Working in Challenging Environments:
Risk Management and Aid Culture in South Sudan and Afghanistan

Project Overview[1]

Since the 1990s, aid agencies have significantly expanded their reach and ambitions in war-affected or chronically insecure fragile states, providing humanitarian assistance as well as engaging in a variety of ambitious programmes of social and political transformation led and funded by Western donor governments. To achieve these far-reaching aims, international policy-makers have encouraged the integration of international aid and political activities to create 'comprehensive' multi-agency policy environments. While there has been some recent research into the trends in and the factors affecting aid worker security, together with a rapidly expanding body of work concerned with identifying and disseminating good practice in risk and security management, there has been surprisingly little research into how aid agencies are actually responding to the real or perceived security risks that they face. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the implications are significant, affecting to a greater or lesser degree every level and aspect of agencies' presence and programming, but while informal conversations yield many stories, actual practices cannot be properly assessed and examined unless these stories are documented.

This research seeks to address this deficit. Drawing on extended ethnographic fieldwork in South Sudan and Afghanistan during 2010 and, especially, 2011 it documents some of the real-life challenges that aid workers and their organisations face in these difficult environments and explores their implications. What aid actors tell themselves and others that they are or should be doing and what they are *actually* doing are often quite different things. Our findings challenge much of the received wisdom and assumptions that underpin the current mainstream discourse and guidance on issues around risk and security management across the sector, including the presumption that aid workers and agencies are likely to act and behave in rational, predictable and principled ways in these difficult environments. In reality, and as the history of the aid encounter

testifies all too clearly in countries such as Afghanistan and South Sudan, operating in conditions of chronic insecurity is almost always a messy, uncertain and compromising process. Because it is so focused on the immediate practicalities of trying to stay physically safe while keeping operations going, the mainstream risk management agenda has so far failed to capture many of the more significant higher-level strategic and programmatic problems, challenges and trade-offs that result from aid actors' engagement in contexts that they consider to be actually or potentially dangerous.

A key frame of reference for this study is the concept of humanitarian space as a social arena. This space, is best viewed as a social and physical space where a variety of different actors – donor representatives, UN agencies and INGOs, headquarters and field staff, aid recipients, local private suppliers, peacekeepers and other military actors, etc. – negotiate the various activities and outcomes associated with aid. This idea of a social arena rests upon an actor-oriented approach that assumes that people's behaviour will often be reactive, irrational and unpredictable, that their practices are influenced by other actors, and that they will be driven by different motives and in response to their subjective interpretation of the needs of the situation. It recognises that action will be based on a range of driving forces and that motivations for action will be mixed; humanitarian action, for instance, is unlikely to be based solely on a desire to alleviate suffering, but will also be driven by other motivations such as organisational pressures to continue operations and retain staff or to demonstrate publicly that the agency is doing good work. The aid arena encompasses recipients and host populations, with the aid encounter understood as an interface where the providers and seekers of aid meet each other.

This approach means paying attention to the 'life-worlds' of aid workers and the ways that they shape and interpret the reality of aid in a given context. Rather than being examined primarily in terms of its avowed policy aims, the international aid industry is understood more as a singular cultural and spatial phenomenon. Through ethnographic observation of the everyday practices of different actors, it is possible to depict how various drivers and dynamics of aid delivery interact and influence each other. How people define and organise their work or actions are mediated by the mission or mandate of their agency, their understanding of the context and assessment of needs to be met, their personal expectations and frustrations, and the associated organisational culture. It is also shaped by the fears and anxieties of international aid workers themselves.

Spanning at least nine months in each country, the research drew on a range of ethnographic and interview-based methodologies, including participant observation and conversation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, focus group meetings, and multi-stakeholder workshops. Host population perceptions of the aid industry were reviewed in partnership with two local research institutions – in Afghanistan with the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO), and in South Sudan with Small and Medium Entrepreneurship Capacity Building Consult, South Sudan (SMECOSS). The research aimed to explore how security risks are understood, negotiated and managed among different actors in the various and interconnected aid arenas that they occupy or encounter, and what the implications of enhanced risk management are more generally for the modalities and dynamics of aid delivery in challenging environments like Afghanistan and South Sudan. The main research sites were the physical spaces occupied and/or created by international aid workers, located mainly but not exclusively in urban areas and including fortified and lower-profile aid compounds and offices, restaurants, hotels and various other recreation spaces used by international aid personnel. Away from these international urban spaces, research was conducted in various sites including provincial towns including restaurants and hotels, hospitals, convents, NGO offices, aid compounds and, besides the local population host population work, while travelling cross-country by road or air. It encompassed conversations, interviews and participant observation with a broad range of actors who are connected in different ways with the aid industry: representatives of donor governments, UN agencies, secular and religious INGOs and national and local NGOs, civilian sub-contractors and security firms, local service providers, peacekeepers, journalists, private consultants, political and security advisers, UN pilots, and a cross-section of local people from communities receiving aid. Importantly, the research was conducted independently of the aid industry and without the institutional support of any one organisation.

With direct observations drawn from the actor-focused field research and supporting literature review, this research aims to provide a grounded account of some of the key challenges and dilemmas faced by aid workers and agencies in countries such as South Sudan and Afghanistan that, it is hoped, will stimulate much-needed debate on the future of aid in challenging environments. In particular, the research is concerned to broaden the notion of risk-management from its limited focus on access, project management and aid workers to embrace a much wider conception of what being 'present' now actually means, requires and entails.