

Liesbet Heyse

Choosing the Lesser Evil : Understanding Decision-Making in Humanitarian Aid NGOs
(Aldershot: Publishing, 2006, 239 pp.)

As Thomas Ward wrote in “*The Political Economy of NGOs and Human Security*” (IJWP, Vol. XXIX N°1) “Although the role that NGOs can play in promoting peace may remain limited because of the complexity of the roots of conflict and the nature of the actors involved, it is clear that NGOs are assuming a more central role in this area and in advancing human security...NGOs have come into the public’s attention as potentially important independent vehicles that can assist in conflict resolution and in promoting human security.”

There has been an increasing analysis of the role that NGOs play in the international system with a growing emphasis on the diversity within the NGO community. A major result of the growth in the number and influence of NGOs is to strengthen civil society and hence democracy by improving interest articulation and representation. However, there has been less analysis on decision-making within NGOs. Why are certain positions taken? Why are certain projects taken up and others not? How are coalitions or partnerships among NGOs made? How do they create their fluid webs of relationships?

Among the most active NGOs are those dealing with humanitarian aid. As Liesbet Heyse points out “Deciding on humanitarian aid projects involves difficult choices about life and death. Humanitarian aid providers face violent conflicts, famines, and natural disasters, all of which concern people in need of food, medical treatment and shelter...As a result, humanitarian aid organizations need to select where to go and what to do, if only because the demand for 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.”

To look at these ‘tragic choices’, Liesbet Heyse has chosen two Dutch organizations that are part of wider networks: Médecins sans Frontiers (MSF) and Acting with Churches Together (ACT). Médecins sans Frontiers (Doctors without Borders) began as a French organization in 1971 with French doctors who had worked in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war. They felt constrained by the policy of the International Red Cross not to speak publicly on what they saw. The Red Cross policy is based on the need to cooperate with governments in order to have access to war victims. Médecins sans Frontiers distinguished themselves from other aid workers by their awareness of the role of the media in bringing the plight of populations to the attention of the general public. As the MSF International Charter states “MSF volunteers undertake to respect their professional code of ethics and to maintain complete independence from all political, economic and religious powers.”

Acting with Churches Together is the Dutch member of the aid activities of the World Council of Churches, a body of many but not all Protestant and Orthodox churches. Much of ACT’s efforts are long-term development and peacebuilding efforts carried out through national and local churches in developing countries.

The two organizations were selected for analysis as they represent contrasting approaches. MSF sends European doctors as volunteers for short-term periods in emergency situations (war, refugee flows, natural disasters), after which they return to their normal medical work. In 2000 when the study under review was carried out, MSF-Holland had 129 office workers for 613 in the field, although the office management team is often in the field

as well for evaluation, negotiations and logistic questions. While each national MSF is independent, the different national MSF organizations work closely together, share research, evaluation and policy considerations.

Act has a small office staff of seven project officers and sends no volunteers. Basically ACT is a fund-raising organization, receiving money given by members of Protestant churches with certain project funds coming from the Netherlands government which divides aid funds among Protestant, Catholic and non-religious or humanist organizations. ACT works directly with individual churches in developing countries and sometimes with other NGOs in countries where there is little Protestant population but where need may be great. ACT often establishes lasting relations with certain churches but is open to new partners through the World Council of Churches.

There is both formal and informal cooperation among humanitarian aid agencies. While there may be rivalry due to fund-raising needs, basically staff from NGOs when facing common problems work together well. There is also a good deal of cooperation among NGOs and the UN humanitarian efforts such as the High Commissioner for Refugees or the World Food Programme.

Liesbet Heyse has led the way in looking at the decision-making process of humanitarian NGOs. There is probably not many differences due to national styles or religious convictions, but more studies along these lines would be welcome.

Rene Wadlow

