NGOs and Humanitarian Principles in an Age of Uncertainty
Barbara Brubacher

The context in which NGOs implement developmental and relief programming has changed and traditional humanitarian principles which made these organisations so strong just a few years ago, now appear strained and, at times, even a handicap to NGO effectiveness on the ground. Accusations that humanitarian aid inadvertently sustains conflict, the war on terrorism and the merging of humanitarian aims with western security interests has politicised developmental programming and undermined their ability to be operate and be perceived as independent and neutral organisations. Similarly, the involvement of the military and private companies in addressing needs in complex humanitarian emergencies,¹ has invaded the turf of NGOs and blurred the division between civilian and military personnel.

From the nascent of the modern humanitarian NGO, the principles neutrality, impartiality and independence have been central to humanitarian programming. However, now that these principles are being undermined by the changing landscape in which humanitarian programming operates, NGOs are either abandoning some of these principles or modifying their definitions and application to the prevailing context. To redefine their place and relevance within the international system, NGOs have begun to redefine their ethical framework and operational principles by advocating more overtly political stances, formulating rights based approaches (RBA) to development, and collaborating to find consensus on minimal standards to guide humanitarian operations. However, the decentralized nature of the NGOs community and the increasing uncertainty, insecurity and diversity of the contexts in which they operate has produced a variety of different approaches to dealing with the moral complexities that accompany complex humanitarian emergencies.

This paper will attempt to map out the questions arising from the current moral dilemmas confronting the NGO community. Although NGOs themselves vary in their approach to humanitarian assistance and likewise to their interpretation and reliance on these principles, this paper will attempt to provide a framework by which to assess the basic definitions and purpose of these humanitarian principles. The paper will then describe the contours of the changing context in which NGOs operate, including the heightened security risks and the prevalence of the military and private corporations in development. The paper will then look at how NGOs have begun to redefine humanitarian principles and outline the manners in which NGOs are redefining their minimal standards and adapting their operational procedures to uphold basic principles such as impartiality and independence. In providing a broad overview of contemporary challenges and arguments confronting NGOs, this paper will attempt to highlight areas in need of further research and understanding.

¹ Complex Humanitarian Emergency is defined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee as “a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single and/or ongoing UN country programme.” See ‘Guidelines on the use of military and civil defence assets to support UN humanitarian activities in complex emergencies,’ UN OCHA, 20 March 2003.