



# The Challenges of Humanitarian Aid Workers in South Sudan

**Aliaa N. Hamad**

## **1. Introduction**

Where turbulence and political unrest exist, you can count on humanitarian assistance to appear in the region (Torrente, 2013). This has been the case in the past decade in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (Torrente, 2013). The mission of aid workers in conflict- and/or disaster-stricken areas transcends providing material relief in the form of services, food, medicine, or money to the recipients, however (Torrente, 2013); humanitarian aid has come to have more symbolic connotations than the material assistance it has to offer (Torrente, 2013). The “global war on terror” waged by the West has often led them to provide, not only emergency relief, but also political and military support for one side of the conflict over the other in conflict-stricken regions (Torrente, 2013). The beneficiaries have, therefore, often begun reading more into their presence than might be warranted (Torrente, 2013).

Depending on which party to the conflict they supported and the party the recipients were aligned with, humanitarian aid workers were deemed the savior by some and the destroyer by others (Torrente, 2013). Because they had ventured where no one else dared to interfere, reached out to them, and freed them from the tyrannical grip of the oppressive powers, they might have the eternal gratitude and loyalty of some of the beneficiaries for saving their lives (Torrente, 2013). Some other beneficiaries might regard them with suspicion, however (Torrente, 2013). They might suspect that their intervention disguises ulterior motives (Torrente, 2013). These ulterior motives are usually ones of imposing a political agenda and ideologies on the recipients, especially considering the colonial history of the West (Torrente, 2013). This has, in turn, led to those who dubiously regard relief workers to start targeting them in order to get back at the West (Torrente, 2013). In 2011 alone, for example, 151 incidents of violence

targeting humanitarian aid workers were reported and rendered a record-high of 308 victims, of whom 86 were killed, 127 were injured, and 95 kidnapped in conflict-stricken regions around the world (as cited in Torrente, 2013). The significance of these incidents far extends beyond the casualties, however. In Somalia, when two aid workers working for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) were kidnapped and held hostage, their remaining colleagues confided that they became short-staffed and unable to meet the needs of the recipients (Torrente, 2013). Another country where humanitarian aid workers' effort to relieve the beneficiaries is constantly thwarted is South Sudan. Officially the youngest country in the world, South Sudan only gained its independence on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (Copnall, 2014). Soon after its independence, however, civil war broke out in the young state (Copnall, 2014), which led the United Nations to establish the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in order to alleviate the suffering of the South Sudanese (Copnall, 2014). Along with local and international relief agencies, the UNMISS intervened in South Sudan to provide the conflict-stricken country with emergency relief, but its mission was also thwarted and its aid workers targeted (Drażkiewicz, 2017; Luedke & Logan, 2018; OCHA, 2018). Since the beginning of the conflict in December, 2013 and until 2017, 82 aid workers had died in South Sudan (African Research Bulletin, 2017). Because targeting humanitarian aid workers might hinder the assistance the aid agencies were meant to provide and the very beneficiaries they intend to serve, it is incumbent upon researchers to address the causes of the issue (Torrente, 2013). Therefore, in an attempt to identify the roots of the problem, i.e. the reasons for which the recipients might end up targeting aid workers, as a first step to formulating an action plan that might help humanitarian aid workers meet the needs of the recipients they were assigned to serve, the present paper will attempt to explore the challenges humanitarian aid workers face in South Sudan.

## **2. The Research Questions the Present Paper Aims to Answer**

The present paper, therefore, aims to answer the following question:

What are the major challenges humanitarian aid workers working in South Sudan face that might impede their provision of emergency relief?

## **3. Challenges of Humanitarian Aid Workers in South Sudan**

### **3.1 Not Fully Understanding the Local Culture of South Sudan**

One issue humanitarian aid workers were not prepared for in South Sudan was gender-based violence (Luedke & Logan, 2018). Violence against women in South Sudan had become so commonplace that it was often dismissed as

a “minor issue” (Luedke & Logan, 2018, p. 108). Indeed, sexual violence against women was nothing new. Luedke and Logan (2018) explain that it dated as far back as the second civil war in 1983 where the national forces, the opposition groups, and the Liberation movements alike targeted women from the other groups and raped them, either as retaliation for going against them or to force their men to join that movement. Over 30 years later, the situation had not changed much in the country. Women were still being used as a “weapon of war” (p. 114). They were abducted and raped by soldiers and opposition groups alike. Soldiers were using women’s bodies, not just to intimidate their enemies, but as a reward for going to war and fighting for their country.

As much as the issue garnered international attention, the authors lamented that it obscured the root causes of such violence against women, however. This violence was not exclusive to wartime; it actually predated their civil wars and was part of the local culture that was honored even at times of peace. This article epitomized how most aid organizations intervening in South Sudan do so with no expertise in the local culture(s). Humanitarian aid workers in South Sudan, for example, were often unfamiliar with the core values and practices of the local culture that they often ended up at the center of crises instead of providing assistance. The authors explained how they were often faced with situations they were not capable of handling: It was noticed that some females, for example, would claim that they had been raped in order to receive assistance and food subsidies from foreign aid workers and that NGOs would also be more likely to receive funds if they were assisting sexually abused women. This, in turn, led many of them to provide such assistance without being fully prepared or trained to handle such cases of violence.

The authors further stressed that what the aid workers were unprepared for was that endemic in the South Sudanese culture is the commodification of girls and women. They are the source of wealth of the males in the family. With a bride-wealth tradition and families that are dependent on the dowry they get for their daughters, the “value” of a girl is based on her virginity. A husband offers cattle, which the whole family enjoys and lives off of, in exchange for the daughter he wants to marry. The more desirable the girl, the more the cows that are offered. A raped girl would be “damaged goods” and would be worth less money, and that is why raping a girl might start a feud between two families and usually ends in her family forcing the rapist to marry her, because no one else will after she lost her “worth”. In South Sudan, women were also shamed into not reporting sexual assaults for fear of driving a wedge between two families or even starting a war. In a patriarchal culture that continues to treat women as property,

women are programmed to believe that if they report cases of rape, they would be challenging gender roles and assuming “the role of the man” (p. 112) which would make them even less desirable.

The patriarchal society in South Sudan and the status of women in it are reiterated in another document: A 2018-document produced by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) further highlights the inferior status of women in the South Sudanese culture and, again, identifies gender-based violence as a result of that status. The document details how men in South Sudan might be threatened by the women’s conquering the public sphere and might resort to intimidating, raping, or bullying them to restore the social order. To South Sudanese men, women belong in the private sphere, i.e. at home; they are not allowed to leave it. Men, on the other hand, belong in the public domain. It is their job to work and provide for their families. Their masculinity is predicated upon it. Therefore, when men see women competing with them by making themselves visible in the public domain, they might assault them to mark their territories. This is especially true in the case of female-headed families where it is the girl or woman who shoulders the responsibility of providing for her dependents.

### **3.2 How the Infrastructure and Weather of a Country Might Impede Humanitarian Aid**

The same OCHA (2018) Report identified South Sudan’s poor infrastructure and lack of maintenance as two of the challenges to delivering assistance to the remote parts of the country. The Report explained how the roads and airstrips on which planes delivering relief items were expected to land are under-developed, and remote areas are often unsafe for humanitarian aid workers due to security threats, i.e. the high probability of warring factions targeting the workers. The weather is another variable at play in South Sudan. In the rainy season, roads are usually flooded which renders it challenging to deliver relief items to the remote areas of the country.

### **3.3 When Neutrality and Independence Become Obstacles**

Sometimes the very damage that might impede the relief effort of humanitarian aid agencies is self-inflicted (Drażkiewicz, 2017). Humanitarian aid workers often have trouble communicating with and understanding the exotic other (Drażkiewicz, 2017). They have been noticed to intervene in a region with a negative preconceived notion of the locals, and might, therefore, deliberately avoid establishing social relations with them (Drażkiewicz, 2017). That was the case of three international non-governmental organizations operating in Bor, South Sudan (Drażkiewicz, 2017). The three NGOs took the words “neutrality” and “independence” to a whole new level that caused communication between them and local authorities to break down (Drażkiewicz, 2017). When

the three NGOs became involved in community development projects in Bor, they realized they had no access to one of the main roads and contacted local authorities to clear a road strip for them (Drażkiewicz, 2017).

The authorities, however, refused to do so and explained that that was not their responsibility, but that of the NGOs (Drażkiewicz, 2017). This, in turn, led the NGOs to refuse to comply since they were both neutral and independent entities, which, by definition, entailed not siding with any party to the conflict, not taking orders from the state, nor being held accountable to them (Drażkiewicz, 2017). To them, that translated into their detachment from the local authorities since the government happened to be party to the conflict in the country (Drażkiewicz, 2017). They further refused to communicate with the authorities and try to reach a compromise (Drażkiewicz, 2017). They perceived the local authorities as “undemocratic” and “uncivilized” (Drażkiewicz, 2017, p. 95). The situation escalated when the local authorities requested that the NGOs relocate because they were disrupting traffic in the neighborhood (Drażkiewicz, 2017). That request only made the NGOs even more adamant to stand their ground and reinforced preconceived notions of the military rule in the country (Drażkiewicz, 2017).

### **3.4 When Humanitarian Aid Workers Come with their Negative Connotations: Perceptions of Humanitarian Aid Workers by the Locals and Authorities**

Resistance might come from the recipients as well. Foreign aid organizations might unintentionally serve as constant reminders of former colonial powers that unjustly usurp a country's natural resources, and consequently, their opposition, becomes a national obligation (Drażkiewicz, 2017). For both the locals and local authorities, foreign aid agencies might be seen as a threat to state sovereignty (Drażkiewicz, 2017). In Jongelai, South Sudan, for example, humanitarian aid workers secure themselves a plot of land in the country to establish their premises, are granted access to facilities the locals might even be denied, and stay at fancy hotels, all thanks to the salaries they are paid for their presence in the country (Drażkiewicz, 2017). That is eerily similar to colonization, and might, therefore, be resisted by the locals (Drażkiewicz, 2017).

It is also a source of frustration for both the recipients and local authorities (Drażkiewicz, 2017). It helps reinforce the systematic failure of state authorities to meet the needs of the locals (Drażkiewicz, 2017). Indeed, employment, food, clean water, medicine, housing, electricity, and education are goods and services that a state is expected to offer its locals (Drażkiewicz, 2017). It is frustrating and shameful for the state, therefore, when a foreign aid agency ends up providing the locals with what they failed to grant them (Drażkiewicz, 2017). It is especially reprehensible

when the relief items given to the locals carry the logo of the foreign agencies as a constant reminder of who they should express their gratitude to (Drażkiewicz, 2017). Coupled with the fact that neither the authorities nor the locals might trust the political affiliations or agendas of the foreign agencies who might be offering assistance in order to advance the ideologies of the West and combat terrorism when the war on terror is in full swing, the state and locals might be more inclined towards decolonization, i.e. thwarting the relief effort of the workers and/or deporting them altogether (Drażkiewicz, 2017).

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the challenges humanitarian aid workers faced when delivering relief items and services in South Sudan in an attempt to help aid agencies adjust their relief programs to be able to better meet the needs of the beneficiaries, and hence achieve what they had intervened in the country to do in the first place. It was concluded that humanitarian aid workers' not being fully familiar with the idiosyncrasies and practices of the local culture, the aid workers' condescending attitude that might prevent them from communicating with and understanding the locals, the poor infrastructure and weather of the country, and the negative connotations, epitomized in the locals' association of the workers with colonization, are the major challenges that might hinder aid workers from alleviating the suffering of the South Sudanese locals. These challenges only prove that humanitarian aid workers are rarely prepared for the task or culture they are required to work in.

When addressing the challenges international foreign aid workers in South Sudan encountered, Luedke and Logan (2018) did not only choose to highlight the status quo in South Sudan, but proposed solutions as well, and realistic solutions, at that. They suggested that women and men alike be empowered so that they could become less dependent on others to sustain a livelihood; both women and men could be trained to find alternative projects that generate income in order for women to have access to food and more control over their bodies and for men to become less dependent on their daughters as a source of wealth. They further emphasized preparedness as a prerequisite for intervention. They also urged international agencies not only familiarize themselves with the local culture and receive training as to how to communicate with the locals, but also to use the compatibilities between the local cultures and the international human rights framework as entry points when approaching the locals, instead of challenging their local practices.

“Making aid recipients “stakeholders” rather than “beneficiaries”” cannot be emphasized enough, either (Torrente, 2013, p. 629). The recipients must be given a voice in the assistance they are provided (Torrente, 2013). They must decide how they want to be helped (Torrente, 2013). No one else should determine how they are to be saved. This is a sentiment long shared by Wright (2001) and Abu-Lughod (2002) who both see the real threat to humanitarian aid recipients, especially in the Middle East, being the idea that they are “oppressed” and “need saving”. Instead of being asked whether they need to be saved, and if so, how, decisions are made for them. They both fear that former colonial powers are using these excuses to intervene in certain Third-World countries and usurp their natural resources. They explain that it was always the aim of the White European colonizers to impose their legacy on the non-White European world. To the West, Third-World countries were always savages that needed to be introduced to the European proper way of life in order to be saved from their inferior selves. The First World, therefore, considers it a moral obligation to invade the developing countries in order to save their oppressed populations and control their resources in the process. Perhaps if humanitarian aid agencies stopped politically interfering in conflict areas, the recipients would have no reason to believe that they had ulterior motives. Humanitarian aid agencies should consider abiding by their role in providing relief items equally with no regard to the recipients’ religion, nationality, ethnicity, class, or political affiliation (Torrente, 2013). Perhaps then, the beneficiaries would not question their motives nor resist their intervention.

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