

## Knowledge, Power and Need in Disasters

### *A professional code for disaster-response agencies*

**T**hroughout the 1980s and 1990s there has been a steady growth in the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), both national and international, involved in disaster relief. In Burkina Faso in the late 1970s, more than 400 NGOs were registered with the government. In Bangladesh, the number today is said to exceed 1,000.

Many of these agencies, including National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the church agencies, Oxfam, the Save the Children Fund or CARE, have a history going back many decades and have gained a reputation for effective work. Others, more recently formed, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, have rapidly evolved to become respected operators. Along with these large and well-known agencies there are today a multitude of small, newly-formed groups, often coming into existence to assist in one specific disaster or in a specialised field of work.

What few people outside of the disaster-response system realise is that all these agencies, from the old to the new, from multi-million dollar outfits to one-man shows, have no accepted body of professional standards to guide their work. There is still an assumption in many countries that disaster relief is essentially "charitable" work and therefore anything that is done in the name of helping disaster victims is acceptable.

However, this is far from the truth. Agencies, whether experienced or newly-created, can make mistakes, be misguided and sometimes deliberately misuse the trust that is placed in them. And disaster relief is no

longer a small-time business. Today, even if those caught up in war are excluded, something in the region of 250 to 300 million people a year are affected by disasters, and this figure is growing at a rate of around 10 million a year. The Federation alone aims to assist some 14 million disaster victims during 1994.

There are now more people vulnerable to disaster. Vulnerable because they live in poverty or in collapsing economies, vulnerable because they are forced to live in close proximity to hazards, on flood plains, steep hill sides, marginal land and in urban shanty towns. Vulnerable because they are subjected to violence and intimidation, whether it be banditry, ethnic or religious discrimination, or sexual harassment.

Because of this increase in vulnerability, families and communities are no longer able to recover speedily after a flood or an earthquake. They remain in need of assistance for months or sometimes years after a disaster hits. But these growing needs of disaster victims are not balanced by an equal growth in the resources available to assist them, either at the national or the international level.

In western Europe, the concept of an all embracing welfare state is being thrown away. In many countries, governments are questioning the previously-sacrosanct notion that they have a direct responsibility to look after the weakest and the most vulnerable. Instead, they are contracting out the country's conscience to the private and voluntary sector. From the humanitarian perspective, it does not matter whether it is the State or



*Disaster relief work schemes are a two-edged sword. They bring food or cash to the few doing the work, but who really benefits in the long run? Who will control the water held back in the dams the disaster victims build? What happens to families too weak to work? Disaster relief is no longer simply distributing supplies to the needy. Relief should be about building new futures and empowering people to have more control over their own lives*  
Brazil, 1983. Sebastião Salgado/Magnum

private institutions which care for the vulnerable. What is important is that the notion of people having a collective responsibility to care for the weakest and least well-off is translated into resources to provide for that caring. The cause for concern in the industrialised States is the growing humanitarian gap between the needs of the most vulnerable and the resources devoted to assisting them.

In eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the welfare State has often completely collapsed and been replaced by raw competition; the survival of the strong and the fit, with virtually no resources, through the State or private sector, flowing to the most disadvantaged.

In many States in the South, governments have always lacked the re-

sources to exercise what should be a central part of the duties of sovereignty of all States: ensuring care for those who are the least well-off.

In all of these countries, as governments limit their role, it is the humanitarian agencies - local and international - who are left to work with the poor and the marginalised. Indeed, they are often contracted to do so by government, and many NGOs now find themselves being actively sought out to accept funds to provide welfare and aid services.

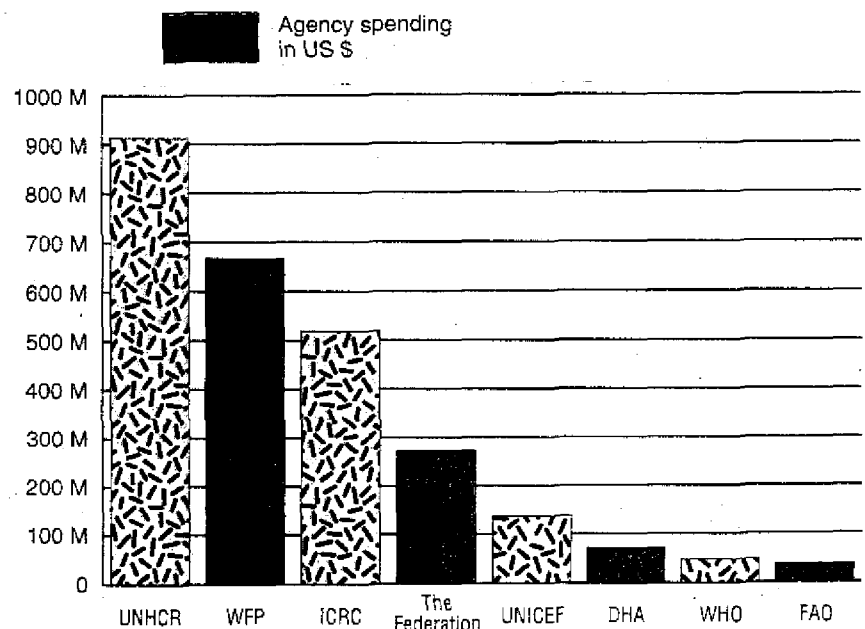
Writing in a report for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1993, John Borton from the London-based Overseas Development Institute points out that in any one year, up to US\$57 billion of assistance is channelled through the in-

*Disaster relief is now a multi-million dollar business with substantial amounts of cash flowing through the UN agencies and the NGOs to assist tens of millions of people each year. With so many lives at stake the need to set common professional standards has never been greater.*

Source: DHA-Geneva, the Federation, ICRC. (Estimates made in February 1994)

**Agency spending on international disaster relief in 1993**

| Agency         | US \$       |
|----------------|-------------|
| UNHCR          | 912,800,000 |
| WFP            | 667,500,000 |
| ICRC           | 519,000,000 |
| The Federation | 273,000,000 |
| UNICEF         | 138,000,000 |
| DHA            | 71,900,000  |
| WHO            | 47,800,000  |
| FAO            | 36,900,000  |



ternational relief system, and adds that since the 1970s there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of this aid channelled through NGOs. The European Union, the world's single largest funder of disaster assistance, increased its proportion of funding through NGOs from nothing in 1976 to 40% by the mid-1980s.

National and international NGOs are coming under increasing pressure: to act as the agents of donor policy; to shoulder the resources burden which should be shouldered by the State or arranged through the private sector; and to employ expatriate staff from their home countries when local expertise already exists in the disaster-affected countries.

Equally, the immediacy of disaster relief can often lead NGOs unwittingly to put pressure on themselves, pressure which leads to short-sighted and inappropriate work. Programmes which rely on foreign imports or expertise, projects which pay little attention to local custom and culture, and activities which accept the easy and high media profile tasks of relief but leave for others the less appealing and more difficult ones of disaster preparedness and long-term rehabilitation.

All NGOs, big and small, are susceptible to these internal and external pressures. And as NGOs are asked to do more, and the incidence of complex disasters involving natural, economic and often military factors increases, the need for some sort of basic professional code becomes more and more pressing.

Organisations like the Federation and NGOs have the unique advantage of appealing beyond government to concerned individuals who wish to help, and of working directly with disaster-affected individuals, families and communities, not just state institutions and government ministries. But if the humanitarian agencies do not jealously guard their professional standards they risk losing this unique people-to-people relationship and becoming just another deliverer of national or international governmental assistance.

It is for all these reasons that eight of the world's oldest and largest net-

works of NGOs (the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, the International Save the Children Alliance, the Lutheran World Federation, Oxfam and the World Council of Churches) have come together to draw up a professional Code of Conduct to set, for the first time, universal basic standards to govern the way NGOs work in disaster assistance.

The Code of Conduct, like most professional codes, is a voluntary one. It is applicable to any NGO, be it national or international, small or large. It lays down 10 points of principle which all NGOs should adhere to in their disaster response work, and goes on to describe the relationships agencies working in disasters should seek with donor governments, host governments and the UN system.

The Code is self-policing. No one NGO is going to force another to act in a certain way and there is as yet no international association for disaster-response NGOs which possesses any authority to sanction its members.

The Code is published here in the hope that NGOs around the world will find it useful and will want to commit themselves publicly to a bidding by it. Governments and donor bodies may want to use it as a yardstick against which to judge the conduct of those agencies with which they work. And disaster-affected communities have a right to expect those who seek to assist them to measure up to these standards.