The function of humanitarian NGOs in a changing world order

I have been invited to reflect on 'the effects of the changing world order on the protection of displaced persons and migrants'. What I have chosen to do is to address this subject in the matrix of the conference theme "NGOs in a Changing World Order'. I therefore consider at first the structural role of humanitarian NGOs in a changing world order before talking about their tasks in transformed contexts. For I do not think it is enough to narrowly focus on the problems confronting humanitarian NGOs in a changing world order in relation to protection of displaced persons and migrants. It simply takes attention away from the limits and problems of intervention by humanitarian NGOs. And I do believe that this assembly is perhaps the most appropriate forum for general collective reflection on the role of humanitarian NGOs in the extant world order.

I want to start by noting the enormous number and range of humanitarian NGOs concerned with the life-world and welfare of displaced persons and migrants. These range from NGOs concerned with delivery of services (food delivery, health and mental care, sanitation, shelter, nutrition, education and training, income-generating and social services) to advocacy NGOs to NGOs focused on the implementation of human rights to NGOs concerned with the fate of returning migrants in post-conflict societies. Then of course one has to distinguish between local NGOs and international NGOs (INGOs), as also small and big NGOs. This makes any attempt to generalize hazardous. On the other hand, if one has to understand the structural role of NGOs, some attempt at generalization is unavoidable. In attempting to understand the structural role of NGOs, I would like to add, I do not distinguish between humanitarian NGOs simpliciter and humanitarian plus human rights NGOs.

I propose to argue that the structural role of humanitarian NGOs, as opposed to their proximate role, is to legitimize and sustain a changing world order (with global capitalism as its foundation) that holds no promise for the dominant majority of the global population. Today, proliferating humanitarian NGOs coexist with spreading humanitarian crisis and growing number of forced and voluntary migrants. At least one persuasive explanation of this phenomenon is that in an era of globalization when the North-South divide is growing humanitarian NGOs are assigned by hegemonic states the role of ensuring (a) that the ongoing neo-liberal globalization process does not cause frequent humanitarian crisis; (b) when it does, to address its worst consequences through offering relief, assistance and protection and later to help, where there has been an internal conflict, to stitch together a post-conflict "democratic" society; and (c) more generally, be an integral part of their global strategy to give violence and injustice a human face. To put it differently, humanitarianism is the ideology of hegemonic states in the era of globalization marked by a growing North-South divide and humanitarian NGOs are its key carriers (Chimni 2000: 244).

But lest I be misunderstood I wish to stress a this point that humanitarian NGOs are without a shadow of doubt playing an important role in ensuring assistance and protection to displaced persons and refugees. NGOs deliver more aid today than the whole UN system and offer protection by their very presence. They help save hundreds of lives. This assistance and protection
is often provided in conditions that can involve the ultimate sacrifice for the field worker. In brief my complaint is not that humanitarian NGOs exploit their subjects or are self-conscious agents of imperial centers. Albeit, there are surely NGO leaders who are trading in misery for individual perks or serving imperial causes (Petras and Veltmeyer 2000: 129). Rather my contention is that it is precisely the fact that humanitarian NGOs are effective in the delivery of assistance and protection that they are assigned the role of legitimizing and sustaining an unjust world order. Unfortunately, NGO personnel by and large do not fully appreciate the structural role of humanitarian NGOs in an unjust global system. Or, to put it differently, they do not fully understand how their deepest humanitarian impulses are mobilized to sustain domination in the international system. I wish to draw their attention to the following:

First, humanitarian NGOs are key agents in knowledge production and dissemination about human rights conditions in third world societies that they are present in. They 'bring back useful information, and make it part of their brief to do so …As the staff of foreign embassies shrink, and the need to keep abreast of events abroad increases, governments inevitably turn to private sources of information. In some benighted parts of the world, sometimes only NGOs can nowadays reveal what is going on' (The Economist 2000). This situation increases the responsibility of NGOs in terms what they are reporting. While humanitarian NGOs easily focus on the internal causes of humanitarian crisis they rarely examine its international causes. They tend to ignore larger global processes and concentrate on local events, contexts, and institutions. This feature however transforms these NGOs from being agents of change to agents of status quo as often the principal causes of humanitarian crisis are global in nature (Chimni 1998: 356). This also makes humanitarian NGOs less critical of Northern governments restrictive policies towards refugees and voluntary migrants. Where global processes are considered the analysis rarely proceeds beyond noting a few facts about the growing North-South divide or considering the implications of events such as September 11. And in exceptional cases when global processes are analyzed the inequities in the international system are almost never traced to neo-liberal globalization policies.

Second, humanitarian NGOs are driven by donor priorities rather than local needs. A striking feature of any analysis of official humanitarian aid is how a small number of donor countries are able to exert a significant influence over the shape of the humanitarian system (Macrae 2002: 11). The US is usually the largest donor by a factor of three or four. What is the consequence of this domination? In 1999, US NGOs raised just over $10bn from private sources for humanitarian and development work, and received a mere $1.6bn from USAID. This would suggest that official funding accounts for a relatively small share of NGO income. However, these aggregate data belie the importance of US government funding to the small group of large organizations that constitute the major American players in the humanitarian field. Out of over 400 US organizations, CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children and World Vision account for around 30 per cent of the US government's total annual support to NGOs. In the year 2000 CARE got 54 per cent , CRS 62 per cent and SAVE 47 per cent of their budget from the US government (Macrae 2002: 48). There is the allied problem of bilateralism leading to the nationalization of NGOs. For example, in Macedonia in 1999 States entered into bilateral funding agreements with NGOs undermining in the process the work of international agencies such as UNHCR (limiting its ability to prioritize programs or monitor efficiency) and other NGOs. There is also the problem of greater earmarking of funds for specific countries and activities (Macrae 2002: 13). Where does all this leave the issue of independence of humanitarian NGOs from governments? According to The Economist, while 'larger NGOs have pledged not to act as "instruments of government foreign policy" […] at times they are seen as just that. [For] governments are more willing to pay groups to deliver humanitarian aid to a war zone than to deliver it themselves' 1. (The Economist 2000).

Third, the absence of resources with local NGOs makes them turn to INGOs for funds engendering a baneful dependence. In 1999 EC NGOs got nearly 64 per cent of the EC contracts for humanitarian assistance (Macrae 2002: 58). It is difficult for local NGOs, on the other hand, to get such resources from any source and therefore end up being sub-sub-contractors to EC NGOs.
Their agenda then cannot be other than what the agenda of the INGOs is. Furthermore, local NGOs have to be anti-statist in order to justify the necessity of sub-contracting services to them. This makes them overlook the privatization of public functions that their activities entail. Humanitarian NGOs ignore the fact that they are only self appointed representatives of the people and are in no way accountable to those amidst whom they work. It may therefore be validly argued that 'NGOs undermine democracy by taking social programs and public debate out of the hands of the local people and their elected natural leaders and creating dependence on non-elected overseas officials and their anointed local officials' (Petras and Veltmeyer 2000:132).

Fourth, humanitarian NGOs often legitimize the use of force against third world countries and increase in general the role of the military in a humanitarian crisis. They can today, given their knowledge production and dissemination functions, shape the response of hegemonic states to a humanitarian crisis. This willingness to shape the response of powerful governments is at least in part a function of what Rieff calls the 'new conventional wisdom that there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems' (Rieff 2002: 111). It explains the growing focus of humanitarian NGOs on human rights. What is problematic is the belief that 'no version of the intermingling of humanitarianism and human rights makes sense except in the context of a world order in which humanitarian military intervention, or at least its credible threat, is one standard response to so-called humanitarian crisis' (Id: 116). For 'recent experience documents the clear and present danger that humanitarian efforts may be co-opted by the United States and other military intervenors' (Minear 2003. Emphasis added). In other words, the link between humanitarianism and human rights is disturbing when it legitimizes military activities. This is particularly troubling because humanitarian NGOs cannot get powerful states to undertake armed humanitarian intervention when it is most needed since their national interests are not at stake, as in Rwanda.

In sum, the work of humanitarian NGOs is currently informed by an ideological and financial dependence that considerably reduces the space for challenging and contesting the policies of powerful Northern states even as they offer assistance and protection to displaced persons and migrants.

II

What should NGOs do?

What should NGOs do in the circumstances? The answer surely does not lie in abandoning their humanitarian role. But it is important that they simultaneously manifest their refusal to legitimize and sustain a changing but unjust world order. Further, they need to respond to the immediate developments in the international system with implications for the protection of displaced persons and migrants. Some suggestions follow.

First, NGOs must more seriously address the issue of international causes of voluntary and forced migration. I agree therefore with the 'new conventional wisdom that there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems'. But this understanding does not necessarily transform itself into the problematic idea of humanitarian intervention (Chimni 2000: 103). Rather it should lead us to contesting the present economic and social foundations of world order that continuously manifests in humanitarian crisis in the third world. For it is not enough to focus on "saving lives" but also on the creation of a just world order. In this regard we should avoid the pseudo choice between humanitarianism and human rights. A principal advocate of the former is also the principal campaigner for change in the WTO Agreement on TRIPs leading to the adoption of a Ministerial Declaration on the Right to Health and TRIPS Agreement at fourth WTO Ministerial meeting at Doha in 2001. MSF therefore does not appear to believe in standing aloof from the realm of rights, unless this means cooperating with the military (Rieff 2002: 121). Organizations like Oxfam, of course, more forthrightly, and rightly, pursue that strategy.

Second, humanitarian NGOs should ensure in other respects that they are not implementing the priorities of imperial centers in the third world. The policies that are implemented should be sensitive to local history and formulated through local participation, particularly of women.
Refugees and displaced persons should be treated as subjects rather than objects of humanitarian policies.

Third, humanitarian NGOs should act as a pressure group to persuade Northern States to negotiate with states in the South to finding solutions to the problem of forced and voluntary migration. Presently these States are undertaking unilateral restrictive measures that merely shift the burden of caring for refugees on to the poor world and restrict the rights of voluntary migrants (Chimni 2002: 151). In a bid to rollback restrictive policies in the North NGOs also need to draw attention to the contribution of refugees and migrants to host states in order to help overcome xenophobia and the erroneous perception that refugees are parasites and migrants take away jobs from host populations.

Fourth, an urgent task today is also to ensure that the war against terrorism is not used as an excuse to neglect the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. There is genuine cause for worry that an elastic concept of "national security" will be used to reduce space for human rights discourse (Chimni 1997: 283ff). Therefore, it is significant that the recent UN Security Council Resolution 1456 of January 20, 2003 emphasizes that: "States must ensure that any measure taken to combat terrorism comply with all their obligations under international law, and should adopt such measures in accordance with international law, in particular international human rights, refugee, and humanitarian law". This resolution can be an important basis for human rights advocacy by humanitarian NGOs. They should also draw attention to the fact that the 1951 Refugee Convention contains exclusion clauses that can help ensure that terrorists are not provided asylum.

Fifth, in the general context of eroding refugee protection, in particular the growing practice of detention, there is an urgent need to establish an independent Refugee Rights Committee, either on the pattern of the Human Rights Committee or any other appropriate form (Chimni 2002: 157; Macmillan and Olson 2001: 38-42; Hathaway 2002: 23-27). The UNHCR is dependent on donor governments and therefore cannot be expected to effectively supervise the actions of States. On the other hand, in so far as the general defense of the 1951 refugee convention is concerned NGOs must join hands with the UNHCR (UNHCR 2002: 7). In particular humanitarian NGOs must strike alliances with progressive elements within the UNHCR (Chimni 2002: 158-160). There are often strong differences between departments and individuals within the UNHCR and it is important to support those that seek to enhance the protection role of the organization. So far as migrants are concerned there is a need to urge the Northern states to ratify the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants.

To conclude, humanitarian NGOs have an important role to play in embedding elements of transnational solidarity and democracy in an unjust system that ignores its victims or blames them for their fate. On the other hand, NGOs should avoid becoming, in the words of Rieff, the 'caring branch of the status quo' (cited by Warner 2003). They must join voices and hands with those whom they assist and protect to create a just world order in which humanitarian crisis is not an ever present reality.

References

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Notes

1. It also goes on to note that ‘the most potent sign of the closeness between NGOs and governments, aside from their financial links, is the exchange of personnel … In the developed world […] increasing numbers of civil servants take time off to work for NGOs, and vice versa: Oxfam has former staff members not only in the British government, but also in the Finance Ministry of Uganda. This symbiotic relationship with government (earning some groups the tag GRINGO) may make the governments of developing countries work better. It may also help aid groups to do their job effectively. But it hardly reflects their independence’ (The Economist 2000).