

In the post-Cold War era, the problem of impartiality still exists but it has less to do with donor's intentions than it does with the changing nature of war as outlined above. During the Cold War, parties to the conflict were heavily dependent on outside support; now however, with conflict strongly rooted in the political and social dynamics of society, the ties to parties outside are less strong (MacFarlane 1999, 548). This shift becomes significant when combined with the changing nature of the refugee regime which is characterised by the huge increase in the number of internally displaced people. Increasingly, access to victims depends on the willingness of parties to a conflict with little leverage available from outside players. The result of this shift is the potential diversion of humanitarian assistance from civilian to military purposes as we saw in the cases of Somalia and Rwanda.<sup>2</sup> This problem of diversion is exacerbated as a result of the blurring of lines between civilians and the military which makes it very difficult for NGOs to know who they are assisting.

What can be done? It has become recognised that field operations alone are not the source of the problem as there are policies, arrangements and operating procedures of aid agency headquarters that feed into and reinforce aid's negative impacts (Anderson 1999, 1-2). As pointed out by Mary Anderson, there are three ways that policies and operating procedures cause field programmes to exacerbate conflicts: 1) they have a centrally-driven focus on aid's inputs that undervalues and distorts impacts; 2) they over-specify recipients which reinforces intergroup divisions; and 3) they use funding and fund-raising approaches that are based on an oversimplification of conflict which victimises one group and blames another (1999, 2). Given these collective challenges, the way to avoid creating negative consequences, may be for aid agencies to establish systems that allow field staff to adjust programme designs on site to avoid increasing intergroup tensions (1999, 7). The field staff requires the latitude to adjust programming approaches on the ground in order to ensure that the aim of meeting 'genuine need' is being met. Encouragingly, the field staff of many aid agencies are now beginning to analyse the impacts of their programmes in the context of the conflicts where they work and they are making adjustments at the field level in an effort to avoid the negative impacts and to promote the positive ones – even if this entails the suspension of aid or complete withdrawal.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the concern over donor and headquarter policies is not specific to NGOs. IGO and military personnel also complain about similar issues.

On another level, there is a compelling case to be made for developing a unified aid strategy for addressing complex humanitarian emergencies. While many argue that developing a coherent strategy is unwise because it will probably be the wrong strategy for the given situation, it can also be argued that too often a large number of independent actors work at cross-purposes

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<sup>2</sup> As John Prendergast indicates, although the humanitarian response in Rwanda was key to preventing higher mortality rates in the refugee camps, the UN, the OAU, donor countries and aid agencies were politically unwilling to separate the refugees from the organisers of the genocide. Therefore, humanitarian aid reinforced the authority structures of those who perpetrated the genocide (1997, 170-171).

<sup>3</sup> Doctors Without Borders chose to leave North Korea in 1998, even though it was the first independent humanitarian organisation to gain access in 1995, because they came to realise that their assistance could not be given freely and independently of political influence and state authority (Orbinsky 2000, 13).