uncovering a dark underbelly to humanitarian relief aid has attracted a lot of attention.[1] Romanticising humanitarianism has had the perverse effect of overly castigating its results. It is important to avoid the assumption that the original purpose of humanitarian relief aid is to solve conflicts. Primarily 'humanitarianism' seeks to ensure that those most vulnerable are not foregone during crises.[2] Within the context of conflict, relief aid, whether from donor governments, humanitarian agencies of the United Nations (UN) or non-governmental organisations, is tailored to deal with the symptoms of violence.[3] Violent conflicts include civil war, ethnic cleansing and genocide.[4] In response to these emergencies humanitarian relief aid constitutes the delivery of food, shelter, supplies and medicine to those in need.[5] Recent notions that relief aid should merge with development aid as a panacea for conflict are beyond the scope of this article because the form of development aid still remains distinct from that of relief aid. Rather, humanitarian relief aid has the scope to fuel or mitigate conflict because any aid that is administered during conflict cements itself as a part of that conflict context.[6] Humanitarian relief aid can influence, for better or worse, the capacity, legitimacy and scale of conflict.[7] Critics argue that media hype surrounding certain emergencies has stimulated unbalanced relief distribution.[8] But ironically they themselves have fallen victim by focusing on extreme examples such as the Rwandan genocide 1994 and the famine in Sudan 1983-1989. Humanitarian relief aid has often bolstered conflict, but these trends should not outweigh examples of mitigation.[9]

Humanitarian relief aid can influence the capacity of warring parties to take part in a conflict, both as an economic resource and opportunity for mobilisation. Since the 1980s targeting relief to civilians during violent conflicts has taken place against amidst the collapse of formal economic structures.[10] Civilians survive during these 'complex emergencies' by resorting to extra-legal activities in a parallel political economy of war.[11] This encourages an, 'economy of plunder' - where relief aid is both a new source of wealth and power.[12] The manipulation of relief by warring parties must be understood as a part of this distorted war economy.[13] 'Creaming off' relief supplied the Sudanese government with an estimated £90 million in 1989.[14] Duffield claims Operation Lifeline Sudan accounted for half of the government's military expenditure that year. Often material goods such as vehicles, medicine and food are stolen both by rebels and government forces - either utilised or sold for a profit.[15] But when agencies hired local drivers or guards in order to prevent theft, these payments encouraged a continuation of the war economy.[16] Competition for profit from relief has even sparked conflict. During the famine in Somalia, 1992, four clans came into conflict over competitive negotiations with agencies that wanted access to a seaport.[17]

The true importance of relief aid as a source of funding for conflict must be placed in perspective. Shearer argues that humanitarian relief aid is less valuable in commodity-rich countries; relief aid to Afghanistan is a mere drop in the ocean compared to their estimated $15 billion UK street value of narcotics.[18] Critics focus on less resource-rich countries such

as Ethiopia and Mozambique where relief aid would have played a higher stake.[19] Keen misleadingly places Sudan in this category, which possesses an abundance of oil.[20] Clearly the distinction here between more or less resource-rich countries is blurred. More likely the value of relief aid varies between different groups. Rebels especially will use whatever resources are available to them.[21] Relief aid could be a valuable source of income for those that do not have direct control over natural resources, such as the ex-genocidaire militias in Eastern Zaire refugee camps.[22] Ultimately, conflicts are not only driven by greed or natural resources, and so humanitarian relief aid does not drive wars either.[23] Anderson argues that relief aid can actually strengthen the peace economy by buying local goods and lowering the resale value of relief goods. Measures have been taken to mitigate the use of relief for military purposes. Operation Lifeline Sudan 1989 helped for a while to mitigate warfare in the South by reducing economic exploitation, for example UN payments to railway workers outbid those from corrupt merchants.[24]

Opportunities to mobilise conflict occur within humanitarian relief aid space in two notable ways. Firstly, belligerent groups of authority have adopted the transport of relief as a smokescreen for military mobilisation. In 1993, 3000 Sudanese troops were transported to Wau under the guise of relief trains, before proceeding to raid and scorch the land.[25] This contradicts Nunn and Qian, who find food aid risks conflict less in countries with well-developed infrastructure.[26] Whether relief transport fuels or mitigates conflict is ambiguous. Operation Lifeline Sudan 1989 ensured that relief corridors were not accessible for military operations, creating nearby peace zones, still the corridors were also used for government military supplies.[27] This may simply have moved the site of conflict. Comparatively, Keen and Wilson argue that the July 1992 relief corridors in Mozambique were relatively successful.[28] It is hard to establish the direct influence of these instances on the broader course of a conflict.[29]

Secondly, the manifestation of humanitarian relief in refugee camps has influenced conflicts, as a 'continuation of war by other means'.[30] Relief aid to Darfur camps in Sudan in the 1980s helped to cement the government's forcible displacement from rebel areas.[31] Prunier describes the refugee camps in Eastern Zaire after the Rwandan genocide as 'war machines.'[32] Hutu genocidaire-militias orchestrated the movement of peoples across the border to attract humanitarian aid. Under this cover, the ex-militia prioritised food aid for the former elite, imported weapons and carried out attacks into Rwanda. One should be cautious about generalising this trend for all refugee camps. Prunier narrows his attention to the five camps around Goma, but as there were around 35 camps in Zaire alone this form of relief was not always overwhelmingly militarised.[33] De Waal and Omaar note that those who had planned the genocide dominated the Tanzanian camps, but they offer no direct causal relation to increased broader conflict.[34] A morally questionable form of organisation does not automatically nurture conflict. It has also been argued that camps limit opportunities for refugees to develop economic survival strategies, and so foster militant recruits.[35] Stockton refutes this because locals often see relief aid as temporary and unreliable. A more helpful approach would be to acknowledge that there are many different practical and affective reasons for joining a war effort that cannot be pegged down to relief.

The relative importance of relief aid as transport and camps are symbolic of the inability of the state to provide basic public services. Jackson's 'quasi-states' concept can often be applied to conflict-ridden countries that have sprouted

complex emergencies.[36] The lack of ability or will of national state structures to provide basic public services has created a situation whereby states rely on and expect private international organisations to be responsible for public welfare.[37] Arguably the 'internationalisation of public welfare' has created more space to focus on waging conflict.[38] This can help explain why warlords assume a singularly military role.[39] But these arguments only present a tenuous causal connection that dismiss other factors responsible for motivating collision before the introduction of humanitarian relief aid. Rather, it can sometimes stint mitigation. In Somalia the collapse of civilian institutions was compounded by famine relief, which increased difficulties for future market rehabilitation and peacebuilding.[40]

'It is a truth universally acknowledged' that humanitarian relief aid influences the legitimacy of a conflict.[41] The 'search for a completely neutral humanitarian space is ultimately futile'.[42] During the Cold War, humanitarian agencies had to have the consent of a country in order to carry out relief operations.[43] Now sovereignty is not as stringently adhered to, but agencies still needed to negotiate both with government and rebel force.[44] NGOs had to deal with Charles Taylor, for his rebel forces controlled roughly 90 per cent of Liberia. 'Neutral' agencies overlook acts of violence and human rights abuses in order to avoid being refused access.[45] Although it is exaggerated to generalise that 'today's human rights abuses are tomorrow's conflicts', using belligerent parties as a conduit for aid automatically transfers a degree of legitimacy to their actions.[46] The government-orchestrated resettlement of civilians during the Ethiopian famine in the early 1980s killed an estimated 80,000 people but was legitimised as a drought-induced refugee crisis by the international community.[47] 'Inaccessibility' provided a fig leaf for the lack of relief agency neutrality, because needs assessments were calculated on accessibility.[48] By claiming ignorance, agencies often discriminated against rebel-held areas, allowed relief to be used as a 'weapon of war'.[49] The government in Sudan blocked attempted neutral shipments to the 'rebel' South and labelled the area as 'inaccessible'. Comparatively, humanitarian 'safe areas' legitimised conflict in other places.[50] It must not be forgotten that in turn, however, relief aid has also supported and legitimised more peaceful actors. In Somalia, aid administered to elders helped maintain the loyalty of those who might have otherwise turned to violence.[51] Notably, Keen repeats may of his examples of misappropriation of relief by the Sudanese government, such as the discovery of a twenty truckloads that were meant for Aweil in 1988, throughout his literature and even within the same chapter.

Legitimacy lends itself to impunity, which can prolong strife. Labelling the Ethiopian famine a natural disaster instead of a calculated government counterinsurgency policy is a case in point.[52] Humanitarian action has often been instrumentalised for political purposes.[53] During the Cold War Western donor countries used humanitarian relief aid as a proxy for fighting communist forces, actively fuelling conflict.[54] The US funded Cambodian refugee camps, between 1978 and 1991, to support guerrillas who were fighting the Vietnamese-backed government. The politicisation of aid has continued into the twenty-first century.[55] During the Somali famine, 2011, US donors denounced relief efforts to the rebel South as supporting terrorists.[56] Even though the end of the Cold War witnessed an influx of non-governmental humanitarian agencies heavily influenced by donor government contributions, exceptions of large organisations such as Médicins San Frontiers were significant.[57] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) claims its strict adherence to

impartial distribution of relief aid prevents it from fuelling conflict.[58] Even the UN provided food aid for both government and UNITA forces in order to mitigate plunder before the elections in.[59] Supporting each side of a fight might have influenced the course of conflicts, but has not bolstered them.

'The increase of donor-funded NGO relief operations and western disengagement from poor countries are two sides of the same coin'.[60] This has not fuelled conflict, but the unwillingness of western donor countries to intervene in collisions has used humanitarian relief as a substitute for broader political strategies that could mitigate them. Because Rwanda was not strategically or economically important for western donors they avoided political action against the genocide.[61] They only responded to the 'conventional' crisis of Rwandan refugees after media pressure.[62] Huge media-inspired funds ensured that only Médecins Sans Frontières withdrew in protest to the militarisation of the camps.[63] Goodhand uses funding trends to prove selectivity of responses. In 1999 a huge amount was allocated to Kosovo, whereas very little went to Afghanistan. Still, some NGOs have attempted to take up the policy vacuum.[64] Oxfam was the first organisation to acknowledge the Rwandan genocide and call for action, and towards the end of 1992 aid workers called for intervention in Somalia, which led to Operation Restore Hope.[65] On the one hand the increased role of NGOs has created unrealistic expectations of what humanitarian relief can achieve, as they are not designed to develop broader policies that tackle the roots of contentions.[66] Omaar and de Waal regard this 'humanitarianism unbound' as fuel for conflict.[67] On the other hand, de Waal's notion of 'debased' humanitarianism may reflect a tendency to see red.[68] Now that organisations and governments are more accountable through the media, politics may have become relatively more humanitarianised.[69]

Lastly, humanitarian relief aid can influence the scale of a conflict. Directly, humanitarianism has been included in every United Nations military intervention mandate since 1990.[70] The 1992 intervention in Somalia at the behest of relief agencies failed and became embroiled in 'warmaking'.[71] Moreover, areas occupied by US forces simply pushed militant violence into new areas.[72] The delivery of relief has also been militarised. Perceived security restraints in zones of collision inspired the safeguarding of workers and supply.[73] However, armed protection in a violent environment can provoke a response and legitimises the use of weapons. Moreover, locals see aid to the 'enemy' as a blow against them, which can spark retaliation.[74] In Sudan, between 1986 and 1988, the Sudan People's Liberation Army attacked relief convoys.[75] Relief has often attracted raiding, which in turn escalates violence.[76] Attacks on distributed relief are easy in refugee camps.[77] Camps are particularly volatile environments because they are often not disarmed, as seen in the Kurdish 'safe haven' in the North of Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War 1991 and the 'safe area' in Sbrenica, Bosnia.[78] Although prostitution and rape are common in camps, Slim makes the wrong assumption that forced displacement prevents women and children from supporting the war effort.[79]

Shearer argues that there is no correlation between the amount of relief and the scale of violence, pointing out that the highpoint of relief to Somalia took place between 1992 and 1994 whereas more people had died from war in 1991.[80] However, his use of immediate timeframes is questionable, as he disregards the impact of earlier relief aid or effects built up over time. There is a 'blurred' distinction between civilians and combatants.[81] Thus the distribution of relief can influence intergroup tension.[82]

Access to relief can foster violent competition – this divided the rebel movement in South Sudan.[83] Marginalisation from aid can create new grievances, which can inspire a resort to violence, as seen when the Nuer attacked the Dinka clan in Sudan, 1991.[84] It is difficult to grasp what part these individual instances of violent theft or attack play in the broader outcome of a conflict. Accepting the risks associated with relief aid may be the lesser of two evils. In Mozambique diversion of aid resulted in a decrease in the need to raid civilians.[85] Accordingly de Waal and Omaar and more recently Keen advocated delivering large quantities of grain in the beginning of a famine, because even if looted it would bring down the prices and so violent looting would no longer be a strategy of survival. Additionally, the strong attraction of relief can also convince people to opt for peace.[86] Keen and Wilson describe how the Mundari in Sudan agreed to abstain from violence in return for a cattle-vaccination program partly run by Oxfam, and the Special Relief Programme Angola was a key part of the political negotiations in Angola, 1990.[87]

It is not time yet to shed our cynicism -

humanitarian relief aid has done more to fuel and than to mitigate violent conflict. But the role of aid itself has been inflated, which misleadingly outweighs more positive cases of humanitarian relief aid. The relative impact of humanitarian relief aid amongst over drivers of warfare renders the image more ambiguous. Humanitarian relief aid has influenced the political economy of war and funded conflict. But its importance is only relative to other resources and can provide a 'carrot' for peace. Transport of relief has mostly provided a smokescreen for military mobilisation, but the militarisation of refugee camps has been exaggerated as a general trend. Critics contradict themselves by first saying donors instrumentalise NGOs but then argue NGOs are too 'bold'.[88] In truth they coexist. Lastly, relief aid's stimulation of immediate violence may be less important for broader conflict than the build up of long term grievances amongst those marginalised from aid. Dark underbelly or not, humanitarian relief aid is neither a nemesis for mitigation nor a panacea for conflict.

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