

Help versus Harm: The Impact of NGO Interventions

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Aiding Peace? The Role of NGOs in Armed Conflict. By Jonathan Goodhand. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006. ITDG Publishing (ISBN: 9-78158826462-6).

The slaughter of 800,000 people in Rwanda in 1994 marked one example among many during the twentieth century in which genocide occurred and the international community failed to intervene. By contrast, the world's powers were moved to action in 1999 when NATO forces intervened in the former Yugoslavia to prevent the kind of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo that had been seen previously in Bosnia. These two cases, in particular, set the stage for the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, which was established in 2000 to forge a consensus on when and how humanitarian intervention should occur. The Commission's report, *The Responsibility to Protect*, lays out a perspective that has received growing international support. It argues "that sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens from avoidable catastrophe—from mass murder and rape, from starvation—but that when they are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states" (International Commission 2001:VIII). However, this perspective is only one side of an ongoing debate that Jonathan Goodhand analyzes in *Aiding Peace? The Role of NGOs in Armed Conflict*. It is the maximalist approach, which argues that humanitarians should intervene to stem violence and protect the innocent. An alternative perspective—the minimalist approach—holds that humanitarians should not expand their activities and mandates but, rather, should retreat to the purer, more neutral position that the aid community has occupied in the past.

This debate is a response to the empirical reality that, over the past decades, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have come to play a larger and larger role in relief and development work. As the level and range of NGO activities has grown, however, many observers have increasingly questioned their effectiveness and accountability. Although it was once assumed that NGO work must be improving the situation in developing countries, a growing concern is emerging that relief and development interventions might harm local communities. The question remains open, with little empirical evidence in support of either advocates of aid intervention or their critics. *Aiding Peace*, which explicitly explores the role of nongovernmental organizations in peace building, begins to fill this void. It deals with the questions of what such groups should be doing in theory and what they are actually doing in practice.

Effectively blending theory with real world data and a practitioner's insight, *Aiding Peace* provides solid, comparative research findings on the work and impact of NGO operations in seven war-torn countries. Goodhand looks at the role of nongovernmental organizations in armed conflict situations and at their efforts to build peace in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan-Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Moldova, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. He investigates the impact that these groups have on the dynamics of conflict and peacebuilding and the main factors that determine their ability to work effectively in conflict zones.

Departing from the humanitarian aid literature's tendency to present individual case studies, Goodhand's comparative research design allows him to consider the various factors that affect the work and impact of nongovernmental organizations. The comparative analysis demonstrates the importance of both context and agency, a major point of the book. Goodhand argues that these organizations have some room for maneuver and, thus, that their actions can have real impact on intervention outcomes. However, NGO action is also limited by structural constraints and, thus, the context of a conflict zone must also be taken into account when assessing NGO interventions on the process of peacebuilding. The importance of context holds true for every case study that Goodhand explores, and it leads him to the general conclusion that the aim should not be a universal framework of best practice but rather interventions tailored to a given conflict setting. In addition, Goodhand urges the humanitarian community to think much more historically about conflict and intervention.

Goodhand's thick case studies come to two macro conclusions. First, the empirical evidence does not provide support for either the minimalist or the maximalist position in the debate on the best approach to humanitarian intervention. The importance of context calls for contingent approaches, grounded in a situational analysis. In certain cases, a minimalist approach, with nongovernmental organizations remaining as neutral and disengaged from the conflicting actors as possible, would be the advisable strategy. In other conflict situations, with contextual factors supporting peacebuilding, a more engaged maximalist approach may be in order. Context is critical and should drive the nature of engagement.

Second, the empirical evidence suggests that the potential for nongovernmental organizations to have a significant impact—whether positive or negative—is limited. Goodhand argues that these organizations do not have the massive positive impact they claim to have—in order to please their funding sources and gain additional funding. On the other hand, the negative externalities that NGO activities can produce, such as the highjacking of aid products and the fueling of black markets and war economies, are also not as extensive as some have feared. Goodhand characterizes this conclusion as a “corrective” to the extreme perspectives that are suggested by the stereotypes. He stresses that the role of civil society has been overemphasized in recent years and draws our attention to the enduring importance of the state in today's world order.

In addition to these two macro conclusions, Goodhand's empirical findings also suggest a number of more detailed conclusions. These findings are driven by the book's analytical framework, which was developed by the British Department for International Development's Conflict Assessment Project. That framework includes three stages: analyzing the conflict, analyzing policy responses, and analyzing strategies and options for working in and on conflict situations. The three sections of *Aiding Peace* are organized according to these three stages and include both theoretical and empirical chapters on each.

The research findings related to analyzing the conflicts in the seven case studies include several important insights. For example, marginalized minorities are always present, unbalanced aid responses can exacerbate inequalities and further fuel violence, and civil society cannot resolve or prevent conflict unless it is supported by political elites, political parties, and diplomacy. In addition, Goodhand finds that in all conflicts critical thresholds or windows of opportunity exist during which the opportunity to influence the direction of the conflict is greatest. Conflict, he argues, results from structural vulnerability, the society's capacity to manage conflict, the opportunity to profit from instability, and external shocks.

The empirical evidence from the case studies presented in the book shows that conflict influences NGO activities but that NGO activities also influence the

dynamics of conflict. Goodhand concludes from his cases that conflict often overwhelms organization efforts. The groups best equipped to deal with conflict are the ones that have a strong analysis of the situation, clear security guidelines, self-directed local staff, and a high level of integration into the local community. At the same time, NGO interventions do have political, economic, and social effects—both intended and unintended—on local war-torn communities. Goodhand finds that NGO interventions do not generally lead to dependency among aid recipients and that the intersection of aid and war economies is complex. The simple solution of cutting aid to starve black markets will do more harm than good. The ability of nongovernmental organizations to positively affect peace also varied across his cases and was influenced by the level of coordination between Track One and Track Two diplomacy, the strength of the state, and the commitment of other societal actors to the peacebuilding effort. The cases suggest that nongovernmental organizations are rarely the main drivers of change. Nonetheless, if the contextual factors point toward peace, such groups can play a vital support role.

Aiding Peace should have provided more background information on the data collection process. We know that the case studies are based largely on interviews with NGO workers in the field as well as with government officials, community members, and journalists. But it would be helpful to know more precisely which organizations were consulted, how many interviews were conducted, what types of questions were asked, how the research teams were structured, and how they operated. As it is presented, the data collection process is a bit of a black box. In addition, the data could have been used more systematically to support the conclusions. At times, Goodhand provides a breakdown of how the cases support a claim, but at other points we see conclusions with little reference to the empirical data. Goodhand notes the shortcomings of past quantitative work done on conflict, and he advocates the benefits of the thick case study approach that he uses. Yet, a more quantitative presentation of his data would have clarified the trends across the seven cases. As we expand Goodhand's sample to a larger number of conflict zones, a more systematic and quantitative handling of the data will be critical to determine if Goodhand's conclusions are generalizable.

Goodhand appears somewhat pessimistic about the ability of nongovernmental organizations to positively effect conflict situations—primarily because of their unintended consequences. Yet, the international community cannot allow the “do no harm” premise to lead to a “do nothing” policy because of a fear that every action will lead to an unforeseeable chain reaction. As Samantha Power (2002) shows in her analysis of international responses to the genocides of the twenty-first century, “perversity arguments” (that international intervention will result in unintended secondary consequences) are among the major reasons cited for inaction. Gérard Prunier (2005) demonstrates that similar arguments are currently being used to avoid intervention in the Darfur crisis.

Policymakers and practitioners seeking to make better peacebuilding policy during future crises will benefit from the concrete suggestions presented in *Aiding Peace*. Goodhand adeptly blends theory and practice, making this book informative for academics researching humanitarian aid, nongovernmental organizations, and international intervention. The call for increased communication between theory and practice is often made, but actually achieving this goal is less common. Based as it is on empirical analysis of multiple real-world cases, *Aiding Peace* provides an excellent model. Similar studies might productively look at NGO interventions in disaster relief, development, the promotion of civil society, health initiatives, and democratization (for example, see Schmitz 2006). Larger-N studies, comparing a greater range of cases, will also allow us to better understand how context blends with agency to determine outcomes.

References

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