Learning to Learn

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This paper examines the lessons-learning process among international humanitarian institutions in the post-Cold War period. It begins with a review of experience in the Great Lakes region (Section I), with particular attention to problems of coordination among humanitarian organizations and at the political interface. It then turns to experience in other major recent crises, which confirms the recurring difficulty of putting humanitarian principles into practice (Section II).

The paper assesses progress to date in making the necessary reforms in humanitarian policies and procedures (Section III), finding that while numerous changes have been introduced, the underlying problems identified remain largely unresolved. The paper links resistance to learning and institutional change with four characteristics of the culture of humanitarian organizations: their tendency to approach every crisis as unique, their action-oriented nature, their defensiveness to criticism, and their lack of accountability (Section IV). It concludes with a discussion of an agenda for future action (Section V).

The Great Lakes Experience

The experience in responding to the crisis in the Great Lakes region is a logical starting point for this review, both because the experience has proved so searing and because the associated lessons learning process has been unusually carefully tracked. Among the evaluations at hand are the 1996 five-volume multi-donor evaluation of the Rwanda response[1], a review of follow-up action taken after a year-plus[2], a 1997 IASC-commissioned Study[3], a 1998 Tripartite Study of Operational Coordination by UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP,[4] and separate reviews by the Departments of Humanitarian Affairs[5] and Peacekeeping Operations.[6]

Taken together, these studies identify coordination among humanitarian organizations and at the political interface as the two critical areas of weakness in the international response to the genocide in April 1994, the uprooting of Rwandans which followed, the festering problems that led to the creation of the DRC, and the continuing crisis of insecurity, human need, and human rights abuse throughout the region.

The IASC Study links the weakness of the UN's humanitarian response to the lack of clear and decisive authority to exercise coordination. "The simple reality is that within the diverse UN family, no element has adequate authority to command, coerce or compel any other element to do anything."[7] Describing the prevailing situation as "coordination light," it picks up on a recurrent theme of earlier studies on Rwanda and elsewhere: that a more assertive model of coordination is necessary for activities to be effective.

The 1994 DHA study of Rwanda distinguishes among coordination by command, by consensus, and by default and concludes that humanitarian coordination in complex emergencies generally relies on coordination by consensus or default.[8] Advocating that "DHA must tighten its managerial and institutional grip on the coordination of complex emergencies," the study concludes that "the donors (and the general public) cannot forever claim that the UN is ineffective in coordinating emergencies while at the same time refusing to give it the means and the resources to do so."[9]

Weaknesses in the area of coordination in the Great Lakes have also played themselves out at the more operational level in the lack of a balanced deployment of resources and programs. The Multidonor Study contrasted the non-response to the genocide in April 1994 with the outpouring of assistance following the mass displacement later in the year. The existence of a continuing problem is confirmed by the IASC Study, which noted that the consolidated appeal process does not function as a instrument of UN system-wide strategic planning and observed that protection activities were underfunded while "hundreds of millions of dollars were relatively easily obtained for moving large volumes of relief supplies."[10] The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has confirmed that "mobilization of

resources does not appear to have been a problem in the region -- the appropriate allocation however is a different issue."[11]

Once again, however, the failure to act upon lessons identified earlier has returned to haunt the system. The 1994 DHA study had noted that "DHA's credibility would be well served by a limited dose of coordination by command, both in terms of some un-earmarked funds, which could be obtained through CERF [the Central Emergency Revolving Fund] or another mechanism, and in terms of leadership and authority on the ground."[12] In early 1998, however, the system appears no closer to acting on that recommendation than when it was tabled.

The studies of the Great Lakes also identify recurring difficulties at the interface between humanitarian organizations and political actors, both international and local. The multidonor study, while citing numerous problems among humanitarian organizations, saves its most blistering critique against international political actors for acts of omission and commission. It was they who misread the signs of approaching genocide and reduced rather than strengthened UNAMIR ranks once the bloodshed had begun in earnest. It was they who responded to an underlying political crisis in exclusively humanitarian terms and sent mixed signals to political and military actors in the region.

Lack of political coherence is indeed a constraint on effective humanitarian action. This was underscored at a February 1998 Symposium on the Relationship between Humanitarian Action and Political Military Action, organized by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross. One of the Symposium's three working groups identified the absence of coherence among political institutions -- donor governments, UN member states, Security Council members, international and regional intergovernmental bodies, and the UN's political department -- as a more serious constraint on consistent and effective humanitarian action than problems among aid agencies themselves. In fact, the reality of coordination by default between and among political actors works against the creation of a policy framework within which humanitarian action in complex emergencies can succeed.

Problems of political coherence at the international level are compounded by local political actors. As the IASC Study notes, coordination "is a function of interaction between elements of the UN system and those political and military actors that are legally, morally and materially responsible for the welfare of affected populations, i.e., national governments, local governments, armies, and in some instances, rebel authorities."[13] In the Great Lakes, such political-military actors represented a threat even to the most effectively coordinated humanitarian efforts. They were best dealt with when consistency existed at the international political level, enabling special representatives of the Secretary-General to negotiate access in selected settings. "Elsewhere, especially in Rwanda, where donor nations and the UN system's agenda often were not in harmony, envoys did little to create humanitarian space, or to pressure for consent to humanitarian action."[14]

By all accounts, the lessons of the Great Lakes are clear: coordination-light is inadequate to the formidable challenge of orchestrating effective humanitarian action in complex emergencies and the absence of political coherence has deprived aid agencies of the indispensable framework for humanitarian action. Various remedies have been suggested: for example, the consolidation of such aid activities into a single agency and the provision of more assertive and consistent political direction. Later sections of the paper suggest why these conclusions have not been acted upon.

Other Recent Experience

From the experience in other post-Cold War conflicts, confirming that of the Great Lakes, emerge several recurring problems that confront and frustrate humanitarian action. From Somalia to Chechnya, from Liberia to Karabakh, the United Nations has not found effective ways of dealing on humanitarian concerns with non-state actors -- and with state actors under duress from insurgents. UN humanitarian agencies, with governing bodies composed of sovereign states and themselves integral parts of a world organization made up of such states, have exhibited well-documented structural difficulties in discharging their mandates to carry out needs assessments, provide assistance and protection to civilians, and monitor their programs in government- and rebel-controlled areas alike.

Problems in the Sudan are illustrative.[15] In 1989, Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), breaking new ground, negotiated humanitarian access with the warring parties -- only to see such access eroded by the belligerents and by its own decision to shift OLS' administrative base from New York to Khartoum. A 1990 OLS case study noted the importance of "coordinating activities from a location removed from each party in a civil war."[16] Decisions about situating relief administration in places such as Monrovia, Luanda, and Zagreb have subsequently created similar problems in carrying out non-political functions on highly politicized terrain. The UN has been no more effective in needs assessment in Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh than in the run-up to OLS. As for on-the-ground presence, UN aid agencies have been excluded from those two settings altogether.

Despite its failure to address the generic problem of carrying out humanitarian functions in situations of contested sovereignty, the United Nations system continues to position itself as the focal point for coordination, a position accepted by donor governments and other member states. But there are, however, alternatives. James Ingram, a former executive director of WFP, has expressed his considered judgment that there is "no reason" why a coordinated international response to future complex emergencies "should be built around the United Nations" and a variety of reasons why it should not. He recommends the ICRC or a new organization situated outside the UN system.[17]

If the UN is indeed to remain at the center of the world's aid efforts in contested settings, steps could and should be taken to clarify that humanitarian action by UN organizations does not confer sovereignty upon those with whom access is negotiated. Such an understanding allowed UNICEF to take the lead in negotiating the terms of OLS with insurgents and the UN-recognized authorities alike. Why should such an understanding not be written into the mandates of other UN aid organizations (WFP's governing body has moved in that direction) or, alternatively, become the rationale for creating a new UN relief dedicated to complex emergency response?

Post-Cold War conflicts have raised serious questions not only about the nature of humanitarian principles but also about how these may best be preserved in practice. In fact, the post-Cold War period can be read as a time of testing established principles in the cauldron of internal armed conflicts. The experience in the former Yugoslavia highlights the extent to which, confronted with the same challenges of the denial of humanitarian access, the UN and the ICRC responded in different fashions. The ICRC took a principled stand, negotiating the access provided under international humanitarian law with the belligerents and being prepared to suspend operations if a party reneged on its obligations. The UN took a more pragmatic approach, ceding the belligerents greater authority over its activities and accepting greater political conditionality in the process.[18]

Which approach works better, in what circumstances, for what reasons, and for how long? The IASC Study makes the intriguing observation that strategic planning and coordination "worked best when grounded in specific tenets of international humanitarian law."[19] It is difficult to say whether this conclusion might be writ large over post-Cold War experience to date. However, it would be useful to explore whether there is a positive correlation between principled action and successful humanitarian action.

The UN system and its stakeholders have yet to address a related problem in the area of principle and practice, flagged in several earlier studies. At issue is the extent to which the effectiveness of humanitarian activities and the security of aid personnel may be jeopardized by association with other more political elements of the UN system. The IASC Study identifies difficulties created for aid actors by the political framework of international action within which they function. "[H]umanitarians in the UN system, and their NGO partners," it observes, "have borne the brunt of anti-UN, anti-humanitarian sentiments far beyond that for which they are responsible."[20]

Such difficulties are not unprecedented, although the extent to which the effectiveness, not to say the principles, of humanitarian action are compromised is often understated by political policy-makers, and even by officials at aid headquarters. In former Yugoslavia, for example, the association of UN aid officials with UN peacekeeping activities and with economic sanctions created a certain "schizophrenia" within the UN and complicated the performance of their humanitarian mission.[21] While such problems

at the peacekeeping interface may have eased in recent years, the reason probably lies not in the improved management of the inherent tensions but rather in a reduction of the number of peacekeeping operations themselves.

The United Nations system has an uneven track record in identifying lessons such as these and, once identified, in instituting the changes deemed necessary. Among the useful steps taken to date have been an exercise by the IASC, begun in 1994 and completed in 1996, to examine tensions between humanitarian principles and other activities of the UN system.[22] OCHA's current review of the UN principles and rules of engagement in countries in crisis may provide a useful point of departure for a formulation of options in this area. As indicated in the discussion to follow, however, the structural nature of such problems has made them unusually difficult to resolve.

The learning curve

Scholarly analysis has yet to examine the dynamics of institutional change within humanitarian institutions. Numerous studies of corporate and public sector institutions remain largely without analog in the humanitarian sector. Yet aid agencies are subject to the same forces that are producing change elsewhere, however idiosyncratic the dynamic among humanitarian organizations may be. These forces include new technology, changing roles of governments and non-state actors, disparities between resources availability and demands, greater media scrutiny, a more informed public, growing competition in the marketplace, and a newly global environment.[23]

Once again, the Great Lakes experience, better documented than most, is a logical starting point for examining the impact of the learning process, and evaluations of it, on institutional behavior. From the Great Lakes studies mentioned earlier, augmented by experience from other settings, emerge the main outlines of a laconic learning curve.

The multidonor study of Rwanda provides an instructive example of the importance of evaluation exercises -- but also of their limited ability, in and of themselves, to produce institutional change. The initiative was launched in November 1994 by a steering committee of some 37 institutions, governmental, intergovernmental, and NGO. The study enlisted 52 consultants who in March 1996 produced a 5-volume work. With direct costs alone of some $2 million, the evaluation reviewed issues related to aid programs that in the April--December 1994 period had cost $1.4 billion.

If the "mother of all evaluations" was unprecedented in scope and detail, so too was a follow-on initiative that urged and monitored implementation of its recommendations. The Joint Evaluation Follow-up Monitoring and Facilitation Network (JEFF) was formed in May 1996 by eleven individuals from the original study and funded by concerned donors. A preliminary JEFF report, released in February 1997, was followed by a final report in June 1997, after which the JEFF group disbanded.[24]

Of the 64 recommendations in the multidonor study, the JEFF study found that, based on submissions from 19 of the 37 members of the original evaluation's steering committee, about two thirds had received some positive action during the initial 15 months. Of course, some of the 64 were more important than others and, as it turned out, the more critical recommendations had received the least responsive treatment.

Ignored altogether were the most overarching, such as the recommendation to foster policy coherence in the UN Security Council, General Assembly, and UN Secretariat and the recommendation to encourage effective prevention and early suppression of genocide. *Reviewed but rebuffed* were recommendations to institute coordination-by-command arrangements in the aid sector and to set up an independent watchdog to keep international institutions' feet to the fire. *Acted upon to one degree or another* were recommendations that involved the least radical options on coordination and accountability, the commissioning of four additional studies, and -- most encouraging -- a number of measures to strengthen international human rights machinery. At several points, the JEFF survey found fuller implementation outside the UN system than within.

The impact of the multidonor study points to a larger conclusion, one corroborated by other evaluations

and evaluators: that the role played by formal evaluations in institutional change is modest at best. Indeed, "evaluation x" rarely causes "change y," although a given study may contribute to subsequent reforms. While such a conclusion "may come as a disappointment to policy researchers and to foundation officers and others who underwrite their work, rarely does the impetus for change come only or even primarily from an assessment, whether by outsiders or insiders."[25] The JEFF review did find, however, that the multidonor study probably accelerated changes already under discussion, facilitating and supporting the process of lessons-learning and policy dialogue within and among institutions.[26]

That said, failure to implement some of the specific changes that had been recommended contributed to the recurrence of the identified problems in the ensuing years. The lack of attention to refugee camp security and the empowerment of the *genocidaires* led to the unraveling of the situation described in detail by the 1998 IASC Study. Festering discontent in 1996-97 confirmed the urgency of specific recommendations to remove barriers to repatriation. There was an occasional encouraging note: for example, the JEFF study found that several "immediate and urgent" measures recommended for Burundi had indeed been put into place, recalling the progress acknowledged by the IASC Study in fashioning and implementing a common humanitarian policy.[27]

Nevertheless, the follow-up study to the multidonor initiative concluded on a bleak note: "the case of Burundi must lead us to conclude that, one year on, a great deal has **not** changed, despite all the debate and meetings described above."[28] In fact, reflecting the passage of time between February and June 1997, the final JEFF commentary expressed even more keen disappointment than had the preliminary review at the absence of action on many key fronts.

A 1996 study of the Rwanda crisis by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations makes for some interesting comparisons. In reviewing how the international response could have been improved, DPKO's terms of reference are far more circumscribed. "[I]t is important not to search for idealistic solutions," the study states, Abut rather to remain within the constraints of the reality of the United Nations system today."[29] Yet the 43 "lessons learned" are decidedly critical of the response mounted. Seven are related to coordination and exhibit little patience for coordination-light. Lesson 11, in fact, urges that "The United Nations overall presence in a country should reflect a unified, cohesive structure. The SRSG should be recognized institutionally as the head of the United Nations family in the mission area."

What of the broader lessons learning process beyond the Great Lakes? Unfortunately, no counterpart to the JEFF review exists surveying actions to implement recommendations in other evaluation studies or to address problems identified. Yet it is possible to retrace some illustrative steps taken, whether in response to evaluation studies or, more likely, to the cumulative pressure for change.

Foremost among macro-level changes was passage in late 1991 by the General Assembly of Resolution 46/182, opening additional humanitarian space in situations of contested sovereignty. "Humanitarian assistance should be provided with the consent of the affected country," the Resolution stated, "and in principle on the basis of an appeal by the affected country."[30] The expanded space was staked out through a carefully negotiated text that spoke of "consent" rather than request, of "country" rather than government, "in principle" rather than in every particular instance, and based on a "appeal" rather than a formal application.

Passed in the wake of the first major post-Cold War humanitarian response and reflecting donor government concern about the disarray of the relief effort on behalf of the Kurds, the resolution also created the position of Emergency Relief Coordinator. In early 1992 the Secretary-General established the Department of Humanitarian Affairs. While the relaxation of sovereignty drew more immediate attention, the orchestration of humanitarian efforts would prove the more consuming challenge. As the situation has evolved, both the relaxation of sovereignty and the efforts of DHA to ensure greater coordination have proved by and large serious disappointments in their practical consequences for a more responsive and effective international humanitarian regime.

Other changes of major proportion and potential include the heightened involvement of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in the humanitarian sphere. The decade has seen greater engagement by

ECOSOC (and its sub-working groups), which has required of the IASC and its member agencies in-depth reviews of their capacities to respond to emergencies. Preparation of the requisite reports have provided a focus for IASC discussion on such issues as coordination and resource mobilization. Again, however, the results to date have disappointed. The ECOSOC review of humanitarian action scheduled for mid-1997, which was expected to bring a new rigor to the process, was upstaged by the UN reform discussions, then at a critical juncture.

Also of significance at the interagency level has been the establishment in 1997 by the Secretary-General of executive committees, designed to achieving greater policy coherence and interaction in the political, peacekeeping, humanitarian, human rights, and development dimensions of the UN system's response to crises. The inclusion of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA) -- and, for that matter, now on the IASC as well -- reflects the implementation of lessons distilled from a variety of conflicts regarding the centrality of human rights issues and a departure from 46-182. An ECHA working group tasked with recommending steps for implementing the reform package made a number of useful suggestions. However, no significant expansion of coordination authority is in sight and confusion remains regarding the division of labor between ECHA and the IASC.

Reform has been achieved in the groundrules governing the withdrawal of UN staff in insecure situations. Responding to situations earlier in the decade when the withdrawal of UN staff from places such as Somalia left the system without essential information about the deteriorating plight of the civilian population, the UN Secretariat has drawn up and implemented new groundrules which allow essential humanitarian personnel to remain in place after less critical UN staff have been withdrawn. NGOs, too, have taken steps to inform their decisions and equip personnel on matters related to the security of staff and programs.[31] Progress has also been made in formulating groundrules for the use of military and civilian assets in responding to major humanitarian crises.

At the intergovernmental level outside the UN system, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee has devoted attention to the impact of conflict on development activities. A Task Force formed in 1995 has produced a set of guidelines on conflict, peace, and development cooperation which were embraced in a policy statement in May 1997 by development ministers and others. The statement pledges to "Work with colleagues within our governments to ensure that all our policies -- including in the areas of security, policy and economic relations, human rights, environment and development co-operation -- are coherent in fostering structural stability and the prevention of violent conflict." The statement raises the possibility of "an independent co-ordinating authority to monitor donors' adherence to agreed principles "[32] The DAC Expert Group on Evaluation is also involved in major efforts in the lessons-learning area.

Beyond interagency and intergovernmental arenas, there have been other changes of potentially major proportions in individual agencies and governments. In late 1996, the World Bank approved new policy on post-conflict reconstruction, followed by a decision to establish a new department to orchestrate expanded operational involvement UNICEF has promoted successful adoption of a Convention on the Rights of the Child and backstopped a detailed study on the impact of armed conflict on children, which has subsequently been endorsed by the General Assembly and contributed to a more rights-based philosophy of programming[33].

A WHO process has reviewed its role in complex emergencies, noting structural and administrative inadequacies and recommending that the agency "should not normally take a direct role in service delivery or procurement and delivery of supplies."[34] The ICRC is about to implement recommendations flowing from its multi-year Avenir review. The Netherlands government has positioned its humanitarian assistance activities within its conflict resolution unit in an attempt to capitalize on the expected synergies. Such changes often reflect recommendations of individual lessons - learning studies, some of them confidential, others available to the public.

As the focus shifts to the more programmatic and procedural level, there is a proliferation of developments to report. One example is provided by the newly available Report of the Tripartite Lessons Learned Study of the Great Lakes mentioned above. The report highlights what it considers "the

importance of the achievements of the three agencies . . in developing the new formal and informal modalities of operational coordination and joint action." At the same time, it acknowledges that even such improvements "often could do little to harmonize agency operations" in the face of personality clashes, interagency competition, and other "natural" tendencies of the emergency system. The study's 28 recommendations offer an agenda for further progress.[35]

In view of the multiplicity of arenas, actions, and studies involved, it is difficult to establish with any precision the significance of the changes achieved to date, to say nothing of the extent to which they have resulted from lessons-learning processes. The evidence suggests, however, that the observations in the various Rwanda studies and their follow-up represent a microcosm of the larger picture of institutional change in the post-Cold War.

That is, while the mechanisms and mechanics of the humanitarian apparatus have been adjusted, the more systemic problems remain to be addressed. Reforms to date have been largely technical, procedural, logistical, and administrative in nature. These include memoranda clarifying relationships among humanitarian agencies of the UN system, guidelines for the utilization of military and civil defense assets, and rosters for personnel with particular expertise available for rapid deployment. In other words, the easiest changes have been made. Still to be addressed are the weak structures of humanitarian coordination and the knotty political and humanitarian tensions underlying the intergovernmental system itself.

Taking stock of the situation in 1995, one study concluded that "the United Nations has made surprisingly few fundamental changes of an institutional or a policy nature."[36] Three years later, a similar verdict would be equally justified, and more alarming.

Cultural impediments to learning

The fact that more significant changes have not been forthcoming, despite profound changes in the external environment, reflects a number of constraints in the institutional cultures of humanitarian organizations. Four are examined here.

The first is *the tendency to approach every crisis as unique*. Sooner or later in most discussions of humanitarian crises, someone observes that Zaire is not Cambodia, Somalia is not Bosnia, Sierra Leone is not El Salvador The point, while not exactly profound, is legitimate. Complex emergencies being complex, a one-size-fits-all response is inappropriate. The idiosyncratic dynamics of individual conflicts need to be taken into account in charting effective international responses.

In a more fundamental sense, however, no crisis is unique. "[E]ach crisis pits the same institutions (the United Nations, governments, NGOs) against the same [interlocutors] (government and insurgent groups, civilian and military host officials) in a continuing effort to find solutions to recurring problems (the obstruction of humanitarian access, the manipulation of relief, inequitable economic relationships, the absence of viable and accountable local structures). As long as every crisis is perceived as wholly without precedent or parallel, there will be little scope for institutional learning."[37]

In fact, overemphasis on the idiosyncratic reinvents the wheel and leaves earlier lessons unlearned. The manipulation of belligerent and criminal elements of the refugee camps in eastern Zaire in 1994 was a rerun of problems unaddressed in Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai border years before. The rebuffs in Sierra Leone in 1997-98 were not the first time that humanitarian agencies had been barred from fulfilling their mandates in insurgent regions. Yet, as noted above, little has been done to address the structural political constraints inhibiting the discharge of the UN's humanitarian responsibilities, whether in Khmer Rouge-held territory in Cambodia, SPLA-controlled southern Sudan, sovereignty-asserting Nagorno-Karabakh, or perilous Chechnya.

The second constraint to learning is *the action-oriented nature of the humanitarian ethos*. Much has been written about the hyperactive pace of the relief enterprise, borne of the need to respond to rapid-onset crises. In the heat of a crisis, humanitarian agencies and staff can hardly be expected to pause and reflect. The reality that "crisis x" is often followed by "crisis y" and "crisis z" -- if not accompanied

by them -- may shift such reflection more permanently to the back burner. As a result, copies of the multidonor Rwanda study and others like it remain intact in their cellophane wrappers.

There is an underlying tension, if not contradiction, between the can-do spirit of concern for suffering humankind and the discriminating calculations needed for effective functioning in today's internal armed conflicts. Only in recent years have the agencies taken specific steps to facilitate reflection on their mandates, strategies, modus operandi, and results. In fact, after some progress in approaching humanitarian activities with greater deliberation, the pendulum may be swinging in the opposite direction. Some NGO practitioners are now concerned that overdue attention to the broader political, military, and social context in which humanitarian interventions are set is beginning serve as a rationalization for inaction rather than a prelude to more strategic intervention.

The third cultural deterrent to learning is a certain *defensiveness to criticism.* Dismissive treatment by the spokesperson of the Secretary-General of the multidonor study surely impeded serious review of that very detailed and thoughtful examination of the UN response to the Rwanda crisis. Her comment to the press at a time when the report was still embargoed -- "we will not continue to take such criticisms lying down" -- was interpreted by those preparing to launch the findings and recommendations as "an attempt to undermine the report and unbalance media coverage of the launch."[38] The implicit message to UN officials was that the changes proposed were unneeded and, in the view of senior management, did not deserve serious consideration.

While institutions dependent upon public support are understandably reluctant to wash their dirty linen in public or to see others hang out their laundry, there are various signs of the emergence of a more self-critical breed of humanitarianism. Agencies that only a decade or two ago rebuffed efforts to examine the implications of the prevailing East-West political framework for humanitarian action are now much more prepared to consider the political dimensions of their work. Assessments themselves have become a cottage industry, with think tanks, universities, research groups, and consultants cranking out more material than can be digested, much less acted upon. A recent compilation of peacekeeping studies published during the first seven years of the post-Cold War period tallied 2200 titles in English alone. That number doubtless dwarfs the recent upsurge in policy reviews of humanitarian activities, whose numbers, as suggested by the ALNAP inventory, are nonetheless numerous.[39]

The swing of the pendulum from a dearth of thoughtful material to an abundance of it is welcome and overdue. Yet the latter extreme may be as unhelpful to the process of learning and change as was the former. Even the proliferation of so-called lessons learned units is not in and of itself a sign of progress. Since serious learning requires institutional change, such units might better be called "lessons-learning" or "lessons identified" units and viewed as means to an end rather than ends in themselves.

In any event, both DHA/OCHA and DPKO now have such bodies. They review the same crises, although from different perspectives, with different methodologies, and without much consultation Each has mounted half a dozen major studies in the past several years. DPKO's unit, which applies a standard set of questions and an established and highly iterative process to each review, is well staffed and securely situated within its parent department. That arrangement has concomitant advantages such as access to information and engagement of professional colleagues, as well as disadvantages, including more circumscribed terms of reference and less independence. DPKO's studies appear not to have generated much of a constituency either in-house or beyond.

The DHA (now OCHA) unit is smaller and less adequately provided for within the regular budget of its parent office. Reaching beyond its own staff to engage outside researchers in its studies, its approach is generally less constrained by institutional politics and more wide-ranging and independent in nature. While individual UN agencies have their own internal lessons-learning processes, DHA reviews have sparked interest across the broader humanitarian community and attracted a wide following in academic and policy circles.

Certainly the spirit of the times requires asking tough questions and subjecting policies and programs to rigorous scrutiny. One thoughtful critic has recently observed that in recent years, the agenda may have shifted "from a debate regarding how to reform the humanitarian system, to the question of whether it is

worthy of reform at all."[40] As long as reasonably satisfactory answers emerge, however, tough questions may be a vehicle for rekindling respect for the humanitarian impulse and principles. The court-martial of several Canadian peace keepers for mistreating Somali captives did not lead the Canadian public to demand, or the Ottawa authorities to initiate, reduced national involvement in international crises. Canada has indeed reaffirmed and continued its tradition of engagement. That said, many humanitarian institutions remain more wary of criticism than open to it.

The fourth constraint on lessons learning is *the prevailing lack of accountability*. The lessons-learning process is undercut by "the culture of impunity:" that is, the failure to hold actors responsible for their actions. As noted earlier, donor governments often send mixed signals to UN agencies and fail to demand appropriate accountability from their operational NGO partners. UN agencies point the finger at governments rather than taking responsibility for variables they themselves control. (Adapting the figure used in the IASC Great Lakes study, the UN, while neither king nor rook, it is nevertheless more than pawn.)

NGOs rationalize dubious levels of professionalism through appeals to their good intentions and voluntary ethos. Armchair generals criticize peacekeeping operations from desks in parliament without having slept in the UN barracks in Srebrenica or gone on patrol in Abkhazia. Conflict specialists pontificate about peace-building without having set foot on an ethnic fault line. Researchers do not take time to read what others write or assume responsibility for their own recommendations.

A recent study on improving the UN's management of economic sanctions, commissioned by the IASC utilizing independent researchers arranged by DHA and underwritten in part by the agencies -- provides both a fascinating insight into confused accountabilities and a good example of constructive post-Cold War change.[41] The study noted that humanitarian organizations are asked by governments to offset the "unintended consequences" of sanctions on vulnerable groups living under targeted regimes, consequences which in reality can be foreseen and are often indeed intended. Aid actors are then faulted for failing to relieve suffering, in part because of the unwieldy system by which governments simultaneously exempt and control humanitarian shipments. Governments themselves, monitoring humanitarian items closely as a threat to the integrity of sanctions, turn a blind eye to illicit imports. The Security Council's Sanctions Committees take decisions of major humanitarian import behind closed doors, well protected from public scrutiny.

For their part, UN aid organizations lack clear policy on how to function in countries under sanctions yet are reluctant to seek clarification for fear that stakeholder governments will tie their hands further. Among and within NGOs, themselves lacking policy in this highly political area, there is a high degree of opinionation by individual staff, often reflecting the particular responsibilities of given staff in the organization, and their personal views. The blurring of who among those involved in sanctions is accountable to whom for what reflects the lack of coherence and transparency in the sanctions scene.

Sanctions illustrates two dimensions of the problem of accountability. The first is the lack of clear policy and lines of authority by which actions of individuals and institutions may be judged. Should a UN aid official be chastised for expressing critical views about the impacts of sanctions on vulnerable groups when his or her organization lacks clear policy about how it will function when sanctions have been imposed? Should an aid organization be faulted for not delivering relief supplies effectively? Is a diplomat who votes to impose sanctions responsible for the pain they cause civilians? More often than not, accountability is something expected of someone else. Everybody -- but also nobody -- is ultimately responsible in the shell game.

The second dimension concerns the multiple points of accountability. NGOs are responsible to their boards of directors and the constituents who elect them, to donor governments and/or multilateral organizations from whom they receive resources, to partner organizations in crisis countries with whom they collaborate, and to beneficiaries on whose behalf they mount programs. Indeed, aid organizations attach great importance to their obligations to beneficiaries, although the prevailing measurements of accountability are largely western in orientation and character and quantitative in nature.

But change is taking place. The sanctions study was the outcome of efforts within the interagency body

and by individual agencies over a period of several years to address difficulties in Iraq, Haiti, Former Yugoslavia, Burundi, and Sierra Leone.[42] Following through on the study, which proposed a methodology and indicators for pre-assessing and monitoring sanctions impacts, the IASC formed an inter-agency technical group and also sent a first-ever communiqué to the Security Council articulating its concerns on the humanitarian impacts of economic sanctions.[43] During the years 1996-98, DHA/OCHA also carried out and/or coordinated sanctions missions to the Sudan, Burundi, and Sierra Leone. Such steps hold promise for addressing underlying as well as procedural problems experienced by the humanitarian community and for enhancing accountability.

Accountability is currently being enhanced in other ways as well. NGOs have taken steps to promote a voluntary code of conduct and to establish certain minimum essential thresholds in key programming sectors. The Sphere Project seeks to improve not only the quality of humanitarian response but also "the accountability of humanitarian agencies to beneficiaries, members and supporters." Some donor agencies are now making a given NGO's endorsement of the code a condition for receiving grants and contracts.

Yet since accountability also involves issues at the interface with political-military actors, it needs to be approached on various fronts in concert. There is little value in holding aid organizations accountable for problems encountered in reaching people inside Afghanistan, for example, when small-arms trade, acquiesced or engaged in by governments, is at the heart of the problem. Accountability is not just a one-way street.

An agenda for the future

The constraints to learning, however deeply rooted in the culture of humanitarian institutions, are not beyond remedy. Correcting the tendency to approach every crisis as unique will require development of greater institutional memory and greater attention to comparative analysis of similarities as well as differences among major humanitarian crises. Institutional implications include providing greater support for in-house evaluation capacity and more consistent and creative use of the results of outside studies.

The action orientation of humanitarian institutions is not likely to change significantly. However, it can and should be balanced by a more reflective approach to the challenges confronted. The idea is not that the agencies should become, Hamlet-like, sicklied over with the pale hue of thought but rather that their activities should be impelled and informed by more savviness about political, military, and social realities on the ground.

Defensiveness to criticism will not metamorphose overnight into more openness to change. The constraints run far deeper than will be remedied by placing a "suggestion box" outside the chief executive's office. Yet ways may be found to institutionalize incentives for constructive criticism and promote an culture receptive to thoughtful critiques of current policy and suggestions of alternatives. The studies reviewed confirm an indispensable role for outside researcher in keeping the system honest, although the data reviewed suggest that evaluations, external and internal alike, have at best limited impact on institutional change.

The prevailing lack of accountability is perhaps the most difficult constraint to address, since it reflects confusion in the accepted approach of coordination-by-consensus. The shell game described earlier in which no single individuals or institutions are held accountable for international humanitarian interventions undermines effective action. Accountability requires clear lines of authority, which in turn means clear-cut delineation of responsibility, political no less than humanitarian.

The future agenda for learning to learn cannot be tackled in isolation from the issues of coordination and the lackluster learning curve. That is, learning the lessons of the early post-Cold War period and of future crises will require a more sober view of institutional resistance to change and a more strategic approach to creating and managing opportunities for reform. Such an approach might permeate the unglamorous day-to-day work of coordination with greater purpose and energy. It would inject greater rigor into interagency coordination efforts. Had it infused the IASC Working Group meeting in Geneva