THE NGO - MEDIA RELATIONSHIP : MANAGING AMBIGUITY

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The media, and in particular the electronic media, exercise a tremendous influence in shaping disaster response. In today's world, media are, more than ever, "the eyes and ears of the world", (IFRC, 1994) especially in regards to emergency operations which attract considerable media attention.

It is essentially through the media that the public - donors and potential donors - and governments learn about situations of humanitarian crisis and of the needs, and "even the most astute policymakers must rely on the media for information and to communicate their views". (Girardet, 1993: 39) A survey conducted in Australia has shown that only a tiny minority of respondents said that they got their information on foreign aid and development from sources other than television, radio and the daily newspapers.[1] "Intense and uneven media interest has had a major impact upon international responses" to humanitarian crises. (*Challenges of the Nineties*, 1995: 2)

[1] Remenyi J. in 'Australia's foreign aid involvement: a report on a survey of attitudes of Australians', *Australian Outlook*, 1984

On the positive side, media help promote some humanitarian causes and therefore provide support to NGOs' lobbying efforts to mobilise public opinion on humanitarian issues. In turn, an aware and concerned public is more likely to provide his financial and moral support to NGOs which are then able to put more pressure on governments to take up these issues. Girardet remarks that broad public sympathy for the Somalis was probably the main reason behind US military intervention in Somalia.[2]

> NGOs, when working with media, can exert decisive influence on Western governments in getting them to push for humanitarian action. (Ingram, 1993: 23)

Bernard Kouchner, founder of MSF, quickly understood the power of media in helping NGOs to promote humanitarian causes. He also realised that, to get the attention of the public, images of human distress had to be shocking and revealing. "An image of a starving baby imprinted itself on the psyche of the 1960s". (*World Disasters Report 1997*: 10)

For NGOs which reject the ICRC's principle of neutrality and are willing to address the root causes of human suffering, the media become an essential partner. For NGOs which follow the neutrality approach, their main objective is to reduce the impact of public criticism directed at warring parties and factions that might make it difficult to reach the victims. On the other hand, more

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[2] However, the famine had already occurred in Somalia many months before media coverage of the Somali situation, and famine deaths had until then been ignored by the international community.

politically-oriented organisations make intensive use of the media in order to publicise their views and criticisms of specific parties responsible for human distress.

If the media have the power to highlight situations of emergency, they, however, also have the power to stop coverage when they estimate that the public had 'had enough'. Needy populations can be forgotten as quickly as they have been unveiled by the media and discovered by the public. An MSF official, currently involved in aid relief operation to rescue the victims of the large-scale famine in Southern Sudan, has expressed concern about what will happen to the victims of the famine when media interest and therefore donors' contributions will drop in favour of a new humanitarian cause.

> Media coverage is uneven, sporadic, and short-lived as new crises push still-unresolved crises off the screen. (Minear & Weiss, 1993: 10)

TV screens reveal as much as they hide; They favour high profile topics, to the detriment of other, often more important but less 'rewarding' in terms of public audience. The fact that only a few conflicts are in the headlines at any given time means that "others sink into oblivion". (Courten, 1997) Girardet regrets that, for journalists covering the Gulf war, and whether they were from the major European or US networks or small-town newspapers, "the forty other conflicts raging from Sri Lanka and El Salvador did not seem to matter". (Girardet, 1993: 46)

The tendency of media and many NGOs to encourage the diffusion of images that shock the mind and therefore have an impact on the public, also has some important negative effects. Having realised that violent cliches appeal to audiences, the media have used them to an extreme degree, encouraging the trend in the public of 'voyeurism'. In the end, populations in distress are not only victims of the politics of their governments but also victims of western 'voyeurism'.

Today, audiences have become so used to images of violence that these no longer raise indignation. The public has become 'blase' with daily stories of humanitarian atrocities.

> We are approaching a time when half the world will sit at home in their lounge rooms and watch the other half die.[3]

If the media can help NGOs in the promotion of humanitarian causes, media also have the ability to ruin the reputation of NGOs. It is through the media indeed that the public learns about disastrous operations led by humanitarian organisations (like in Somalia), as well as various other scandalous revelations regarding NGOs activities.

For example, media have reported that such or such NGO has brought to a country some irrelevant or inadequate aid material, therefore acting to the detriment of the victims as well as wasting the donors' money. An article published in a French newspaper has revealed that more than half of the medicines

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[3] Anthony Burgess, in D. Millikan's 'Compassion Fatigue', *Zadok Perspectives*, 1986

delivered in Bosnia during the war were in fact unusable. 17,000 tones of them were "off" or close to it, with the wrong stickers on, or simply damaged by the transport itself. Other reports have revealed abuse of office and excessive salaries among some NGO leaders in the US, as well as the financial incompetence of some NGOs such as the UK Salvation Army who lost millions in investments made after "dubious" advice. (Fowler, 1997: 220)

All these media reports help sully the reputation of NGOs and many humanitarian workers have criticised "media disinterest in the 'good news' they seek to publicise: literacy programs, projects for women, rural development, appropriate technology …To most news editors, it's boring fare besides a gunman running rampant in the US or…a disaster in the Third World".[4] However, NGOs must not forget that they largely contributed to the media tendency to publish offensive images and reports. NGOs are perhaps as much responsible as the media for caricatural and partial versions of human tragedies.

The Code of Conduct has called on NGOs for that, in their public information, they portray "an objective image of the disaster situation where the capacities and aspirations of the disaster victims are highlighted, and not just their vulnerabilities and fears".

Misleading or incomplete information is not indeed only the responsibility of media professionals. Journalists, when reporting on a situation of complex emergency, often rely for their

[4] R. Osborne, 'Good news is no news', *Australian Society*, June 1987

information on the aid agencies present on the ground, often the only ones having access to crisis areas or to the victims caught in the conflict.

However, the information media obtain are often subject to bias by NGOs themselves. As we have mentioned earlier, the media foster competition between NGOs. These latter, always looking for more funding, will quite naturally seek to publicise their positive achievements while omitting the problems or failures they experience. Girardet reported on what a senior representative of the US relief agency World Vision in Ethiopia once told him:

> You can't confuse the public with complex issues. Starving babies and droughts are something people can understand. But trying to explain corruption or aid abuses is not going to help our fund-raising and will only hamper our work. (Girardet, 1993: 46)

In fact, it is quite worrying that many aid organisations have not yet understood the good impact that accurate reporting in the media can have on the solving of humanitarian crises. "Aid agencies should concentrate on trying to get the issues across, not themselves"[5] and "they need to recognise that without better media coverage, it will become more difficult to deal with Third World humanitarian crises". (Girardet, 1993: 55)

By providing only partial truths, both media and NGOs prevent the public from gaining a comprehensive understanding of conflicts. Many editors and broadcasters are today "unwilling to provide the space or time needed to explain complex issues",

[5] Girardet, cited in *International Symposium*, 1997

(Girardet, 1993: 41) especially at a time when coverage of domestic issues is often favoured over that of international topics. It has become increasingly difficult for audiences to obtain background history of contemporary conflicts.

The unfortunate consequence of this poor information is that the potential of the media to provide the public with essential elements to understanding key current events is being neglected. In the end, all this happens to the detriment of victim populations.

> A poorly informed public places less pressure on policymakers to resolve conflicts, shows less interest in assuming a more activist role in international affairs, and offers less support to the aid organisations to carry out their work. (Girardet, 1993: 41)

Media professionals and NGOs must urgently face their responsibilities and recognise the importance of providing accurate information to the public. Both media and NGOs must seek to avoid misleading the public with what are only partial and biased truths.

> Though media criticisms of NGOs are not always just, their work should always be open to critical evaluation and consequent improvement. Unless an agency can demonstrate that the net impact of its work is positive, it does not deserve support from the media. (Cairns, 1996: 52)

And where an NGO does not have the support of the media, it also considerably reduces its chances to receive support from the public, however essential to its survival. Today, NGO ability to re-attract support and convince an increasingly 'disillusioned' public of their legitimacy will largely depend on the extent to which NGOs are honest with the public. To regain public's confidence, NGOs will need to prove they can be truthful and reliable under all circumstances. NGO capacity to take up this challenge will

determine whether NGOs will be a credible humanitarian actor in the 21st century.