

Humanitarian aid and reconstruction

More than saving lives

‘Humanitarian aid has moved to the heart of the political debate’, according to Thea Hilhorst, professor of humanitarian aid and reconstruction at Wageningen University. ‘Discussions on humanitarian aid are always centred on the latest crisis. I want to address more fundamental issues’. In doing so, she is asking some difficult questions.

By **Mariëtte Heres**

Professor Hilhorst, you are the first to hold the chair of humanitarian aid and reconstruction at Wageningen. Why was this chair created?

The chair is part of a development in which the importance of humanitarian aid has gradually been recognized. In the 1970s and 1980s aid was ideological. Formal aid was provided in the frame of the Cold War and non-governmental organizations were driven by notions such as solidarity and liberation. Those who wanted to provide neutral humanitarian aid were regarded as nerds. After the Cold War, humanitarian aid became more important politically. Since Kosovo, humanitarian interventions have also come to mean bombing campaigns. NATO’s actions moved the whole concept of humanitarian aid to the heart of the political debate, so that it now receives much more attention.

Development organizations are also devoting themselves to emergency aid, as a by-product of their core activities. Almost all humanitarian aid organizations now have a ‘mixed mandate’, providing both development assistance and emergency aid. Until the 1990s, emergency aid activities were never evaluated. There was no need for that when lives were being saved. But development organizations have now extended the debate on regular aid to include emergency aid. Humanitarian studies is well on the way to becoming a full-fledged multidisciplinary field.

You recently received a grant to conduct research in Ethiopia. What do you intend to study there now, 20 years after the famine?

Few people are aware that Ethiopia has never completely recovered from the famine. Since 1985, at least 5 million people have received food aid for part of the year. The Ethiopian government, together with humanitarian and development agencies, has set up programmes to address structural aspects

Thea Hilhorst has worked in the disaster studies section of the Centre for Rural Development at Wageningen since 1998, and was awarded the first chair in humanitarian aid and reconstruction in April 2006. Professor Hilhorst is currently researching the organization and implementation of humanitarian aid, its impact on the areas affected by disasters, and the attitudes to aid among recipients. She is particularly interested in the relationships between humanitarian aid, socio-economic and political developments, military interventions, disaster responses and peace building.

of this situation, and we want to examine how they are working out in practice.

I believe this is very important. With increasing population growth, environmental degradation and climate change, it is expected that large areas will become unsuitable for year-round survival. For centuries, Ethiopians have resolved this problem with temporary migration, but today this is not always possible. Is it a bad thing when people leave *en masse* to live in cities? Or are the social costs so high that it is socially, economically and politically more justifiable to offer them subsidies so that they stay in these areas? Perhaps providing food aid for three months each year is a relatively inexpensive way to halt the endless trek to the cities. But development practice is at the moment very much against the idea of subsidies.

Is such a programme likely to make people dependent on aid?

Our Ethiopian counterparts at the Bahir Dar University thought it very important to examine this issue, and have therefore included it in the study. Researchers such as Barbara Harrel-Bond, Gaim Kibreab and others have long debated whether the availability of aid makes people passive and dependent. It is a tricky debate, because it leads to blaming the victims: if a programme fails, you don’t need to look at what the agency did wrong, but can blame it on the people’s dependency. ►

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Professor Thea Hilhorst on a recent mission in Afghanistan

Research since the early 1990s has shown that aid recipients are not at all passive. If people in areas stricken by famine were just to sit and wait for aid, they would die. The level of aid is not that high, and those who receive it use it strategically – they adopt all kinds of strategies to survive, and using aid as best they can is only one of them.

Yet the argument about aid dependency keeps recurring. The people in Bahir Dar convinced me that we should be open to research it properly. The idea of a dependency syndrome among short-term refugees has been refuted, so in this case we now want to measure people's attitudes after more than 20 years of receiving aid. The debate on aid dependency has become highly politicized, with researchers claiming it does not exist, while aid providers continue to refer to it. I think it is important that we come up with evidence-based arguments to resolve this question.

As well as looking at emergency aid in Ethiopia, you are also involved in research in Angola. What is that about, and why Angola?

Discussions on humanitarian aid are always centred on the latest crisis. I want to remove the element of urgency from the debate and address more fundamental questions. In Angola I am studying whether it is better to restrict emergency aid directly to saving lives, or whether we can be more ambitious in terms of development. I am also concerned with whether it is a good idea to work with local institutions in providing humanitarian aid, or perhaps not at all. How you answer these questions depends very much on the nature of the crisis.

We are conducting a comparative study within one country, Angola. 🗨️ It is possible in Angola because the country's history can be divided into very clear periods: decolonization, the Cold War, and the civil war over oil and other natural resources. And then, suddenly, there was a period of peace. We hope to compare these different periods to see whether the various forms of aid that were provided actually made a difference to people's lives. Did it make a difference if the aid was provided by a country that supported the regime, such as Cuba, or by the Red Cross? What impact did this have on the population? Or did it not matter one way or the other, because people had to rely on their own resources to survive? I suspect that this is the case.

How have the various crises influenced this discussion, and have any lessons been learned over time?

In my area of study, humanitarian aid, very few studies have

been conducted over an extended period of, say, ten years. Usually, organizations ask consultants to address a specific question and they spend perhaps three weeks in the area affected by the crisis. That means that the study is formulated and conducted in the heat of the moment, and often takes the point of view of the intervening agencies. But there are other realities too, most importantly the realities of the people affected.

One of my PhD students, Luis Artur, has recently examined the interventions that followed the floods in Mozambique – while seemingly logical and reasonable from the agencies' point of view, these interventions were completely inappropriate because they failed to consider the needs and concerns of the people affected. Thus, while the actions of the relief agencies were focused on ensuring the physical survival of flood victims, the people themselves were interested in salvaging their livelihoods and maintaining their social networks. They refused to evacuate not out of stupidity, but because they wanted to secure their means of existence first.

World Conference on Humanitarian Studies

In response to the growing attention to humanitarian aid, Thea Hilhorst has taken the initiative to convene a World Conference on Humanitarian Studies, which will bring together academic researchers, policymakers and practitioners. The conference will be held in Groningen, the Netherlands, from 4 to 8 February 2009, organized jointly by the Universities of Groningen, Wageningen and Bochem.

For more information, visit www.humanitarianstudies2009.org.

Have NGOs asked you to conduct research that goes further than quick consultancy work?

Yes, on disaster preparedness, for example. Another PhD researcher, Annelies Heijmans, has studied disaster preparedness in Afghanistan and Indonesia, in collaboration with ICCO and Oxfam Novib. This analysis went further than an evaluation, because we were looking for ways to respond better to the situation in which people find themselves. One of the findings of the study was that, if you want to respond effectively to floods and earthquakes, you have to adopt an integrated strategy that also addresses poverty and the political situation. For local people, these threats are interconnected: their insecurity is due to natural, political and economic factors. When an agency is only interested in addressing earthquake risks in Afghanistan, without taking into account these complex realities, they fail to take people's concerns seriously. ■

- B. Harrell-Bond (1986) *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*. Oxford University Press.
- G. Kibreab (1993) The myth of dependency among camp refugees in Somalia, 1979–1989. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6(4): 321–349.
- Chair of Disaster Studies at Wageningen University: www.disasterstudies.wur.nl

🗨️ *A longer version of this interview can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu.*