

Competitive humanitarianism

Relief and the tsunami in Sri Lanka

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RODERICK STIRRAT

Fig. 1. A relief worker surveys the remains of a school. Note the undamaged building immediately behind the site of the school.

This short article is concerned with a common issue in disaster relief: high levels of competition between the agencies involved, coupled with a lot of talk about the need for 'co-ordination'. The particular setting for the discussion is the relief that poured into Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami of 26 December 2004, and the article is based on my role as an advisor (on a voluntary basis) to one of the major British-based agencies which became involved in the relief and rehabilitation process.

Lack of co-ordination among agencies and high levels of competition between them is frequently mentioned as characterizing disaster relief. The post-tsunami efforts in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand and India were no exception to this. The recent evaluation of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) response to the tsunami alludes to this issue on a number of occasions and sees it as a problem which has to be overcome by better co-ordination.¹

In this paper, I shall be suggesting that 'better co-ordination' is unlikely to lead to less competition. Rather, I shall argue that competition of various forms, particularly among NGOs, is inherent in the structure of humanitarian relief, and that this is the result of a basic contradiction at the heart of philanthropic approaches to relief and rehabilitation (and, one might suggest, to development interventions in general, especially those mounted by NGOs). For various reasons which I will examine in this paper, agencies which are based on disinterested principles are forced into situations where organizational and individual interests become increasingly important, and which undermine the principles upon which philanthropic interventions are based.

The discussion is based on my experience of relief activities in the southwest of Sri Lanka, the coast between

Colombo in the north and Hambantota in the south. The situation in the east was in many ways much more complex because of the continuing civil war between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE.

The nature of the tsunami in Sri Lanka

By way of introduction, it is worth saying a little about the nature of the disaster in Sri Lanka, for in some ways the peculiarities of the tsunami had an effect on how relief agencies reacted to the situation.

Put rather simplistically, most disasters – earthquakes, floods, cyclones and hurricanes – cover a more or less concentrated area. There is some sort of centre where devastation is at its greatest and a shading out of destruction as one moves away from the centre. But the tsunami affected Sri Lanka in a very different way – 'ribbon destruction' rather than 'centralized destruction'. Thus around 75% of the Sri Lankan coastline was affected by the tsunami, yet at most the destruction only penetrated a kilometre or so inland. More or less 'normal' life was never very far from devastation. At the same time, the impact of the tsunami was decidedly spotty. So whilst in some places the waters destroyed anything for a kilometre or so inland, in others there was almost no impact even immediately adjacent to the beach. The result was a mosaic of total destruction and no impact. One house would be destroyed, its immediate neighbour untouched.

This situation faced the relief agencies with rather different problems from those which they are more used to. For instance, it was difficult in eastern Sri Lanka to use large-scale water purification equipment because the tsunami-affected population was spread along the coast rather than focused around one central point. Elsewhere,



RODERICK STIRRA

Fig. 2. Women on the site of their destroyed house. The debris has been removed but rebuilding has not yet begun.

including the southwest of Sri Lanka, basic amenities such as food and water were never very far away from the area of destruction. Another difference, which I will return to later, is that the geographical distribution of damage made it relatively easy for different agencies to make claims to different segments along the ribbon of destruction.

Estimates of how many people were killed or injured still vary. Probably the total is around 35,000 dead or missing, 15,000 injured and 500,000 displaced, mostly from the coastal belt itself. However, the tsunami hit on a full moon *poya* day, a holiday in Buddhist Sri Lanka, and thus many people were on the move. Some were on their way from Colombo to tourist resorts along the southwest coast, whilst others had come from inland towns and villages to attend markets in coastal towns such as Galle and Matara. Thus from the beginning it was difficult for the agencies to identify precise areas of impact and there was a tendency to concentrate on coastal areas where destruction was most visible, even though the human impact of the tsunami was much more widely distributed.

In comparison with other types of disaster, the tsunami injured relatively few people, and there was not as great a need for specialized medical assistance (although it nevertheless arrived) as in many disasters. But as in many other natural disasters, the tsunami had a differential impact in terms of gender and age. Although there are no precise figures, anecdotal evidence indicates that the tsunami killed women rather than men, and children rather than adults.² It appears that men were more able to run away or climb coconut trees and less involved in trying to save children and infants than were women. Regardless of why men rather than women should have been able to survive the tsunami, the result was that the agencies were often faced with male rather than female single parents, a situation which they appeared unprepared for. There were also relatively few orphans.

To return to the timing of the tsunami, *poya* day being a holiday meant that the majority of the inshore fishermen were not at sea. The result was that most small fishing craft were laid up on the beach and received the full impact of the tsunami. In contrast, craft which were at sea, even only a few hundred metres from the beach, successfully rode the tsunami waves. On another day the damage to fishing craft and gear would have been much less.

The immediate response to the disaster was very much Sri Lankan-led. Even though road and rail connections were very badly hit by the tsunami, individuals and groups of individuals from Colombo and inland almost immediately became involved in taking food, shelter and medical equipment to those directly affected. It seems that much of the immediate response was provided by what one might call 'civil society': government appears to have been relatively uninvolved and made little immediate effort to co-ordinate or manage a response to the disaster.

That the president was out of the country at the time of the tsunami may have been significant. Various foreign organizations became involved in the relief effort very quickly. Some of these such as Oxfam, Save the Children and CARE were already active in Sri Lanka, while other organizations, not just NGOs but also the military from various nations, arrived within a few days. Very rapidly these foreign organizations became increasingly important and influential in the relief effort. Sri Lankans became less active; local organizations including NGOs were reduced to the status of junior partners dependent on foreign agencies. But before looking at this process in more detail, something has to be said about the nature and scale of the response to the tsunami outside the affected area

The scale and nature of the response

One of the aspects of the tsunami which remains somewhat obscure is the factors which gave rise to the massive

response to calls for relief assistance. Throughout Europe, North America and East Asia, vast sums were raised to support the relief and rehabilitation effort. Thus the British-based DEC raised around £350 million before the appeal was closed in March 2005.³ Organizations which are members of the DEC also received funds from other sources. The British Red Cross raised a total of £85.9 million, of which £59.3 million came from the DEC, £26 million from direct donations and a further £3.5 million from DFID. Much of this money came from private individuals or groups of individuals, but the corporate sector was also involved. For instance, Marks and Spencer gave £260,000 to CARE for work in southern Sri Lanka.

In part the response to the tsunami has to be seen as the result of the media coverage of the disaster. Shots of the wave first receding and then thundering into the beach destroying all in its path were certainly dramatic. Furthermore, Sri Lanka and Thailand are tourist destinations for Europeans and this may also have had some effect, especially as European tourists were among the victims. That the tsunami hit just after Christmas must also have had an effect, as did the large numbers of Sri Lankan expatriates living in Europe. Finally, countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand are easily accessible to the media. That this was truly a 'natural' disaster, not the result of human activities such as war or civil unrest, may also have played a part.

But no matter what the factors behind this response, the result was that almost every household in countries such as Britain, Scandinavia and Germany was to a greater or lesser extent involved in tsunami relief. This might just consist of donating money, but it also involved organizing fund-raising events, co-ordinating fund-raising activities and acting as collectors. Not only was money collected but also goods – clothes, medical and educational supplies and food. And in some cases people themselves went to Sri Lanka and elsewhere to assist in the relief effort.

The result was that, to use developmental terms, the agencies involved in relief activities found themselves not only the recipients of vast amounts of money and other resources but also faced with a vast number of 'stakeholders' who to a greater or lesser extent felt a sense of 'ownership' in the relief effort. From the beginning the pressure was on the agencies not only to be effective but to be *seen* to be effective. They had to try to justify the vast investment that millions of stakeholders had made in the relief effort. And they had to intervene in ways which these 'stakeholders' would recognize as being 'relief'. So from the beginning there was a certain bias in the sorts of interventions favoured by the relief agencies towards those which were highly visible, photogenic, and focused on the poor, women and children. Furthermore, given the worldwide profile of the disaster, it became essential for almost every agency with ambitions in the disaster arena to become involved.

NGOs in competition

Within a week of the tsunami a vast range of relief organizations was active in Sri Lanka. Some of these were the military: the Americans, the British, the Belgians, the Indians and the Pakistanis all had a presence. The Americans, for instance, were active in clearing rubble, whilst the Indians and Pakistanis concentrated on medical assistance. But much more visible were the vast numbers of NGOs which arrived in Sri Lanka intent on spending money.⁴ Hotels in Colombo and those that had survived along the coast all experienced a short-term boom, as did the demand for drivers and interpreters. Such was the flow of foreign currency into the country that the Sri Lankan rupee rose rapidly in value.

The problem for most NGOs was to find ways of spending their money.⁵ As part of my job I was asked by my team leader to try to spend £5 million as fast as possible. Given the number of NGOs and the amount of money they had at their disposal this was not surprising: after all, there were only a limited number of 'beneficiaries' and only a certain area of land which had been affected by the tsunami. The result was that first comers tended to carve out their territories both spatially and in terms of activities. Thus in the Matara region, repair of fishing craft was taken over by an Irish NGO called GOAL, while the International Organization for Migration dominated temporary housing. Any piece of land which could be used sported an IOM signboard, an effective statement that other organizations should keep out. NGO representatives openly talked of 'carving out territories' along the coastal strip.⁶ Moving into an area already occupied by another NGO involved careful negotiation.

At the same time there was also pressure on the incoming NGOs to find 'local partners' with whom and through whom they could work. Many of the larger NGOs were aware that they lacked the capabilities or capacities to launch activities in Sri Lanka and recognized the need to work with local organizations which had the necessary skills and experience. Yet these were scarce and often already in some sort of relationship with foreign NGO donors. By the end of the third week after the tsunami it was generally accepted that there were few available 'partners', although there was a certain amount of 'poaching' as latecomers offered higher inducements in terms of facilities or management fees to potential Sri Lankan partners as well as attracting individual members of staff through high salaries.

What made the problem worse for the international and foreign-based NGOs was not just the need to spend money but also, as has already been noted, to spend it in particular ways. NGO representatives were only too aware of the presence of TV teams and reporters, and many organizations had their own film crews to record their activities: in one case a three-person mission from an overseas NGO consisted of two officials and one cameraman. The result was to privilege certain sorts of activities, such as distributing new fishing craft or constructing housing, rather than less visible or more indirect forms of disaster relief, for instance rehabilitation of government offices destroyed by the tsunami. Competition was not just a matter of getting rid of money but getting rid of it in the 'right' way which would fit with Western donors' visions of what relief should be.

Competition also occurred within organizations. Whilst the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies ostensibly acts as a united organization in such situations, in practice competition between different national branches led to different strategies being followed in different places. Thus the Maltese and the Turkish national organizations followed their own paths, much to the annoyance of other national organizations which toed the Federation line.

Dinosaurs and small furry animals

So far, the organizations I have been concerned with are mainly the large international NGOs with a long track record in relief or development or both. These include the members of the DEC as well as other international NGOs, and they all in general follow a strict set of guidelines laid down in the Red Cross/NGO code of conduct.⁷ In addition, such organizations tend to follow international guidelines in the contexts of sanitation, water supply, temporary housing and so on. Finally, these organizations generally attempt to create good relationships with government, work alongside government departments, and have to a

Fig. 3. The tsunami destroyed the coastal railway line running south from Colombo, but it was restored within a matter of weeks.



RODERICK STIRPAT

1. Vaux, Tony et al 2005. *Independent evaluation of the DEC tsunami crisis response*. Report to the DEC Board'. Available at <http://www.dec.org.uk/uploads/documents/decsunaACFF.pdf>. There is a vast and growing literature from within the disasters world on the tsunami.

Probably the best are: Bhattacharjee, A. et al. 2005, *Multi-agency evaluation of tsunami response: India and Sri Lanka*, available at http://www.alnap.org/tec/pdf/IWG_IN_LK_Evaluation_20050901.pdf, and Telford, J. and Cosgrave, J. 2006, *Joint evaluation of the international response to the Indian Ocean tsunami: Synthesis report*. London, Tsunami Evaluation Coalition.

2. See Telford and Cosgrave op. cit.

3. The members of the Disasters Emergency Committee include World Vision, Help the Aged, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, CARE, Concern, Save the Children and the British Red Cross among others.

4. It is impossible to list all the NGOs that appeared in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the tsunami. Perhaps my favourite was 'Noah's Wish', an American NGO which assists animals in disasters. See <http://www.noahswish.org/>. But as well as such environmentally orientated agencies, there were also organizations involved in 'heritage conservation' and even teams from Europe equipped for mountain rescues!

5. DEC-supported spending in Sri Lanka is estimated to be £41 million in 2005. This was broadly in line with spending objectives for Sri Lanka but overall the DEC in 2005 only managed to spend £128 million on tsunami relief compared with its target of £151 million. Most of the shortfall was in Indonesia-based spending.

6. See Fernando and Hilhorst's comment on, 'the feverish and competitive claim-staking [which] was fairly generalized amongst the NGOs'. Fernando, U. and Hilhorst, D. 2006 'Everyday practices of humanitarian aid: Tsunami response in Sri Lanka'. *Development in Practice* 16: 292-302.

greater or lesser extent a political understanding of the context in which they are working.

The result of all this was that in the Sri Lankan case at least, these agencies tended to be rather slow and ponderous in their response to particular situations. This was exacerbated by the extremely hierarchical and bureaucratized way in which many of these organizations are structured. In one of them the team in Colombo charged with finding ways of spending money was unable to take any decisions without consulting by telephone at least once a day with management in London. The justification for this was the need for 'accountability', how proposed activities fitted the mandate of the organization, and to consider how proposed forms of intervention or partnership might play in the context of British-based stakeholders.

This situation encouraged the activities of what might be called 'small furry animals' in a world of slow-moving dinosaurs. One of the striking features of the relief effort was the presence of a horde of small, often newly formed, foreign organizations with little if any experience in disaster relief but motivated by a strong humanitarian impulse that 'something had to be done'. Throughout the tsunami-affected areas small groups and individuals from a wide range of countries were active in all sorts of activities. For instance, a Slovakian organization was engaged in boat-building, while an Austrian NGO assisted in constructing houses. Neither had any previous experience of South Asia or disaster relief. Similarly individuals from Europe, North America and Asia whose only prior knowledge of Sri Lanka came from news bulletins arrived in the country and proceeded to do whatever they thought useful.⁸ From the point of view of the larger NGOs such as the members of the DEC, the visibility of these small projects was a problem which only got worse as fewer and fewer visible means of activity were left untouched. It looked as if they were doing nothing.

The lack of experience of many of these small groups led to a degree of vulnerability. This was particularly true in some areas of the country where individual politicians and political groups attempted to control the relief effort, with the result that aid was perhaps misdirected.⁹ But this lack of experience was also apparent in other ways. So for instance, competition between the Indian and Pakistani armies led to the establishment of two 'field hospitals' a few miles apart. Both did brisk business, partly because they were free and partly as novel suppliers of medical commodities. This was interpreted (wrongly) by some inexperienced NGOs as indicative of failings in the Sri

Lankan health service and led to further interventions in a sector which needed little assistance. In other cases the boats and fishing equipment supplied to fishermen were technically flawed or simply unsuitable for Sri Lankan waters.¹⁰ There was also little control as to who received assistance. In some cases fishermen received no assistance; in others individuals were given two (and in at least one case three) brand new boats. But, and this was what was perhaps most important, what was being done was highly photogenic and appeared to be dealing with the results of the tsunami in an immediate and relevant fashion.

Attempts at co-ordination

The overall picture of relief in the period immediately after the tsunami is one of chaos. A large number of agencies, mostly NGOs of various sorts from various countries, competed with one another for ways of spending money in ways which fitted into a relatively narrow conceptualization of what relief is and which would be easily accepted by the donors back home. Well-meaning amateurs could outflank the relatively slow dinosaurs of the relief world by undercutting standards – but in such a way as to appear more 'effective' than the larger, more well-established NGOs.

Of course, those who were working for the NGOs were only too aware of the problems involved and saw this competitive world as counter-productive in terms of the humanitarian objectives of the relief effort. And there was a whole series of attempts at co-ordinating relief activities at various levels.

As I mentioned earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, the government of Sri Lanka took very little role in actively managing the relief effort. In contrast to India and Indonesia, foreign NGOs were given free access for personnel and resources to enter the country and very little effort was made to control who came in with what.¹¹ Over time this situation was to change, with the government attempting to take increasing control over the activities of relief agencies. Thus in early February customs duties on imports for humanitarian use were reintroduced. This led to massive accumulations in Colombo harbour of aid items sent by well-meaning groups and individuals abroad, and also led to complaints from NGOs that their work was being hampered.¹²

Internally, various efforts were made to co-ordinate relief activities on a sectoral basis. This frequently involved the local offices of UN agencies working with government agencies. Thus agriculture and, more importantly, fishing,



RODERICK STIRRAAT

Fig. 4 (above). Sri Lanka Red Cross workers clearing rubble from heavily damaged houses.

Fig. 5 (right). Tents supplied by Dutch disaster relief agencies.



RODERICK STIRRAAT

7. For the text of this code of conduct, see <http://www.ifrc.org/public/conduct/>

8. See Fernando and Hilhorst op. cit.

9. So for instance some East Asian organizations became involved in the then prime minister's scheme to resite the town of Hambantota.

10. An example of technical deficiencies are the so-called 'papadam boats' which used two layers of glass fibre rather than five. See Cossee, O., Hermes, R. and Mezhoud, S. 2006, *Real time evaluation of the FAO emergency and rehabilitation operations in response to the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami*. Report of the Second Mission. Available at http://www.alnap.org/tec/pdf/RTE_FAO_Second%20Mission%20Report%20-%20Final%20Version.pdf

11. This in part led to suspicions later on that various Christian evangelical groups had used the tsunami as an opportunity for proselytizing.

12. The government claimed that these restrictions had to be reintroduced because unscrupulous groups were using humanitarian imports as a means of supplying the LTTE. Oxfam vigorously complained about duty being charged on the import of four-wheel-drive vehicles which it claimed were being brought in for humanitarian purposes.

13. Cooley, A. and Ron, J. 2002. 'The NGO scramble: Organizational insecurity and the political economy of transnational action.' *International Security* 27: 5-39. See also de Waal's characterization of 'the humanitarian international' in de Waal, A. 1997, *Famine crimes: Politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*, London, James Currey, as well as the tradition of anthropological critiques of this industry stretching back to Harrell-Bond, B.E. 1986, *Imposing aid: Emergency relief to refugees*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

14. Thus there is little love amongst many Red Cross personnel for MSF, which is seen as flashy and too intent on maximizing the media coverage it receives.

15. Parry, J. 1986. 'The gift, the Indian gift and the "Indian gift"', *Man* 21: 453-473. See also Stirrat, R.L. and Henkel, H., 1997, 'The development gift: the problem of reciprocity in the NGO world'. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 554: 66-79.

were charged to the FAO working with the Department of Fisheries. Shelter was a matter for the UNHCR. Yet it was almost impossible for them to find out what was happening in their sectors because of the plethora of agencies involved in the relief effort and the need for each individual agency to maximize its visible impact. In the case of the fishing sector matters were made worse by the attempt of the FAO to use the tsunami as an opportunity for restructuring the fisheries sector, which was seen as employing too many fishermen who were over-fishing the inshore waters. This policy was widely rejected by the relief agencies – to such an extent that by the end of March there were probably more fishing craft active off the southwest coast of Sri Lanka than there had been before the tsunami.

There were also attempts at co-ordinating relief activities at a local level. In some places such as Galle this involved the UNDP; in others local government agencies were more important. But again, attempts at co-ordination were generally unsuccessful. Agencies were often unwilling to share information which might threaten their own efforts. There were unsavoury disputes between agencies as to which one should intervene or take the lead in specific areas. In one case representatives of two agencies almost came to blows over which one had the 'right' to assist elderly female coir workers affected by the cyclone, the argument being couched in terms of the respective agencies' particular skills.

Over time, and as the immediacy of the relief effort passed, forms of co-ordination did develop. Areas of activity were demarcated both geographically and thematically. But this was not the result of some effective policy: rather, it was the result of a competitive process which, in a parody of the perfect market, produced a series of unstable equilibria.

Discussion

All the organizations, agencies and individuals I came into contact with were driven by a strong sense of moral commitment to the relief effort and they deprecated what they recognized as the corrosive nature of inter-agency competition. All talked of the desirability of effective co-ordination, although there were strong differences as to what such co-ordination might entail. Thus there were complaints of over-centralizing attempts by central government to manage the relief effort, although in practice this seems to have had little effect. Most saw more local or district-level forms of management as preferable. Yet the question remains as to whether there is at base a very real contradiction between the philanthropic and humanitarian objectives of relief agencies, which imply co-operation and co-ordination, and structural forces which encourage relief agencies to compete with each other.

In an important paper, Cooley and Ron have argued that competition between agencies is inherent in the structure of the international aid industry.¹³ They take issue with authors who have argued that the increase in the numbers of international NGOs is an element in the emergence of a global civil society based upon shared liberal values. Instead, they argue that the world of NGOs is a world of extreme competition for resources and that organizational continuity depends upon success in this competitive world. This in turn leads to major dysfunctions and contradictions in terms of the effectiveness of aid and disaster relief.

The situation in Sri Lanka certainly fits into the broad picture painted by Cooley and Ron. Relief agencies were very conscious of existing in a highly competitive world and in the long term saw themselves as competitors for resources. Organizations such as the Red Cross or Merlin continually face challenges from other organizations which claim to be doing the same things more effectively.¹⁴ Continued funding depends upon not just being effective but being seen as effective. Disasters become opportunities

for these agencies to stake a claim to continuing or new effectiveness.

These competitive pressures were exacerbated by more individual ambitions. Many of the people involved in post-tsunami relief in Sri Lanka were to a greater or lesser extent 'disaster professionals'. In Colombo the major social centre patronized by these people was a bar known as 'The Cricketers'. On one level this became a clearing house for information and, it has to be said, a setting where informal forms of co-ordination were worked out and deals over territory made. But it was also the scene of reunions between people who had worked together in previous post-disaster situations and were now recreating the social networks through which future jobs could be ensured. Career paths and development become a matter of gaining a reputation and 'doing well' in the disaster business, and this involves successfully shifting relief materials both physical and financial. Again we are in a competitive milieu which whilst extolling the virtues of co-ordination and collaboration is at the same time based on individual self-interest.

But what makes the Sri Lankan case significantly different from those described by Cooley and Ron, for instance the horrifying picture of life in the Goma refugee camp in the 1990s, is that in the short run the competition between agencies was not to *get* resources but to *spend* them. In Sri Lanka there were simply so many resources that the competition focused around control of beneficiaries rather than donors. Furthermore, rather than being answerable to a small number of major donors, relief agencies working in Sri Lanka were answerable to millions of small donors who could all watch the progress of the relief work through the international media. Competition was thus greatest in aspects of relief which play directly to this public – for instance housing and shelter, distribution of food and medical aid, new fishing tackle. Where there was no competition was in areas which did not have this immediate and visual quality. It might be argued that in the fishing sector restoration of the capacities of the Fisheries Department was a priority – yet as far as I know very little was done in this area during the first few months and even later there was little input.

The situation in post-tsunami Sri Lanka exemplifies what is in some ways the major contradiction at the heart of philanthropy. In his article on the nature of the gift, Jonathan Parry argues that the 'free' or 'pure' gift can only exist in the context of a market-orientated society.¹⁵ In Parry's terms, acts of charity are forms of asceticism, a small rejection of the material world. Yet while philanthropy can be seen as the antithesis of self-interest, the means of delivering philanthropic relief undermine this high moral tone. People who gave so generously in Europe, Asia and the Americas in response to tsunami appeals were doubtless motivated by a generalized humanitarian sense of moral and ethical obligation. The organizations involved in delivering this relief are also premised on these high moral standards, held too by the vast majority of the people who work for these agencies. Few people if any get rich through working in disaster relief. Yet the structural nature of the relief business inevitably generates competition both between and, perhaps to a lesser extent, within relief agencies. For the ethically motivated donor the issue is always how their donation can have its maximum effect and this inevitably generates competition between the donors to prove that they and not other organizations have the greatest impact in alleviating suffering and achieving humanitarian objectives. So whilst philanthropy may involve a rejection of the world of competition and the market, it inevitably becomes a part of that world. What starts out as a gift becomes a commodity, and no matter how frequent the call for 'co-ordination' and 'collaboration', competition will continue to characterize the 'humanitarian international'. ●