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# Humanitarian Aid and the Struggle for Peace and Justice: Organizational Innovation after a Blind Date

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# Humanitarian Aid and the Struggle for Peace and Justice: Organizational Innovation after a Blind Date

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*Humanitarian organizations working in developing countries have gone through a transformation since the thaw of the Cold War. Their increased programming to promote justice and peace has resulted in disparate partnership configurations. Illustrative examples of these configurations show how organizational deficiencies and challenges have spawned innovation. These innovations provide insight about how similar organizations might usefully be engaged in the struggle to promote greater justice and peace in areas of the world suffering from violent conflict.*

*Key words: violent conflict, identity-based conflict, humanitarian organizations, justice, peace, partnership, innovation*

Humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and those that struggle for justice and peace have been developing various forms of partnerships at an accelerating rate. Two developments have fostered this partnering. The first is the greater awareness that humanitarian aid can have both positive and negative impact on tensions of the host country population. The second development is the increased funding by donor governments and multilateral organizations for conflict-related programming. For example, U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID) created the Office of Transition Initiatives (though this office has focused mainly

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on providing in-kind support to indigenous NGOs). More recently, USAID created the Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation as a part of the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance. These branches of USAID provide funding for conflict-related programming.

In this article, I describe some of the reasons behind the collaboration of disparate types of organizations and some of the challenges they face. I then present five examples of organizational innovation that, together, provide insights about how configurations might be developed for effective programming that combines humanitarian aid with the promotion of justice and peace in developing countries.

### Evolving Organizational Imperatives

For years, the objectives of humanitarian aid (such as providing food, potable water, and plastic sheeting after a flood) and conflict transformation (such as training moderate religious leaders in anti-incitement or political leaders in negotiation skills) were distinct and separate from each other. Many humanitarian NGOs were created in the wake of World War II, and the Cold War between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States followed shortly thereafter. In a Cold War context, conflict transformation was viewed as too “political” for humanitarian organizations which prided themselves on that impartiality. Conflict transformation NGOs, on the other hand, tended to utilize a relatively narrow repertoire of methodologies, namely mediation techniques. Humanitarian NGOs with an explicit conflict transformation agenda (focusing substantially on promoting justice and peace in addition to relief and development), such as Mennonite Central Committee, were both atypical and modestly funded. The larger humanitarian NGOs such as CARE, Save the Children, and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), generally speaking, sought to maintain their neutrality with a rationale that it was their role to help the victims of conflict and the purview of diplomats and politicians to prevent or stop wars from happening.

This division of humanitarian from justice and peace programming changed gradually over the years following the thaw of the Cold War. Skirmishes between groups within

nation-states allied with the respective superpowers became an anachronism while conflict between those of different identities (related to ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, tribe, or a combination of these), including instances without external encouragement and support, grew in frequency. No longer were humanitarian NGOs kept at a distance from conflict-related programming by the "high politics" of the Cold War. Rather than encountering rebels or paramilitary factions fighting in "proxy wars," humanitarian NGOs were faced with internal and regional conflicts. These consisted of one identity group pitted against one or more others in a bloody contest for control, or of regional "warlords" with powerful armies pursuing enormous financial gain, skillfully pitting one group against another, often by enkindling or inventing ancient enmities related to past injustices (Rudolf & Rudolf, 1993). Local, national, and regional disputes erupted without the influence of bi-polar superpower politics. It became clear that aid itself was often political and partisan, or perceived as such, when victims of conflict and other disasters of one identity group received support when others did not, or arrangements were made with groups perpetrating violence as a way of securing safe passage for relief supplies (otherwise known as "corridors of tranquility"). Humanitarian NGOs found themselves in the middle of disputes between people of different identities that were fueled by "grievance," "greed," and "failure of the social contract" (Korf, 2005; Murshed & Tadjoeeddin, 2009). A position of standing in the background was no longer morally tenable. In addition, humanitarian NGOs experienced an urging from donors to become involved in conflict transformation, sometimes with diplomatic support in the corridors of political power providing some leeway for programmatic inventiveness and assertiveness.

At the same time, humanitarian NGOs began looking critically at how their aid impacted inter-group tensions. For instance, some had distributed food aid for decades. They began an introspective process of asking why people did not have enough food and what could be done to change agricultural and trade policies that would bring about greater food security. Many supported the "Do No Harm" initiative (Anderson, 1999), which sought to distill lessons learned about how to

not inadvertently exacerbate tensions with humanitarian assistance. Some humanitarian NGOs took this evolution a step further and developed free-standing conflict transformation projects aimed at addressing such contentious matters as land disputes.

### Organizations and Challenges

There are five main types of entities that have engaged in various organizational configurations to promote justice and peace internationally. These are international humanitarian NGOs, advocacy-oriented peace and justice NGOs, service-oriented peace and justice NGOs, for-profit contractors, and academic entities (such as peace institutes or programs at universities). Each type of organization, on its own, faces challenges that can conceivably be addressed by some form of partnership with one or more of the other types of entities.

#### *International Humanitarian NGOs*

Large international humanitarian NGOs have budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars, programs in as many as 110 countries, and thousands of expatriate and national staff members. They typically encounter high staff turnover and frequent reassignment, which makes being "learning organizations" difficult. Some of the larger ones develop their own technical support units. CRS, for instance, has a Program Quality and Support Department. But even when such a unit is created, staff turnover and transfers are disruptive to institutional memory, especially when major disasters pull people into emergency responses.

Peacebuilding technical support staff members are often under pressure to do monitoring, evaluation and proposal writing, the projects of which are often funded by government donors like the USAID or by multilateral institutions like the United Nations' Development Program, or a combination of the two. This constrains the membership of their learning communities, because of their specialized terminology and acronyms. Engaging outsiders, including academics, is awkward due in part to this specific vocabulary.

*Advocacy-Oriented Justice and Peace NGOs*

Those NGOs that focus on justice and peace advocacy typically have offices in Washington, DC, New York, or Brussels, Belgium, or all three, to cultivate policy changes with the U.S. Government, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations (UN), or the European Union. These organizations face daunting challenges in raising money from individuals. At a meeting of the Peace and Security Initiative, a collaborative effort of foundations and NGOs focusing on foreign policy issues, it was acknowledged that NGOs involved exclusively in research and advocacy on foreign policy issues are overly reliant on foundations,<sup>1</sup> and foundation grants tend to be fickle. They typically last between one and three years. Foundations often expect unrealistically that these NGOs will have sustainable funding after the grant funding discontinues. What this means in practice is that advocacy-oriented justice and peace NGOs will typically survive only if they develop multiple foundations to support them, along with other major donors (usually private individuals).

It is important to keep in mind that it is much easier to raise money for humanitarian relief and development than it is for advocating for policy change. As a result, advocacy organizations do not typically have the funding for programming that can lay an educational foundation upon which to build a critical mass of involved citizens.

*Service-Oriented Justice and Peace NGOs*

In contrast to advocacy-oriented justice and peace NGOs, those that provide conflict transformation services, primarily in mediation, are more apt to develop sustainable funding by charging fees. An example is Collaborative Decision Resources Associates, based in Boulder, Colorado. It provides negotiation support to foreign governments, federal government departments, state governments, and Native American tribes.

The challenge service-oriented justice and peace NGOs face is in getting an adequate amount of steady business to remain financially solvent. Financial survival sometimes requires that a few core staff members are on the payroll while others are pulled into projects on an as-needed basis. The non-core staff members are typically on temporary contracts, and

the revenue they generate is often a subsidy to their more reliable income in an academic setting.

### *Contractors*

Contractors are for-profit entities (though some barely stay solvent) and, supposedly, take on a higher degree of liability for program performance than those that receive grants under cooperative agreements (which NGOs typically receive). Examples of contractors are Chemonics, Development Alternatives Incorporated (now simply called DAI), Research Triangle International (RTI), and Associates in Rural Development (which is now simply called ARD since becoming a subsidiary of Tetra Tech).

The volume of governmental funding going to contractors has increased in recent years. USAID, among others, has awarded contracts to reach specific program objectives. According to Rachel McCleary (2010) "United States Agency for International Development (USAID) reported that from fiscal year 1996 to fiscal year 2005, the share of funds awarded to for-profit contractors rose from 33 percent to 58 percent" (p. 1).

Contractors are by nature project-oriented. They hire a Chief of Party to oversee project activities. They typically do not establish country programs but, instead, set up an operation for the specific purpose of project execution. Unlike NGOs, contractors do not contribute matching funds, and they tend to be willing to accept money from entities like the Department of Defense in addition to the USAID.

Staff members of international NGOs sometimes generalize about contractors, calling them "beltway bandits" (referring to the location of many of the contractors' headquarters, near the Beltway surrounding Washington, DC). One reason is due to competition and the increasing amount of U.S. Government funding going to contractors which NGO staff members feel they could more effectively utilize. There is also a common perception that contractors do not engage the local population, and do not work with national NGOs and civic groups.

*Academic Institutions*

Universities and colleges have supported NGOs and contractors engaged in justice and peace. Individuals and groups of faculty members serve as consultants, usually by assisting in conceptualizing a problem. The understanding that develops is then used in project design or in staff training programs. While academic institutions do not have the in-depth knowledge from on-the-ground work as do staff members of NGOs and contractors, they do bring theoretical and comparative perspectives that can be useful for some justice and peace efforts. Academic institutions, especially those that engage tenured faculty, can also provide added institutional memory to NGOs and contractors that suffer from high staff turnover and transfer rates. Faculty members, however, usually need to be engaged over a period of years to develop an accurate understanding of the donor and political environment in which NGOs and contractors work.

## Organizational Innovation

In this section, I provide examples of some of the organizational configurations which have developed in justice and peace programming. This is by no means an exhaustive list but is meant to be illustrative of the kind of innovation that has been taking place. It is hoped that these examples will shed light on which combinations work well in achieving greater justice and peace.

*Producing Toolkits*

CRS went through an organizational transformation in the late 1990s, during which it developed what is commonly called its "justice lens" (Fast & Lindsteadt, 1998). Rather than simply trying to help pull people out of poverty, CRS leadership insisted that they ask why people were impoverished in the first place.

As CRS leaders sought to imbue each of their country programs in Africa, Asia, and Latin America with an orientation aimed at addressing underlying causes of poverty and violence, they sought the help of the Kroc Institute for International



Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. The two organizations exchanged a Memorandum of Understanding that stated, in part, that a regular "peacebuilding institute" would be conducted in which CRS staff from all over the world would get trained by Kroc Institute faculty. Over the years, a more substantial "learning alliance" was created with the CRS' South East Asia Region. Insights from the annual workshops in South East Asia were documented by a CRS regional staff member focused on justice and peace. Over three years, enough common terminology and material had been produced to create *Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Toolkit* (Lederach, Neufeldt, & Culbertson, 2007). The toolkit is in its second printing, has been translated from English into French and Spanish, and has been downloaded from the internet on a scale much beyond what either CRS or the Kroc Institute anticipated.

Another example of developing a toolkit is a collaborative initiative of Church World Service (CWS), the relief and development arm of a number of Christian Protestant denominations, and Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. CWS is a smaller organization than CRS. In some respects, its size precludes achieving economies of scale in technical support related to justice and peace. As a result, CWS leadership explored a working relationship with the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding's STAR Program (Seminars in Trauma Awareness and Recovery). The Program had been launched in the United States following the devastation of September 11, 2001. Church World Service leaders were impressed by the project and asked Center for Justice and Peace faculty and staff if they would be interested in doing the same kind of work in war-torn countries. The two entities exchanged a Memorandum of Understanding and implemented a week-long training program in Monrovia, Liberia, in 2004, involving 45 civil society and church leaders (Church World Service, 2004). As was the case of collaboration between CRS and the Kroc Institute, STAR produced a toolkit that has been disseminated widely (Eastern Mennonite University, 2010; Yoder, 2005).

*Undergoing a Merger*

Mercy Corps decided that its approach to building its capacity to engage in justice and peace programming would be to merge with Conflict Management Group (CMG), a service-oriented justice and peace NGO (Mercy Corps, 2004). CMG was facing financial challenges, despite its stellar reputation and credibility from being founded by one of the authors of the classic conflict resolution book *Getting to Yes* (Fisher & Ury, 1981) and being affiliated with the Harvard Negotiation Project. Fees for services proved to be feast or famine, with rather too much famine.<sup>2</sup>

Mercy Corps, on the other hand, raised private, governmental, and multilateral support with relative ease. The merger, in 2004, was seen as mutually advantageous in that Mercy Corps increased its conflict transformation capacity while CMG staff members kept their jobs—even continuing to reside in Cambridge, Massachusetts even though Mercy Corps' headquarters is in Portland, Oregon (Mercy Corps, 2004).

But the merger had a rocky start, due mainly to the type of services that CMG staff members provided. They were experts at mediation. And in war-torn countries, mediation is typically undertaken by diplomats, not NGO staff members. But by 2009, Mercy Corps' conflict transformation activities included not only training Iraqi leaders in consensus building and negotiation, but also: resolving land disputes in Guatemala; supporting regional initiatives to reduce clan violence in northern Somalia related to competition for firewood and water, youth unemployment, environmental degradation and drug abuse; working with over 400 tribal elders, government officials, youth, women, and religious leaders in Kenya's Rift Valley to reduce election-related violence; and supporting the creation of 820 youth clubs in Nepal to minimize inter-ethnic conflict following a decade-long civil war. Mercy Corps has been pleased with the results of the merger. According to the organization's website, "Mercy Corps' 2004 merger with the Conflict Management Group strengthened our ability to implement conflict programs worldwide. Over its 20-year history, the Conflict Management Group developed a widely acclaimed reputation built on interest-based negotiation methodology. By blending their vast experience in negotiations theory and

practice with Mercy Corps' global experience in conflict and post-conflict settings, the merger created possibilities that were not possible as separate organizations" (Mercy Corps, 2009).

### *Making Handoffs and Building a Foundation*

American Refugee Committee (ARC) works in war-torn countries around the globe. ARC's staff members often see gross violations of human rights. In one instance, one of ARC's country directors communicated passionately with ARC headquarters in Minneapolis about the need to advocate with the U.S. government and the United Nations about abductions of children by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. The conundrum facing ARC leadership in its headquarters was that if ARC was visible in such advocacy, there could be repercussions for its staff members working in those countries. This was especially so because ARC's logo was prominently depicted on vehicles, in part to make sure that government troops and LRA rebels knew of its humanitarian identity.

ARC leadership overcame this challenge by communicating information gleaned from the Uganda/southern Sudan program staff to one of the ARC board members. The board member was an executive at Refugees International, a prominent advocacy-oriented NGO in Washington. As such, Refugees International benefited from the on-the-ground information while ARC did not compromise the safety of its staff in Uganda and southern Sudan.<sup>3</sup>

Another example of a handoff relationship exists between CRS and the Justice, Peace and Development Department of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). CRS was contacted by one of its country representatives about a law in South Asia that resulted in the capricious prosecution of religious minorities. For CRS to have been visibly involved in advocacy with the U.S. Congress and the diplomatic community to address this injustice would have put CRS staff members in South Asia in a compromising position relative to extremist groups. So CRS contacted the Justice, Peace and Human Development Department in Washington about the problem. The Department's advocacy did not implicate CRS' staff overseas.

But a more interesting organizational development occurred with CRS relative to the USCCB, whereby a more robust foundation for advocacy is being laid. CRS and USCCB leadership recognized that advocacy on justice and peace issues would be limited without educating the public. In this case, the U.S. Catholic community comprises the largest single denomination in the United States—roughly 70 million people in a population of 310 million. The Church has considerable infrastructure—parishes, schools, colleges and universities.

CRS' budget dwarfs that of the Justice, Peace and Human Development Department of the USCCB. People donate to CRS primarily because of its humanitarian work. But some of the donations are unrestricted as to their use. So CRS channeled some of its unrestricted funds to an entirely new department called U.S. Operations, opening regional offices in major cities across the United States with the mandate to engage the U.S. Catholic community in education and advocacy. This organizational innovation builds a foundation of educated supporters who can engage in public policy advocacy on behalf of those suffering from injustice, violence, and poverty to address root causes as well as immediate needs.

CRS' U.S. Operations efforts have also engaged academic institutions. Rather than collaborating for technical support and the creation of toolkits, a partnership with universities has spawned an education and advocacy initiative on campuses throughout the country (Catholic Relief Services, 2010).

### *Securing Community Involvement and Technical Support*

In 2004, DAI was awarded a contract from the USAID for its Sri Lanka Transition Initiatives Program. DAI established offices in Colombo, Trincomalee, Ampara, Matara, and Batticalo and provided grants totaling approximately \$30 million to "local government entities, nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations and, to a lesser extent, international nongovernmental organizations, chambers of commerce, trader and farmer associations, student groups, and the media" (DAI, 2009).

Because of the technical challenges of meeting contract specifications for an early warning system that would incorporate events data development, digital mapping, and mathematical

pattern recognition, DAI engaged Virtual Research Associates, another consulting firm, to provide technical support (Virtual Research Associates, 2008).<sup>4</sup> This specialized technical knowledge was unavailable in Sri Lanka.

In 2008, DAI received additional funding for its Sri Lanka Transition Initiatives Program from the U.S. Department of Defense to assist people displaced by conflict in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. DAI worked with local contractors to rehabilitate health facilities, schools, and other public infrastructure using "an inclusive participatory community consultation process" (DAI, 2009).

This example illustrates how for-profit contractors sometimes work closely with national NGOs, government officials and other entities. It also shows how the use of other for-profit entities is typically related to areas where substantial technical expertise is needed. And, finally, it shows how contractors are willing, unlike most NGOs, to accept funding from the Department of Defense for humanitarian projects.

## Conclusion

Supporting justice and peace while also engaging in humanitarian relief and development is perhaps analogous to an emergency assistance social service agency developing an advocacy arm and the capacity to do group therapy. The skill sets are different. The networks are different. The terminologies are different.

Organizations have adapted, however, and aligned themselves in creative combinations that take advantage of their respective strengths. No single organizational configuration will work all the time. Instead, it is helpful to ponder the experiences of those who have had the imagination and inventiveness to build creative partnerships.

What might we learn from these examples? First, international humanitarian NGOs that have staff members operating in developing countries can benefit from having a close partnership with advocacy-oriented NGOs. Handing off information that could compromise the security of staff members or the mission of the aid itself to an entity that specializes in advocacy can enhance staff security in the field and provide

needed on-the-ground information that can enhance the accuracy and authenticity of advocacy efforts.

Second, service-oriented NGOs that are skilled in mediation will probably find it challenging to merge with humanitarian NGOs. Those skilled in mediation, however, are likely to enjoy greater job security and, over time, will learn how to adapt their services to a wider range of humanitarian interventions.

Third, academic institutions can play a vital role in supporting the justice and peace initiatives of humanitarian NGOs by assisting with workshops and producing "toolkits." Furthermore, the research and instruction of faculty members involved is improved by interacting with practitioners with on-the-ground experience. Academic institutions can also help NGOs promote greater engagement of the U.S. public in advocacy related to justice, peace, and poverty.

Fourth, on some projects, contractors work with national and local NGOs, but also reach out to other for-profit firms for technical support. While most NGOs neither pursue nor accept funding from the Department of Defense for fear that staff security in conflict zones will be compromised, contractors are more apt to pursue and accept such funding in conflict zones. This reflects how NGOs usually operate in a specific country or region for long periods, ideally getting to know the culture and leadership of a given place, while the contractors discontinue project operations when a contract expires. In addition, NGOs' security is usually based on "acceptance" by the local population rather than "protection" from harm. Contractors, in contrast, are usually more apt to hire armed guards, being more inclined to use "protection."

And, finally, if one looks at these evolving partnerships over time, from a social work perspective, it is evident that systemic reasons for poverty, for violence, and for injustice are increasingly being addressed. It is easy to understand and to raise money for charity. It is difficult, relatively, to understand and raise money to do systemic change. But with a "systems theory" perspective, the tide is turning. More specifically, NGOs are embracing a "strategic peacebuilding" version of that theory, which holds that structures that lead to violent conflict must be addressed systematically. Specifically, it involves

...the creation and nurturing of constructive relationships—at every level of society—across ethnic, religious, class, and racial boundaries. ...[Practitioners] seek the nonviolent and collaborative resolution of social inequities and the transformation of structural conditions that generate deadly conflict. The range of relationship-building activities encompasses the entire conflict cycle and includes conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution and transformation, and post-conflict reconciliation. (Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 2010, para. 1)

Those NGOs that pursue this approach are venturing forward into relatively new territory, less focused on symptoms and more focused on causes. What more could one ask for after a blind date?

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(Endnotes)

1. Comments about the difficulty of raising money were made during Peace and Security Initiative meetings in Washington, DC in 2003 and 2004 which I attended.
2. At the time of the merger, I spoke with a number of CMG staff members.
3. I know of this example personally because I was Vice President at ARC at the time.
4. I am familiar with the involvement of Virtual Research Associates through communication with its President, Doug Bond. I spoke with him about my experiences with the Foundation for Co-Existence, most of which was as a consultant with The Asia Foundation.



