Quality and control: In their work linking people who want to help across the world with those who desperately need assistance, international humanitarian agencies today have to set high and consistent professional standards. Standards of ethics, standards of technical competence and standards of accountability. In helping those in need help themselves and others, through support such as training, equipment and basic supplies, global humanitarian assistance now represents a key resource and a way of life for millions of near-permanent disaster victims.

Health worker, Sudan, 1991 Chris Steele-Perkins/Magnum

Doing the right thing: Why good practice?

This year sees the introduction of a new section to the *World Disasters Report*. Previous *Reports* have explored key long-term issues facing those involved in humanitarian response and have described the major emergencies and operations of the previous year. But the need to ensure and promote professionalism becomes ever greater, as humanitarian response becomes more complex and eats up a greater percentage of total overseas assistance budgets.

This new section is one attempt to answer that need. Each year the *Report* will focus on aspects of response practice, seeking to describe present-day best practice and point to future developments in the field. This year, we look at the preliminary and final stages of response, i.e., early warning systems and impact evaluation. Future editions will look at best practice in such areas as food-aid distribution and use, basic health care, programme management and moving from relief to development.

Why has ensuring good practice become so important? Firstly, the nature of humanitarian response has changed over the past decade. A trend which started in the 1970s has now become well established, relief operations, particularly those for refugees and displaced populations, often drift into long-term welfare support programmes. Thus relief can no longer hide behind the excuse that it is just about meeting short-term basic needs. Relief programmes today can have a profound effect on the long-term well-being and security of those they serve

Coupled with this increase in the longevity of relief operations, the percentage of a region's or country's population served by such programmes has grown. In many famine- and conflict-affected countries, relief projects may now reach anything from 10 to 40 per cent of the population. In other words, disasters and subsequent relief programmes can no longer be thought of as irrelevant to long-term development. The numbers involved today are staggering. The International

Federation alone found itself assisting over 15 million people in 1994, equivalent to the entire population of the Netherlands, Chile or Syria. Agencies who shoulder such power must also accept the responsibility that goes with it – a responsibility to those 15 million people to channel resources given essentially for them with efficiency, effectiveness and honesty to achieve both the short-term and long-term alleviation of suffering.

Added to these well-established trends is a new phenomenon, in some ways associated with the ending of the Cold War period. Humanitarian response is increasingly taking place in an environment of political changes, both local and international One newspaper headline in the 1980s referred to nurses working in famine relief camps as "angels of mercy", reflecting well, if rather naively, the image of relief work as an intrinsically noble activity which could do no harm and should be above all political concerns. Today's world is not like this. Most of today's large humanitarian response operations take place as a result of complex crises where civil strife, ethnic and religious aspirations, environmental pressures and social inequities come together to create human emergencies. Any action taken at such times to alleviate suffering will be seen by some factions as suspicious. Today, relief work has to strive actively to assert its impartial and neutral position vis-à-vis the humanitarian crisis and its causes. In so doing it has both to be, and be seen to be, consistent in its standards and rigorous in its efficiency and effectiveness.

As if this were not enough, the political changes have been paralleled by changes in the way humanitarian work is perceived. The information revolution and its opening up of the world to the instant eye of the news media has meant that humanitarian work is now open to instant scrutiny. And that scrutiny is bound to get tougher. In the past, the international news media covered most conflicts, famines and refugee crises in a simple way – the bad guys (or nature) caused the problem, those

suffering received the attention of our sympathy and the good guys helped alleviate the suffering. But today's conflicts and crises are no longer that simple. Most outside observers are at a loss to say which "side" is in the right and which in the wrong. The line between those who are suffering and those who are causing the suffering is increasingly blurred. The story of cause and effect in today's disasters and emergencies is just too unclear and complicated to portray via the news media. A new genre of story is needed, one which those receiving the news can associate with. That genre may well be revelations about failures in the aid system, the diversion of relief supplies, inefficiencies and mismanagement. To put it bluntly, the international humanitarian response system can no longer afford the luxury of assuming a gentle, supportive and unquestioning news media. From now on, the system's failings, real or imaginary, are going to be open to instant and public scrutiny.

What then are the critical areas where relief agencies must do, and be seen to do, the "right thing"? Where is best practice indispensable?

The *1994 World Disasters Report* launched a simple *Code of Conduct* for relief agencies and their workers (see Chapter 16 for a progress report of the *Code*). The *Code* provides the starting point for all systems of best practice in humanitarian response. As in any profession – medicine, law, engineering – technical standards must be based upon commonly-accepted ethical and moral standards, because the profession is essentially about serving people, not just creating academic or technical masterpieces.

What few people outside the disaster-response system realise is that humanitarian response agencies, from the old to the new, from multimillion dollar outfits to one-man shows, have no such 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. Thus, developing a common set of values within the international humanitarian response community is a key challenge of the 1990s.

If developing the internal standards of behaviour has become important, so too has displaying these standards to the outside world. Accountability is now a critical dimension of any relief agency's work. One aspect of accountability is touched upon later in this section, namely evaluation. Other aspects, particularly in the fields of financial accountability and auditing are becoming increasingly important to agencies. Many agencies now find themselves having to devote considerable resources to providing the specific financial tracking information a host of different donors require. The financial and narrative reporting systems that donors require agencies to use vary tremendously. While welcoming and complying with these standards, there is an increasing feeling amongst agencies that a degree of regulation needs to be introduced to this field so that that common internationally agreed standards for financial and associated narrative accounting can be reached.

Standards in cooperation

The information revolution, alluded to earlier in this chapter, has not only changed the way the news media work, it is also rapidly changing the way aid agencies function. For instance, the advent of computer networking means that agencies, regardless of where they are in the world, can instantly share information and ideas with other agencies. A multiplicity of networks is coming into existence to take advantage of this new-found openness. Disaster-net, relief-net, fed-net, the list goes on.

The increase in resources being channelled into humanitarian response, coupled with the immediacy of international media coverage has lead to an increasing pressure for agencies to compete for resources.

Media coverage of humanitarian crises in 1994 gave an unparalleled picture of misery and chaos. Aid workers appeared as heroic failures battling against impossible odds, waiting in vain for the international community to respond. This was nothing new, but unwelcome to an "international system" for humanitarian assistance which felt it had made some progress over the last 25 years in setting up coordination mechanisms to harness its collective strength.

Such cooperation, through the Disasters Emergencies Committee (DEC) in the United Kingdom, European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and EURONAID in the European Union, InterAction in the United States, all gave NGOs (PVOs – private voluntary organisations) an added credibility with their public. The maximising of resources and the combined clout seemed to work well with the policy-makers through a decade of crises, or at least to promise improvement. It was even duplicated at a higher UN level by the DHA, with a promise of international cooperation, to prevent a repeat of the indifference to Somalia's demise, and the launch of the Partners in Cooperation (PARINAC) process by the UNHCR to improve its cooperation with key non-government operational agencies.

But these promising signs of a more systematic response seem to be breaking down under the size and speed of recent humanitarian operations, throwing the spotlight on the public relations and fund-

raising activities of agencies. How far are they in control of a message which reflects their strategic aims? How well coordinated are they when confronted with a chaotic media process? What steps can they take, if any, to address policy-makers and public with a more concerted approach?

If the aid community is still groping for sound standards in how it should behave and interact with the world around it, then it can at least point to substantial, if incomplete, progress in setting more technical standards.

There is now reasonable international agreement on what constitutes a minimally acceptable level of provision for disaster victims in terms of water supply, the calorific value of food rations, and basic shelter. Less clear are standards for medical care. Should there be an internationally agreed basic standard of medical service for disaster victims, or must it be tailored to the conditions of the country they are in? For refugees, should medical services reflect the services they were used to in the country they have fled from, or those of the country they have fled to, or again some preconceived international standard?

More contentious still is the debate over the need for less immediate but equally important services. UNICEF has long championed the need for education services for refugees and internally displaced populations, the groups which make up by far the majority of today's disaster victims, but again, education to what level, by whom and following what system?

If standards for what agencies deliver and do are important, so are standards for how they do it. The process of relief is all too often neglected in the rush to save lives. Yet the way relief is carried out can have a profound effect upon the long-term well-being of the victims of disaster. Chapter 4 on early warning systems shows, at least for impending food crises, agencies have the possibility to choose their mode of intervention. They can wait until the provision of mass food aid seems to be the only solution, or they can intervene earlier in the process to forestall suffering.

As the *Code of Conduct*, referred to earlier, suggests, agencies providing relief can also choose to act apart from, or within the context of, the victims' suffering. Community participation in relief planning and management is a much touted and sought-after standard but one which requires a great deal of work to achieve in the heat of a relief operation.

Equally, the goals for relief work bear examination when we are exploring the need for standards. In alleviating famine, for instance, is the goal to alleviate present malnutrition or present and future food insecurity? For the former, the provision of food aid may suffice, but for the latter a much more developmental approach is required.

Conclusion

Over and above all these concerns, however, should stand one overriding principle. In this increasingly complex and competitive environment, humanitarian agencies need to be constantly reminded that they exist to serve those who are suffering and to alleviate and prevent that suffering. Our responsibility to follow best practice, to develop and champion high standards is a responsibility primarily to those we seek to serve – ironically, those who at present have least say in how humanitarian work is conducted. ∎
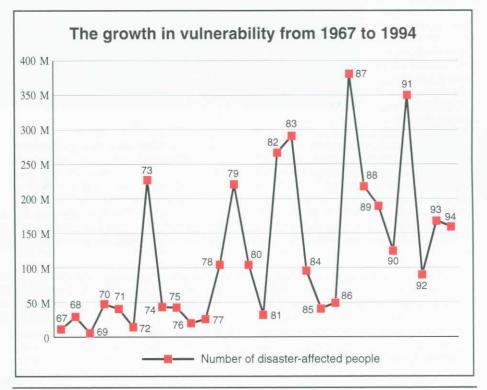
Figure 3.1 Ten million more: Growth in vulnerability. The number of people affected by non-conflict disaster continues to increase. Although there is great variation from year to year, averaging the data over a number of years suggests that around ten million extra people are affected by disaster each year. This increased case load is one of the key driving factors behind the need for more consistent and higher standards of humanitarian assistance.

Source: Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters

The growth in vulnerability from 1967 to 1994

Number of disaster-affected people