

# 13.

## CONCLUSIONS

### CHALLENGING CHARITY

*For most programmes, little is known of programme delivery, let alone impact.*

*OLS Review*<sup>1</sup>

#### DOES RELIEF WORK?

Nobody knows what the human impact of OLS and other humanitarian programmes in Sudan has been. It is remarkably difficult to find out. No relief programme has included a routine measure of mortality levels. Most of the numbers produced for people 'in need' or those 'reached' are difficult to justify. Some mortality surveys were undertaken in the aftermath of the 1984-5 famine (see chapter 3), but since then the quality of data has deteriorated.

It is notable that the 1996 OLS Review was not given the task of assessing lives lost and saved.

[T]he team will not be expected to undertake a detailed analysis of the impact of OLS programmes, but rather to review the effectiveness of the *modus operandi* in meeting the needs of war-affected civilians.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ataul Karim, Mark Duffield *et al.* *OLS: Operation Lifeline: A Review*, University of Birmingham, July 1996, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Terms of Reference for an Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) Review,' 18 August 1995, cited in *OLS Review*.

Hence, rather than assessing impact, the Review was instructed to concentrate on the internal logic of the operation. With a handful of exceptions, the same holds true for other assessments of relief activities in Sudan. *Access* is the simplest and most elementary proxy that is measured in place of impact.

This helps to explain why nobody has seriously attempted to prove that OLS has been of net benefit. The impossibility of making a clear case may also explain why OLS has not even been consistent in collecting and analysing the most basic and measurable types of data. There is a remarkable lack of transparency in how the figures are generated. The *OLS Review* concluded that information management within OLS on the whole had been inadequate, so that when UNICEF or other agencies have done useful research, the results tend to be forgotten, lost or ignored.<sup>3</sup>

The same difficulties of assessing impact hold for parallel relief operations. Among the most important are the ICRC relief programme, the Lutheran World Federation/Sudan Emergency Operations Consortium (LWF/SEOC) airlift, and the Combined Agencies Relief Team (CART) in Juba and its environs. The culture of discretion and confidentiality within ICRC makes its programmes singularly difficult to evaluate: they have not been discussed here. After six years of operations, the LWF/SEOC operations (to Juba and elsewhere in the South) were independently reviewed in 1994-5.<sup>4</sup> The review failed to find identifiable benefits from the expenditure of \$40 million, as a result of which the consortium was radically changed. Ten years after its formation, CART has not had a thorough independent review—the closest is a desk study conducted in 1992,<sup>5</sup> as the prelude to a field-based main evaluation that was in the event never carried out.

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<sup>3</sup> *OLS Review*, pp. 221-234

<sup>4</sup> Mark Duffield, Helen Young, John Ryle and Ian Henderson, *Sudan Emergency Operations Consortium (SEOC): A Review*, University of Birmingham, February 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Graham and John Borton, 'A Preliminary Review of the Combined Agencies Relief Team (CART), Juba 1986-91,' London, Overseas Development Institute, March 1992.

These are the better examples. Most relief programmes have never been systematically assessed at all. While some international NGOs carry out internal evaluations (some of which are fairly critical), independent assessments are notably absent.

So, nobody can say, or even forward a realistic guess, how many people have died from famine in Sudan. In 1989 the UN publicly used a figure of 250,000 dead in Southern Sudan, without making it clear which period this referred to, and with the implicit claim that OLS was preventing a similar scale of disaster. This was a shot in the dark. Other figures cited since then have also been guesses.

This is extraordinary. Relief operations have consumed billions of dollars. All are justified on the grounds that they are saving the lives of ordinary Sudanese people, especially women and children. But they cannot produce systematic evidence that they have succeeded. Relief programmes rest on the logic that by delivering essential supplies to needy areas, and in isolated cases observing a measurable increase in (for example) child nutrition, that they must be doing good. To some extent, this logic holds. Almost for sure, relief programmes have saved some lives and sustained some livelihoods, but on what scale, nobody knows.

What does this extraordinary failure of information mean? It indicates a basic failure of concern for human impact. For all the major relief institutions, other considerations seem to be more important.

## **HUMANITARIANISM AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Taking a cold, objective look at the effectiveness of humanitarian programmes in Sudan is not an encouraging experience. At a purely technical level, the failures are often shocking enough. Looking at the wider social and political impact of aid leads to a persistent worry: perhaps relief assistance has done more harm than good. Humanitarian aid may be motivated by sympathy and altruism, but it is hard to escape the conclusion that these noble motives are often wasted.

### **Calling Agencies to Account**

The 1990s have seen growing pressure for humanitarian institutions to become more accountable. There has been a succession of reviews of major operations, growing in independence and criticism. The taboo of criticising NGOs was broken in a major way in Rwanda in 1994. The Joint Evaluation of Emergency Operations in Rwanda, commissioned by the Danish Government under the auspices of the OECD<sup>6</sup>, went a step further than any previous review. It had a higher profile and was more authoritative, and had one volume dealing with specifically political matters. The volume on emergency relief concentrated on technical and professional shortcomings in the relief operations and was uniquely frank about their extent. The Joint Evaluation team was disturbed by the inflated claims of success made by NGOs, and 'came across examples of agencies telling, if not falsehoods, then certainly half-truths.'<sup>7</sup> It also noted 'a remarkable lack of attempts by agencies to seek the views of beneficiaries on the assistance being provided.'<sup>8</sup> Comparable criticisms were made of the UN, notably its lack of preparedness both for the genocide and the enormous flow of refugees, migrants and fugitives to Goma in Zaire. The UN unconvincingly disputed some of the team's findings.

Pointing out shortcomings is one thing: enforcing change is another. Just a few months after the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Operations in Rwanda, many very similar errors were committed in response to the emergency in eastern Zaire. Toughening up the evaluation process is necessary. One option is an international emergencies commissioner, who would have quasi-judicial powers within the UN-donor system, to investigate humanitarian operations and expose their successes and failures.

The OLS Review is part of the same pressure for accountability. Its conclusions were tough on the Sudan Government and some UN agencies (notably UNDP). In this case, enforcement was hampered by the fact that the main potential beneficiary of the Review, the

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<sup>6</sup> Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience*, Vol. 3, *Humanitarian Aid and Effects*, Copenhagen, March 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

SPLA-SRRA, chose to attack the review process as a sham. As a result, the Sudan Government strategy of a low-key response paid off handsomely, as operations have continued much as before. Meanwhile, internal discussions continue in the UN and between UN agencies and donors.

Although the *OLS Review* is a public document, the review process has been controlled by governments and the UN, and therefore has remained hostage to their interests. Something more radical is needed: a more public and democratic process that involves a much wider section of Sudanese people.

### **Calling Donors to Account**

Donor governments bear great responsibility for what has happened in Sudan. Many of them have short memories, and regard, for example, the over-generous and uncritical U.S. assistance to President Nimeiri as history, no longer of current relevance.

Western government's strategic and commercial interest in Sudan is now very slender. The prominence of humanitarian assistance in their involvement is a manifestation of this: it is the minimum they are ready to do. Lacking a clear political agenda of their own, donors should be able to adopt policies that will allow the Sudanese people to find peaceful and democratic solutions to their problems. This has not happened: instead, the western agenda has largely been driven by humanitarian agencies, which have their own priorities and institutional interests. As this book has documented, this agenda has readily been manipulated and co-opted by the Sudan Government. Donors bear a responsibility for this.

### **Accountability for Famine Crimes**

Sudan has its share of war criminals: individuals responsible for gross violations of the Geneva Conventions and other crimes against humanity. A string of human rights publications has documented these violations, though rarely have the perpetrators been identified by name. The issue of accountability for war crimes is currently not on the political agenda in Sudan. There are several reasons for this, including the culpability of members of previous governments, now

in opposition, and the culpability of members of the SPLA. As with the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, the belligerents anticipate that a post-war settlement will involve 'reconciliation', taken to include an amnesty for abuses committed during the war. This assumption is deeply problematic. Impunity for those primarily responsible for gross crimes against humanity can only encourage future perpetrators to believe they can do the same thing.

There are clear legal, moral and political arguments for calling war criminals to account. This includes those who have inflicted famine. The Geneva Conventions prohibit the infliction of starvation as an instrument of war.

The political logic of famine prevention is based on deterrence: those who create famine or permit it to happen will pay the price. This same logic applies *a fortiori* to famine crimes committed in wartime. The prosecution of war and famine criminals should prove a deterrent to further such crimes, if not immediately then further into the future.

## **BUILDING AN ANTI-FAMINE POLITICS**

Famine will not be the central political issue in Sudan. Peace, self-determination, economic disarray and the constitutional place of Islam are some of the problems that will preoccupy Sudanese democrats, should they assume power, (assuming they are not wholly preoccupied with competition for office). But famine prevention should be elevated to be one of the central political issues.

Famine-vulnerable people themselves are a large but marginalised constituency. Most of them live in Sudan's peripheries and have historically been neglected by the ruling parties. As the NIF has recognised, food and other forms of assistance (notably micro-credit) can be a means of mobilising poor people. Democrats should recognise this opportunity too: there can be a progressive politics of food.

An anti-famine politics in Sudan needs international allies. For the most part, international relief institutions have been wedded to ideas of political neutrality and technical proficiency, which have obscured the political nature of famine and famine prevention. There

are exceptions, and there is a challenge for such international organisations to join a democratic Sudanese anti-famine politics.

### **Tackling Causes**

Democratic process means putting some of the basic causes of famine on the political agenda. Sudanese democrats already have a long list of difficult problems to address, should they have an opportunity. But some relatively neglected questions also need also to be considered:

- Land reform is a fundamental issue. Unjust systems of land ownership are a basic reason for war and famine in the Nuba Mountains and a number of other regions. Equitable rural development in Sudan will remain impossible unless commercial mechanised farming ceases to be given priority over smallholder agriculture.
- Ownership of natural resources is a related but slightly different issue, especially in that it includes the Nile waters and oil reserves. Resolving this issue cannot be separated from the demands for regional autonomy and self-determination, not just for the South but for other marginalised areas.
- A democratic planning, development or famine prevention process has never existed in Sudan. Lack of popular consultation in aid programmes has been notorious. If there is only one lesson to be learned from the war, it is that rural Sudanese cannot be governed peaceably without their consent.
- Demilitarisation of rural Sudan will be essential as a prerequisite for establishing rural administration, social services, justice and normal economic activity. This in turn requires settling the disputes and grievances that give people reason to hold arms. It is a much more lengthy process than establishing a national peace accord or electoral framework, but experience demonstrates that unless local peace is guaranteed, national peace will not prevail.

- Challenging the current economic dispensation. The NIF has 'bought' Sudan, and established its economic control through a range of banks, businesses, foundations and charitable organisations, as well as the institutions of central government. The economic interests of substantial sections of the opposition are also tied up in commercial farming, banking and import-export businesses. Constitutional change alone will not affect this economic stranglehold, which underpins many of the forces that promote war and famine.
- A governmental obligation to preventing famine is needed. This is much more than a simple administrative commitment, to be implemented when resources allow: it should have mechanisms for enforcement from the outset. The proposal for a commission of inquiry has been mentioned above: a domestic version, operating within a democratic framework, could prove an effective way of monitoring governmental (and NGO) effectiveness at fighting famine.

One of the challenges of an anti-famine politics in Sudan is to identify and articulate these issues, so that they can be put on the political agenda and pursued at the appropriate moment. This in turn requires building a political coalition ready to do that.

### **Challenging Humanitarian Power**

Foreign relief agencies will continue to play an important role in Sudan for the foreseeable future. Their technocratic approach to famine relief has provided a pretext for marginalising the politics of famine, while their resources have supported the authoritarians and encouraged an external orientation. Most insidiously, humanitarian power influences the way that people think: it makes them expect solutions from outside. International aid has *managed* Sudan's political decay rather than *halted* it. By concealing the true nature of the wounds it has prevented correct diagnosis and treatment by Sudanese themselves. It may do so again.

Sudanese democrats need to challenge the power of humanitarian agencies and the ways in which they have dominated the anti-famine agenda. Rhetorical and propaganda challenges are not helpful. An effective alternative anti-famine practice is required, based on a Sudanese agenda for tackling the political and economic causes of famine.

## **FIGHTING FAMINE DURING WARTIME**

Currently, the war is a reality in Sudan. One challenge is to bring it to an end; a second is to minimise its human cost; a third is to try to assist in the moulding of progressive political agendas during wartime. The second and third challenges are linked: effective wartime famine relief depends upon the political colour of the belligerent that controls the area and population.

Despite its impressive ability to mobilise people and resources in pursuit of a comprehensive agenda, the NIF government is perpetuating and deepening conflict and the prospects for famine in Sudan. While it continues to pursue its agenda, including the Comprehensive Call, Sudan will not be free from famine.

After nearly fourteen years of war, the SPLA has failed to forge a democratic contract in Southern Sudan. Despite the avowals of its leadership, and the best efforts of many of its members, the SPLA remains a prisoner of its past—and indeed the previous history of failed attempts to establish a system of government in South Sudan. Since 1993, there has been enormous enthusiasm among Southern Sudanese and foreign friends for promoting an agenda of democratisation, capacity building and civil society. Some efforts have been well-meant, some self-serving, but progress has been disappointingly slow.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) also gives little reason for optimism. Among its leaders are many of those who were prominent in the pro-war and pro-famine coalition of 1985-9, and they have not expressed remorse for their crimes during that period nor indicated readiness to learn from their mistakes. Issues such as land reform and accountability for creating famine are not on the NDA agenda. Within the NDA, however, there are many who recognise these failings, and some who are ready to learn from them.

The last constellation of forces is in the marginalised areas—regions neglected by both government and opposition. A new model humanitarianism can be developed in these areas, where the humanitarian international has penetrated least, and there is a degree of popular mobilisation by anti-government forces. This has already occurred to some degree in the Nuba Mountains, and there are possibilities elsewhere, such as southern Blue Nile and the Beja Hills. The obstacles are tremendous, but the tenacity of people such as the Nuba and Beja in the face of threats to their survival should not be underestimated.

If a democratic coalition emerges in Sudan, deeply committed to the fight against famine, there will be an opportunity for a constructive engagement by humanitarian agencies, to support them and their approach, or at the very least to provide the political space for them to pursue their agenda without being derailed by a technocratic, charitable approach. Some NGOs should be able to meet this requirement, and themselves challenge humanitarian power.

### **The Virtues and Limits of Neutrality**

But no such opportunity exists at present. In the absence of tangible democratic options: where does this leave a progressive humanitarianism? Abandoning suffering people to their fate because of unpleasant political authorities is not humane.

The ICRC has long developed rules for operating in such situations, governing its activities by international humanitarian law, and using the utmost discretion and diplomacy. Neutrality is prominent among the ICRC's principles. Neutrality has its virtues. Most importantly, it is a mechanism for providing access. It can also be a lever against the co-option of humanitarian programmes by belligerents with abusive agendas. (In fact, in Sudan the main use to which the concept has been put has been to criticise the government's manipulation of relief, starting with CART and most recently manifest in the *OLS Review*.)

Operation Lifeline Sudan has been derived from broadly the same set of principles, but has been required to adapt them. These adaptations have their perils. The first is publicity: OLS was

launched in a blaze of media attention and (at least the Southern Sector) has seen facilitating journalists as one of its tasks. Publicity is important to OLS's ability to attract funds from western governmental donors, and has also been seen as providing a measure of protection for the programme. A second change from the ICRC mode of operation is an unwillingness to withdraw. OLS (again, especially the Southern Sector) has become an institution in its own right, determined to preserve itself. Its donors are also determined to see it continue, for a range of reasons.

### **OLS, the SRRA and Responsibilities in the South**

Perhaps most importantly, OLS makes much larger claims for itself than any ICRC programme, entailing larger responsibilities. The Southern Sector has found itself drawn into a vacuum of quasi-governmental responsibility, that it cannot adequately fill, by the shortcomings of the SPLA and SRRA. To be fair to the SPLA, OLS has also embraced the opportunities for control and programme expansion, leading to some understandable frustrations from the SRRA that it is unable to regulate humanitarian activities. This was not envisaged at the launch of OLS, and reflects the way it has grown in an ad hoc way over the years. The rehabilitation, education, capacity building and humanitarian principles programmes of OLS-Southern Sector are all manifestations of this: while they are the most welcome programmes, they also intrude into the social fabric of the South. OLS's relationship to the SPLA and SRRA has echoes of aid agencies in the South in the 1970s, and reminds many Southerners of the colonial encounter.

International humanitarian law was not set up to deal with such a situation: there are no clear rules for how to operate. The Geneva Conventions deal solely with emergency relief, not with education or capacity building. The latter are essential for maintaining a functioning society, but humanitarian law is concerned with much narrower questions. The legal grounds for sustaining such programmes are uncertain, faced with Sudan Government objections founded on sovereignty. This kind of intimate involvement in a war-stricken society is also best done from a sense of solidarity by organisations and individuals closely committed to the cause.

The Geneva Conventions also bestow primary responsibility for meeting relief needs on the host authority. With this responsibility goes the power to regulate relief activities. This is based on the assumption that the host authority can actually do both of these tasks, which is questionable in the case of the SRRA. If the ICRC had been responsible for the programme, the SPLA's role would have remained clear, but the ICRC would not have moved beyond relief and modest rehabilitation assistance.

The SPLA and SRRA would much prefer an operation that abandoned neutrality and provided them with direct assistance out of solidarity. They have measured OLS against this standard and found it wanting. Mario Muor Muor, SRRA Secretary General had a legitimate point when he contrasted the co-ordination and control role played by the Sudan Government in the Northern Sector, with the much smaller role played by the SRRA—UNICEF has taken on most aspects of co-ordination.<sup>9</sup> He pointed out that the Geneva Conventions bestow this responsibility on the SPLA rather than any international agency. However valid this point, the reality is that the SPLA cannot easily improve its position *vis-à-vis* foreign humanitarian agencies and their donors. First, the legal case remains contentious (sovereignty remains an issue). Second, western donors remain sceptical of the SRRA's capacity for effective co-ordination. Only when the SRRA can prove its ability to do the job as well as it can it mount an effective challenge to OLS's lead role. Third, agencies and donors are unimpressed by the record of human rights and democratisation within the SPLA. Solidarity assistance springs from admiration for the struggle and how it is conducted. At present, the SPLA can only expect uncritical solidarity from certain small Christian groups which have their own agendas to pursue.

There are understandable reasons why the SRRA and SPLA remain weak, but their weakness is a hard fact. Ultimately it is their challenge to prove to the international humanitarians that they can do the job. They have not yet risen to this challenge. Probably, they would have a better chance if there was less of an international humanitarian intrusion: on these grounds, there is a strong case for

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<sup>9</sup> Mario Muor Muor, 'SRRA Position Paper on Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) Southern Sector,' SRRA, 27 November 1995.

making OLS smaller. However, until both capacity and democratic accountability are proven, in the meantime there is little alternative except a relief operation founded on the principle of neutrality. This need not be OLS, at least in its present form, but something designed along similar lines is necessary if significant international relief operations are to continue in Southern Sudan.

### **Extremist Islam, OLS and Co-option in the North**

Perhaps the biggest problem with OLS is the degree to which the Northern Sector has been co-opted and manipulated by the Sudan Government, in pursuit of a systematically abusive military and political agenda, making a nonsense out of neutrality and accountability. There is a very powerful case for demanding that these principles be enforced, or that OLS drastically cut back on its Northern Sector programmes. In particular, 'development' schemes in the government sector should not receive international support.

The Sudan Government's overarching project is the total transformation of society in the image of extremist Islam. Islamic relief is an integral part of this. Islamic relief has a number of advantages over the Christian tradition and secular humanitarianism. Its emphasis on obligations and justice is a welcome change from western notions of charity that have proved so damaging in Africa. Many of those who criticise Islamic relief—notably some fundamentalist Christians—are hypocritical. But the NIF's project of Islamic relief under the Comprehensive Call is deeply flawed. It furthers the interests of a political and commercial elite drawn from a narrow social class and ethnic group, concentrating power and wealth in their hands. The Comprehensive Call is pursued by exploiting the vulnerability of poor, marginalised and oppressed people, who have little option but to submit to its agenda. It is closely integrated into a military strategy that involves gross and systematic violations of human rights.

Little has been published about Islamic relief in Sudan. One reason is that western relief workers and scholars know rather little about it. Another is that diplomats and senior relief officials, especially at the UN, are reluctant to criticise it from fear of appearing anti-Islamic. A policy of tacit co-operation has been

adopted by default. This is not acceptable: the merits and demerits of the Comprehensive Call and Islamic relief in NIF-ruled Sudan must be debated openly. It is important to distinguish between the noble principles of Islamic humanitarianism and its practice in Sudan. The conclusion of this study is that Islamic relief in Sudan is too deeply compromised in abusive and exclusive government policies to be worthy of humanitarian support.

### **Should OLS Continue?**

Another huge problem with OLS is that nobody knows whether it is doing any good, that is, saving any lives. The *OLS Review* did not attempt to address this question. It is difficult to make sensible policy choices about international assistance to Sudan, as humanitarian crises emerge in eastern Sudan, without this information. It would be pointless to maintain OLS if it is not delivering on its basic aim of saving lives, at the price of ignoring suffering elsewhere.

The most precious element of OLS is the principle of a negotiated breach of sovereignty that opens up a 'humanitarian space' in parts of Southern Sudan accessed by OLS Southern Sector. When there is acute famine in the South, this principle is essential. When there is none (which in practice means most of the time), the quantities of aid delivered are much less important than maintaining the principle. This has important implications for OLS's priorities. In particular, the chance to be operational on the ground should not be pursued at the cost of neutrality and accountability.

Internationally, OLS produces the illusion that 'something is being done.' The default option for any foreign initiative to do with Sudan is 'let's maintain OLS.' This leaves other options for action hostage to the fortunes of OLS (as the case of the Nuba in 1992 shows). The OLS budget also swallows up money that could be used elsewhere.

In conclusion, humanitarian neutrality remains an important principle in a war in which no side has the capacity and political agenda to enable an effective struggle against famine. An OLS-type operation will be needed for the foreseeable future in Southern Sudan: in practice, this means a continuation of OLS. But in the Northern Sector OLS has become far too compromised. In the Southern

Sector, it has raised too many expectations and become too intrusive. A smaller OLS might be a more effective one. In the meantime, the challenge for Sudanese democrats and like-thinking outsiders is to make OLS unnecessary as quickly as possible.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to end any analysis of contemporary Sudan on an optimistic note. The problems are so huge and the potential solutions—when they can be identified at all—are so difficult, that few pessimists have been proven wrong. The greatest source of hope is the tenacity and resilience of the Sudanese people. They have shown an extraordinary capacity to cope with adversity, and in many cases to work for democratic or peaceable solutions. It is a simple truism that solutions can only lie in the hands of Sudanese people. Measures that lead to greater popular involvement and accountability are the surest way of moving towards solutions.

International aid can do many things, but solving political problems and preventing famine do not figure among them. If there is a domestic political process that has humanitarian objectives, then aid can support that process. Otherwise, the best that aid can do is not to obstruct political processes and not obscure real power relations and the need for accountability, while alleviating some human suffering. Aid is the source of many illusions. Democracy, accountability and the prevention of human tragedies require a freedom from such illusions.