Toward a Philosophy of Compassionate Interaction in International Relief Activities: Lessons from Rwanda after the 1994 Genocide - Parts 1 & 2

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In Search of Reciprocity in International Development:  
An NGO Worker’s Field Note from Post-Genocide Rwanda  
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In what follows, I will summarize key points of my Japanese article “Toward a Philosophy of Compassionate Interaction in International Relief Activities: Lessons from Rwanda after the 1994 Genocide”, Monthly Africa, Parts 1 and 2, 1998. I wrote this article based on my experience as a Rwanda representative of a Japanese development NGO.

In search of a point of departure

- As of the late 1990s, there is a growing sense of apathy and skepticism among many Rwanda citizens and government officials about international aid workers in general and Western NGOs in particular. Why? What can we do about it?

Some basic statistics of foreign aid in Rwanda (as of the fiscal year 1996-97)

- About 100,000,000 dollars of foreign aid in total, provided by: UNHCR/UNICEF (approx. 44%), NGOs (27%), government assistance through designated agencies (11%), EU (9%), direct government assistance (2%), and other (2%).

- Breakdown of aid agencies’ expenses: direct input for projects (approx. 22%), vehicles (12%), other capital (46%), staff salaries (7%), rent, etc. (14%).

- Expenses by project type: community development, including poverty reduction (approx. 28%), shelter (17%), vulnerable population (16%), health (15%), orphans (7%), water (6%), agriculture (5%), education (3%), refugee repatriation (3%), etc.

What accounts for the growing apathy?: Three propositions

1. Historical memory of German and Belgian colonialism and French neocolonialism, leading to stereotyping and demonization through the experience of the genocide

2. Negative images generated by the UN and international withdrawal in 1994: “Westerners left us when we needed help most. So they are opportunistic.”

3. Socio-economic class differences highlighted by the presence of foreign humanitarian workers: “Why do they spend so much money at expensive restaurants when we have no money to buy food?”

Major concerns raised by local residents and officials about international aid

1. Failure to put the beneficiaries’ needs first – e.g., water pipes removed by local residents in northern Rwanda; local communities not part of project development

2. Lack of long-term planning – e.g., In 1997 less than half the new shelters empty as
“uninhabitable”, lacking water, market, agricultural land, school, transportation.

3. Lack of financial transparency – 488 out of 607 foreign NGOs unable or unwilling to provide financial and related information to the Rwandan government in 1997.

What accounts for these perceived failures?: On the deep culture/structure of aid
1. Aid as power, reflecting the prevailing discourse of Western superiority
   - Economic power as the only objective criterion for international influence?
   - Lack of self-reflective capacity and desire to build equal partnership
2. Foreign aid as a way of exacerbating the “deep culture of begging”
   - Local beneficiaries accustomed to receiving, without reciprocity or hard work
     - e.g., National Univ. of Rwanda bilingual project in 1997, with no English textbooks

Toward reciprocal partnership: Guidelines for constructive change
No improvement is possible without a drastic transformation of the development discourse, with emphasis on the need for deep empathy with local partners. General guidelines –
1. Take a development project as a joint challenge of international and local partners.
   - Recipients must end unilateralism and seek reciprocity, through service, intangible.
2. Put the needs of beneficiaries over the development workers’ own agenda
   - Bring in local partners at an early stage of the project and share decision-making
   - e.g., Local NGO as a bridge between a foreign NGO and local government for negotiating a refugee resettlement process and public relations for trust-building.
3. Establish a mechanism for long-term effectiveness, even in a short-term project
   - Before intervention, examine whether one can make a long-term commitment.
   - Invite qualified local staff to be part of the project early on, especially in such fields as health, agriculture, and engineering, for capacity- and infrastructure-building
4. Consider the transparency requirement as an opportunity for trust-building.
   - Program evaluation must be incorporated as part of the project. Publicize results.
   - Donors are ethically responsible for project outcomes; c.f., Hutu militias receiving aid in the refugee camps of eastern Congo, gaining strength to re-launch attacks.
   - Proposal 1: Joint government-donor mechanism to examine NGOs’ accountability.
   - Proposal 2: Establish central command under an umbrella organization (e.g., Red Cross, UNHCR?) for NGOs working in the same region to meet a refugee crisis.

In conclusion
- None of these proposed measures may be implemented without a drastic transformation of the existing discourse of international aid and development.
- Yet we have no alternatives to seeking a serious change, given the magnitude of human suffering in such contemporary post-war societies as Rwanda.
As a first step toward the necessary change, it is recommended that all development workers, and if possible donors too, visit sites of massacres and mass graves before they intervene, in order to develop empathy and a deep sense of social responsibility.