

In closing, this paper has attempted to raise four potential roles that NGOs can assume in helping the international community to deal with complex humanitarian emergencies. These roles include relief and rehabilitation, human rights monitoring, conflict prevention through early warning and mediation and reconciliation functions. At this point it should be clear that these roles are not necessarily carried out separately but sometimes overlap. Not all NGOs will be involved in all four roles at the same time however, because there may at times be an inherent incompatibility of roles. For example, properly monitoring human rights abuses, running relief programmes and carrying out policy advocacy in a complex emergency situation will probably disqualify that particular NGO from participating in conflict mediation and reconciliation where absolute neutrality is essential (Natsios 1997b, 169). Keeping this in mind, NGOs must decide where their commitments and skills lie and where they can be the most effective in a given situation. Finally, it should also be noted that NGOs should not be expected to take on this work alone as an adequate response to these crises. Efforts will necessarily involve the UN system, regional organisations, donor agencies, NGOs and military units.

One of the greatest challenges that the international community faces is dealing with the plethora of complex humanitarian emergencies that have arisen in recent years. Yet, there is little consensus on how NGOs, donor governments, UN agencies, regional organisations and military units should co-ordinate their efforts.⁶ Some suggest that each agency should 'do its own thing' but we can see from past experiences that this is not the best approach. Conflicting strategies, practices and objectives frequently cancel each other out. Instead what should be developed is a coherent strategy that can direct resources so that the course of conflict (if not prevented) can be shaped towards a favourable outcome. Moreover, without coherent objectives outlined by a unified strategy the international community will not be able to determine whether their policies are, in fact, working. Indications of this problem are already emerging in Bosnia at this time.

Clearly, the response system cannot continue to function as it does now. The system is overcommitted and the tide of complex emergencies continues. As the international community begins to develop operational guidelines, it must be recognised that the ultimate responsibility for moving the affected society from a state of conflict to long-term peace and stability rests with its people and government. Therefore, actors should focus on helping to create a conciliatory environment that will allow a strong civil society to flourish over time. A strong civil society requires the emergence of cross-cutting associations throughout society which evolve in a society that is based on participation, accountability and which has the ability to undergo peaceful change (Ewert 1999, 16). The process will be neither trouble-free nor short-term. NGOs have many strengths that can contribute to these efforts; therefore, given the collective considerations that have been mentioned above, it is imperative that a coherent strategy be formed so that complex humanitarian emergencies can be addressed more effectively in the future.

⁶ One of the big questions for NGOs has become their relationship with the military. In the past, the Canadian Department of National Defence has had little interest in having dialogue with NGOs. Perhaps this is now changing as evidenced by the inclusion of a Care Canada representative at NT HQ.