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### Everyday practices of humanitarian aid: tsunami response in Sri Lanka

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# Everyday practices of humanitarian aid: tsunami response in Sri Lanka

*Udan Fernando and Dorothea Hilhorst*

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*This article underlines the importance of grounding the analysis of humanitarian aid in an understanding of everyday practice. It presents ethnographic vignettes illustrating three aspects of aid response in Sri Lanka following the tsunami disaster in 2004. The first deals with the nature of humanitarian actors, the second explores how different kinds of politics intertwine, and the third considers humanitarian partnerships. The authors discuss the need for a shift in current academic approaches, where discussions on humanitarian aid usually start from the level of principles rather than practice. They argue that accounts of the everyday practices and dilemmas faced by NGOs help to correct blind expectations, expose uncritical admiration, and put unrealistic critiques into perspective.*

## Introduction

In this article, we underline the importance of grounding the analysis of humanitarian aid in an understanding of everyday practice. We do this by presenting and discussing three ethnographic vignettes that illustrate three aspects of disaster relief. The first deals with the nature of humanitarian actors, and in particular the role of private initiatives. The second prompts a discussion of how different kinds of politics play a role, and how these intertwine. The third raises the issue of humanitarian partnerships. Although each vignette presents a unique angle, they all form part of the same picture, revealing the need for detailed analysis of everyday practice as the starting point for understanding humanitarian aid. Although this may sound simple, it would require a shift in current academic approaches, where discussions on humanitarian aid usually start from the level of theoretical principles.

We use the response to the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka to illustrate our arguments. The tsunami was a globalised event: a disaster that manifested the processes of globalisation and was shaped by them. We therefore assume that readers have some knowledge of the disaster, which gives a common frame of reference for the vignettes that we present.

Like the tsunami, this article is also the product of processes of globalisation. Udan is a Sri Lankan national and is preparing his doctorate in the Netherlands, where Dorothea is based. When we met several years ago, we found that we had a lot in common. We are both academics with one foot in the university and the other in civil society. We both work *with* and *on* NGOs and share a passion for organisational ethnography. When we met again in Sri Lanka after the tsunami, we compared notes over a couple of beers and worked out the

basic idea of this article. It could be written at a distance from the hectic realities of the tsunami response, during one of Udan's periods of study in the Netherlands in April 2005.

Like many contemporary ethnographies of globalised processes, the article draws on material from various sites and sources, incorporating research experiences from both of us. Udan has been involved in the response to the tsunami from Day 1. Like every other Sri Lankan, he roamed around parts of the affected areas in search of friends, relatives, and bodies. Soon he was caught up in the 'second tsunami' of aid-agency responses and became active as a consultant, facilitator, and researcher. For instance, in April 2005 he conducted a 'Real-Time Evaluation' in Sri Lanka, commissioned by ACT International, which is a worldwide humanitarian network of churches and related agencies. Dorothea went to Sri Lanka in January and March 2005 for two one-week visits. The first concerned real-time research,<sup>1</sup> and the second a mission to assist the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies to formulate a proposal on behalf of Novib/Oxfam Netherlands. During these two weeks she interviewed around 50 people, individually and in groups, and attended several meetings.

In addition, the article uses interview material collected in the Netherlands from funding agencies, NGOs, and private humanitarians. Apart from interviews, the article draws on newspapers and other media sources, as well as an analysis of email correspondence. Since we did our research separately, 'we' does not always refer to the two of us. Where this is the case, it is specified in the notes.

## The importance of grounded research

Humanitarian aid appears to be dictated by principles, policies, and intervention models. However, fieldworkers construct their own interpretations of principles and priorities in response to demands posed in the field. The translation of principles into practice happens through the combined actions of staff members and other involved actors. It is therefore not enough to discuss principles and policy, since understanding how they work requires looking at the everyday actions in the field. Recognition of the importance of everyday practices for understanding aid in situations of conflict is founded theoretically and methodologically on the premise that social actors have agency (Long 1992, 2001). People reflect upon their experiences and what happens around them, and they use their knowledge and capabilities to interpret and respond to their environment. Humanitarian aid, in this perspective, is the outcome of the messy interaction of social actors struggling, negotiating, and at times guessing to further their interests (Bakewell 2000). An ethnography of humanitarian practice can illustrate the ways in which humanitarian actors give meaning to and act upon their mission.

Actor-oriented research also focuses on the multiple realities of NGOs. Humanitarianism prides itself on delivering principled aid that is needs-based, neutral, and independent. These principles are meant to forge the trust that is necessary in order to get access to people in need, while protecting the safety of the aid workers (Slim 1999; Hilhorst 2002, 2005). In practice, however, humanitarian aid comes about through an amalgam of different 'drivers', and humanitarian aid is profoundly political. It often constitutes an uneasy mix of principles, foreign policy, and military doctrine, as well as the everyday politics of organisational politicking and rivalry (see also Kerkvliet 1991:11). At the same time, humanitarian actors are geared towards seeking to legitimise their work. In order to mobilise support, they have to convince stakeholders of their appropriateness and trustworthiness (Bailey 1971). These different kinds of politics are entangled (Hulme and Goodhand 2000; Uvin 1998), and the resulting dynamics play out in everyday practice.

Grounded research is also necessary for revealing and analysing the diversity of humanitarian response. The ways in which humanitarian aid is delivered have become increasingly

complicated. The number of development NGOs and humanitarian agencies operating in crisis areas has grown, and many different approaches to aid can be found in the field, including those of international NGOs (INGOs) with their own operational capacity, INGOs working through local partners, and diverse local NGOs. The various aid modalities set different parameters for discussions of each agency's principles, humanitarian policy, and decision-making space. International discussion seems to focus mainly on operational INGOs, and neglects the wealth of other experiences.

Finally, a focus on everyday practices allows one to analyse the power processes within humanitarian communities and in their relations with wider domains. In the wide perspective of human suffering, humanitarians may appear as idealistic aid workers who help people in need, often at great risk to their personal security. But if we zoom in on the situation, the power differentials become apparent. International NGOs, for example, have been uncomfortably associated with a desire to impose a set of Western humanitarian values on the world. There are also questions about the power differentials between INGOs and their local implementing partners, and between humanitarians and the recipients of aid. These differences are hidden under the rhetoric of partnership and participation, but they are being played out in the realities of everyday interaction.

### Globalising disasters: Kees and Annette vs. the aid agencies

In 1968, the Biafra war was the first humanitarian crisis that was televised and had a real-time impact on people living on the other side of the world. Barely 40 years later, the tsunami response shows how disasters have now become globalised. The processes of globalisation collapse time and space, so that people all over the world can be immediately connected to the site of a disaster, whether via satellites that transfer information through the mass media and the Internet, or by getting on a plane. (This is not, of course, the same for everybody and every disaster: many people are beyond the reach of the media, and, sadly, too many disasters fail to attract globalised attention.) Globalisation can result in strands of (affectionate) identification stretching across the world. Among the many e-mails received by Udan after the tsunami from friends in the Netherlands was one that read: *'Dear Udan, can you please go and check out if K.A.G. Ajith Priyashantha, Tharanga Siriwardana, Noel, Punchihewa, Padmini, Ama and Dilrukshi are still alive? These people worked in the Dayawasa hotel in Galle, where I spent my holidays several years ago. We have always stayed in touch and I am very worried about them.'*

Globalisation has also led to greater informality. Increasingly, knowledge and action have been taken out of the exclusive realm of experts and are now within everyone's reach. Post-disaster rescue, survival, and rehabilitation have always depended first and foremost on the informal help of neighbours and community members, with the professional agencies only coming in later. After the tsunami, however, for the first time the event appeared to be everybody's disaster. All over the world individuals assessed the damage, identified needs, and expressed opinions on the progress and quality of aid delivery. Members of the Sri Lankan diaspora came in huge numbers to help their people. Not only that, but many other people whose only relation to the tsunami was having spent a holiday in Sri Lanka got on planes with loads of relief items and cash collected from their own personal, neighbourhood, professional, or church networks. One of them was someone whom we shall name Kees.

Kees is a former employee of a public company in Amsterdam who took early retirement. After the tsunami he travelled to Sri Lanka with 130 kg of relief assistance, including a heavy box of nails – which he thought would be handy to repair the damaged houses and boats – and a thick wad of Euros. Kees is active in his local church, both as a religious

lay-worker and in its social work. His church is connected to an umbrella body, Kerkinactie, which deals with development and humanitarian assistance. Despite its fundraising campaigns, Kees wanted to travel to Sri Lanka and do the work on his own. He went to the south, where he often spends his winter holidays. Together with friends there he started to build four houses in the tsunami-affected village of Habaraduwa. Two women from his church later came to assist him. The construction was to be completed in June 2005. Kees, who returned to Amsterdam in late March having completed the initial work, examined his weekly bank statements with details of transfers of money to his account. He was surprised to see that he had received a total of €17,000 from 214 different people, 77 of whom he did not even know.

There were many Keeses who came to Sri Lanka. Their confident belief that they knew what to do and how to do it is related, we believe, to the way in which globalised news is packaged: as brief items stripped of any complicated details, generating a sense of intimate knowledge and proximity – as if the world were indeed a global village. Their response shows the strength of informal networks and a personal approach, but also illustrates the fact that although globalisation can create bonds it is certainly no equaliser. It is hard to miss the implicit sense of superiority among the Keeses who, equipped with nails and cash, automatically assume that they have something to offer to Sri Lankans. Not a single Dutch person travelled, for example, to the USA after the attacks of 11 September 2001 to help to clear the rubble, rightly assuming that the Americans could do this job themselves.

What about the relations between the Keeses and the official humanitarian agencies? Why did Kees not want to channel his assistance through organised and formal agencies such as Kerkinactie or Icco, which are linked to his church? These agencies claim some expertise in relief work and also have their own networks of ‘partner’ organisations in Sri Lanka who work at the grassroots. Would it not have been more effective and efficient for Kees to use these agencies to channel the money that he had raised from his own personal network? The response of the Keeses suggests a growing dissatisfaction with professional agencies and their expertise in relief and humanitarian efforts. They are wary of the agencies and the money that they need to maintain their bureaucracies. This is clear when another Dutch woman, Annette, who went to do relief work in the eastern region of Sri Lanka, says: *‘[One] hundred per cent of the money that we collected is given to the needy. I do not even deduct the bank commission as administration costs, and I paid my own ticket and hotel.’*

The humanitarian agencies, on the other hand, have difficulty with the Keeses and Annettes. Although many agencies welcome volunteers working through their own channels, they tend to dislike the ‘loose-cannon’ initiatives of private individuals, whom they regard as amateurs who get in the way of professional help. Interestingly, however, the case of Kees does not corroborate this view. Although Kees had never heard of the Sphere Code of Conduct, his life experience has given him an implicit and not dissimilar set of principles. Clearly, he is motivated by the idea of ‘humanity’ and eager to work on the basis of needs. He and Annette have their own form of professionalism. The impact of the work that they did is yet to be assessed. But Kees and Annette hold themselves accountable to their own *achterban*, or constituencies. In an e-mail sent to his friends who donated money, Kees said: *‘Upon my return to the Netherlands I will send all of you a complete and detailed account of the expenses’*. He is also keen to avoid the adverse effects of aid and proudly announces that *‘Not a single penny was paid on bribery’*. Kees may have his *eigenwijze*, or idiosyncratic ways of doing things, but at the same time he also has his own logic, for instance concerning accountability. Of course, the complexity of the individual networks defies generalisation, because they each represent different interests, colours, and shades, but the case does point out that the difference between the professional and amateur humanitarians may not be as straightforward as is often assumed.

While the individuals and professionals grapple with each other, the question that we wish to address is how to deal analytically with the phenomenon of a globalised disaster? To our minds, the case underlines that there is no such thing as a humanitarian system, in the sense of an assembly of parts with clear complementary roles and responsibilities. Humanitarian aid comes about through diverse and geographically dispersed actors. Key players are the implementing agencies, their recipients, and the local institutional environment. Other relevant actors are foreign-policy makers, donors, UN agencies, peace-keeping forces, the media, and a range of local institutions. Together they form a humanitarian complex consisting of shifting actors, diffuse boundaries, partly conflicting interests and values, a high diversity of organisations and work styles, and unpredictable outcomes (Hilhorst 2002). Analytically, it would be unwise to attempt to draw a boundary between professionals and other humanitarians, such as for instance the military, private businesses, and the tsunami 'amateurs'. Instead, one needs to analyse how different actors emerge and relate to one another in the everyday practice of providing humanitarian aid. Rather than making assumptions about what particular actors have to offer, we must establish how the differences between professionals and other brands of humanitarians or non-humanitarians come about in practice.

## The politics of aid

After a brief moment of respite immediately after the tsunami, political difference and conflict resurfaced almost immediately, strongly affecting the way in which aid was organised. The long-running conflict in Sri Lanka is complex and multi-dimensional, made up of intertwining ideological, religious, and ethnic differences (Frerks and Klem 2004). Mutual allegations abound, claiming that the political factions of the government, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) hijacked relief to distribute under their own names, favoured their own followers, or withheld aid from areas not under their control.<sup>2</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the everyday organisation of aid is always dictated by these differences. In a country of long-standing conflicts like Sri Lanka, conflict inevitably becomes ritualised while people find ways to accommodate their differences on the ground.

A case in point is the attempt of a Buddhist monk and a Christian clergyman to work together in a village close to the southern city of Galle. The church and vicarage were not affected by the tsunami, as those buildings were located on high ground. But the temple, lower down, was almost submerged by the inundating waters. The clergyman through his network of churches was quick to receive loads of relief and money, which he wanted to disburse through what he called 'inter-religious' work. The temple was turned into a relief camp. When we visited Galle,<sup>3</sup> the Buddhist monk told us: *'Whenever there's a problem we [the Temple] always get involved. When we need money we ask money from the fathers [i.e. the Christian priests], because we know that the coffers of God are with them.'* Apparently, this monk was resigned to the fact that Christian churches have an advantage in tapping into Western resources, due to their networks. That does not mean that he can afford to explain this fact to his own people. When we asked a fisherman who had received food, medicine, clothing, and cooking vessels from the temple whether he knew where this aid came from, he replied that it had come from Japan and Thailand! When asked how he knew that, the fisherman said that the monk had told him so. The monk had diplomatically concealed the Western/Christian source that he knew was not acceptable to his own constituency, and instead attributed the relief to acceptable Eastern/ Buddhist sources.

Even though conflict may not always be manifested, there is no doubt that the aid is subject to political pressures. One particular field of tension that intensified after the tsunami is the relation

between the state and civil society, in particular NGOs. On 27 March 2005, *Silumina*, the Sunday newspaper of a government-owned publishing house, carried an extra-large headline: 'NGOs have taken nine out of the ten Billion foreign aid' (*videshaadaara biliyana dahayen namayakma engeeo aran*). The message was clear: the NGOs had snatched the money that would rightfully have come to the government. Indeed, many donors refused at that moment to channel funds through the government, unless the authorities reached an agreement with the LTTE for the joint management of aid. The state's frustration in getting limited funds, or none at all, from those who pledged support was vented when the President declared at a mass rally in the south that the government had not received even a *thamba doithuwak* (one cent).<sup>4</sup> Under different governments the Sri Lankan state has had a series of love-hate relationships with NGOs since the latter became a notable phenomenon in the late 1970s. While there have been collaborations between the two sectors, NGO-bashing has been a favourite pastime of respective governments. The state has sometimes been vocal in the anti-NGO lobby, joining forces with some odd allies, who represent ultra-nationalist groups such as Sihala Urumaya, Jathika Hela Urumaya, and the Patriotic National Movement (Fernando 2003). When decrying the role of NGOs, respective governments have used two types of argument. First, they claim that NGOs snatch money that would otherwise be available to the state. Second, they ascribe a conspiratorial role to NGOs, whom they accuse of promoting Western interests. History was thus perpetuated when the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs said:

*After the tsunami disaster several hundreds of NGOs entered the country as 'saviours' of the people. This sudden growth in the number of NGOs is a reason for concern. Some NGOs had developed into an organised network associated with the country's ethnic question, which is a dangerous trend. I need to tell you that all these NGOs have a political agenda. I would like to dub them as organisations which are servile to the West. Some NGOs openly display their servility to their neo-colonialist masters.*<sup>5</sup>

One can understand the frustration of a government that was seeing most official aid channelled through NGOs, in addition to the millions of Euros in private donations that were also finding their way into the country through NGOs. What is interesting for our purpose, though, is to see how different kinds of politics intertwine in the dispute. Institutional envy is coated in a sauce of ideological conspiracy theory. Hence, what appears to be an ideological dispute may hide underlying organisational politics. Similarly, what appears to be straightforward organisational competition may be complicated by clashes of real values. Our point is that humanitarian politics constitutes a mix of different kinds of politics. They combine ideological politics, humanitarian principles, and the everyday organisational politicking and rivalry. Stating that aid is political is simply a tautology. The real questions are what kinds of politics are involved, how they interrelate in practice, and how people's perceptions of these politics colour their interpretation of what happens around them. Such questions can be tackled only by detailed analysis of everyday practice.

## Coordination: international and national NGOs

Commenting on the overwhelming international response to the tsunami, one Sri Lankan NGO director observed: '*there has never been so much money available, which is creating unique opportunities*'. While the potential benefits were astonishing, the downside was also immediately visible. One experienced international humanitarian worker commented that he had never been in a situation of such fierce competition among the aid agencies. The Sri Lankan government was slow to register the influx of international agencies, but the numbers were estimated at around 250 in March 2005.<sup>6</sup> These agencies arrived in addition to the dozens of

international agencies that already had a presence in the country, focused on either conflict-related or development programmes. Many of them have signed the humanitarian Code of Conduct and are committed to working in partnership with local organisations and coordinating their work. Nonetheless, local organisations found it hard to find a place of their own in the implementation of tsunami-related activities. The case of X illustrates the problem.

X is an NGO with ten years' experience in supporting development projects in the district of Batticaloa. Naturally, it wanted to be involved in the tsunami response. When the NGO presented a proposal to one of its two European core funders, it was told that it would be best to 'leave the tsunami work to the international agencies and concentrate instead on the continuation of their work in the non-affected areas'. X had no intention of abandoning the non-affected areas, but nonetheless felt that it should also be involved in the reconstruction effort. Fortunately, its other core funder was more responsive, and the NGO was invited to present a proposal. During one of the district coordination meetings, X successfully registered a project to construct temporary shelters for two villages in Vaharai. During the preparation process, X discovered that the government itself had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with an international agency to construct new shelters in one of the villages. Although the district officials assured X that it could still proceed, and provided a signed statement to this effect, after a few weeks X wrote to the funding agency that it was being 'pressured by the government to withdraw from both villages'. It was hoping to get permission to work in another village.

The case of X is not unique to local NGOs. International NGOs too encountered difficulties in planning their work because they found other agencies 'taking over' designated areas. However, local NGOs felt that they had unequal access to the post-tsunami rehabilitation effort, although they were frequently sought out to become partners in the international agencies' programmes. And they often found that their best staff were attracted by the high-salary job offers extended by the agencies. Many international agencies are serious in saying that they want to engage in partnership with local agencies and capacities. But what do they mean by the concept? What does partnership constitute in practice?

'Partnership' is the term most frequently used for relationships in which INGOs fund local NGOs to implement humanitarian work. The term 'partner' is often misleading, since it suggests a relationship of equality (Smillie 2001). In discussing international aid and development, some have argued that, given the asymmetrical relationship between funders and implementers, partnership should not be understood in a legal sense, but more appropriately in terms of the partnership of marriage, involving complementary and different identities: 'as with most marriages, the relationship is as much a site of struggle as a cause of harmony' (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). The nature of partnership and the roles and decision-making discretion of the partners are always under negotiation, and the way in which the partnership evolves reflects the power struggles taking place (Hilhorst 2003).

In addition, the term 'partnership' is used to refer to a wide variety of arrangements. Extending the metaphor of marriage, we can distinguish partnerships in humanitarian aid that range from close and exclusive partnership to tendered, contractual arrangements. These are summarised in Table 1.

The metaphors imply no moral preference for one type of partnership over others. Rather, we would stress that each type of relationship may be useful for good humanitarian practice. However, we would make two qualifications. First is the need to be more explicit about the nature and the type of partnership in which organisations engage. Second is the need to examine how partnership is shaped in practice. As the following case illustrates, this defies simple definitions of working arrangements.

Let us consider an agency under the pseudonym 'Dutch Co-financing Agency (DCFA)'. The agency has regional departments for long-term development aid, as well as a separate

**Table 1:** Partnership: different types of relations

Type of partnership	Metaphor
Family networks, such as IFRC, where local partners are determined by corporate policies.	Family
Long-term equal relationship, two-way accountability, and two-way policy advice.	Marriage
Long trajectory, including capacity building and/or institutional support.	Adoption
Incidental support on the basis of specific project.	One-night stand
(Tendered) sub-contracting.	Prostitution

department of humanitarian assistance. Its partners in Sri Lanka include, according to the scheme presented in Table 1, family relations, adoptions, and one-night stands. Partners are engaged in development, health, peace building, and human rights. The dozens of partnerships are mainly arranged through e-mail and reports, with the occasional visit of a project officer from The Hague.

When the tsunami struck, DCFA immediately sent one of its staff to Sri Lanka. This person used to be responsible for Sri Lanka but had recently been moved to a different desk. Let us call him Paul. When he arrived, three days after the disaster struck, he first travelled around the country to meet DCFA's partners and assess needs, then settled in Batticaloa as the base of DCFA's programme. When we met him two weeks later, he had set up a programme worth around €5 million. While other organisations were occupied with distributing food, non-food items, and first aid, and setting up temporary shelter (some of which DCFA had funded), DCFA had almost immediately moved into trying to restore people's livelihoods. In the course of ten days, discussions were held with local fishing cooperatives to establish needs; contracts were established with the local wharfs, and the first 15 boats were already afloat. The programme aimed to provide 2800 canoes for the lagoon and 3843 boats of different sizes for sea fishing within five months, to cover livelihood needs of three districts. On 22 January, less than one month after the tsunami, DCFA celebrated the official launch of the hundredth boat, complete with an international press conference. To develop the programme, which was directly implemented by DCFA, the agency gathered considerable support from a group of medical doctors who had formed an environmental protection organisation. One of them was a surgeon from Argentina who had been hired by DCFA and worked for two years in the local hospital. Although this group of doctors did not belong to the normal DCFA partner network, Paul felt that they were better able to help to organise the large-scale and logistically demanding project than DCFA's other local partners were.

Soon after our visit, we heard that problems were beginning to emerge.<sup>7</sup> Other agencies in Batticaloa considered that DCFA should work in a more coordinated way, rather than launching an ambitious programme covering the entire fishery sector of three districts. The local DCFA partners complained that their role in the programme was too limited. The head office in The Hague questioned some aspects of the programme, for instance whether the boats should be distributed for free.

It seems that Paul and his local colleagues had become carried away with the programme. Several factors played a role here. First, Paul was very much affected by the situation. Knowing the environment from his previous visits, he was shocked by the extent of destruction. He moved into the guest-house where he always stayed: a gesture that was highly appreciated

by the owners. This was the only building still standing on an entire block, and he was literally surrounded by reminders of the tsunami. Second, due to the spontaneous public response in the Netherlands, DCFA had some €27 million for tsunami-affected people, an amount almost equal to the annual budget of the humanitarian aid department. As a result, Paul felt under pressure to devise a substantial programme. Third, the feverish and competitive claim-staking was fairly generalised among the INGOs, who seemed highly adrenalin-driven over this period. Like many aid workers, Paul had hardly taken time to eat and had visibly lost weight under the pressure of getting a programme running. Finally, he and his colleagues were caught up in the enthusiasm of getting a big job done and finding local fishermen extremely happy to have their boats restored within one month of the disaster. After the problems occurred, DCFA decided to trim down the programme and focus more closely on coordination and further dialogue with their existing partners, to define their respective roles in implementing the programme.

The point here is that partnership is highly fluid and changes with circumstances. Before the tsunami, DCFA partners had little day-to-day involvement with DCFA, which mainly acted as a funding agency. During the first post-tsunami weeks, DCFA became an implementing agency that set up a programme under the (felt) pressure of time, while disregarding and to some extent alienating a number of their local partners. To its credit, DCFA is a learning organisation which has built in checks to adjust programmes as they evolve and has engaged in the kind of meaningful dialogue with its partners that may result in a far more equal relationship than before.

All INGOs in different ways and to different extents act as funding partners to local NGOs. The ways in which partnerships evolve do not translate from good intentions straight to the field. Partnerships depend on the history of engagement, the demands of the specific situation, the constellation of actors in the humanitarian response, and especially on the ways in which these actors interpret and negotiate their relationship in practice. A meaningful discussion of partnership should therefore, in our opinion, be grounded in analysing real partnerships as they develop on the ground, rather than being based on an ideal image of partnership.

While some INGOs may abuse the notion of partnership to mask highly unequal relations, it is also true that there are many risks involved in engaging in partnership in the context of a major emergency. Working with local partners means working with organisations that have their own historically developed patterns of work, which may or may not be appropriate to the task at hand. An NGO's local ties may enhance its effectiveness, but such ties can also have adverse and harmful consequences, especially in situations of armed conflict. The influx of international organisations in emergency situations may also have a profound impact on the local organisational field. Such risks are real, and international organisations should invest in finding out about these realities, rather than relying on an idealised notion of what constitutes a 'typical' local partner. How can INGOs ensure that partnership – in the sense of ownership, participation, and equality – is a reality rather than an illusion, serving only to legitimise the humanitarian enterprise? How can they ensure that partnership can indeed live up to its promise and contribute to building more resilient and capable societies?

## Conclusion

From three different angles we have argued for the importance of grounded research in the everyday practice of humanitarian aid. The case of Kees and Annette concerned the identity of humanitarians. While humanitarian organisations have a tendency to defend the boundaries around them, invoking their principled approach as their main distinction, this case tells us that differences between those who deliver aid cannot be predetermined, but have to be empirically established. The case of the joint Buddhist/Christian project concerned the politics of aid.

Although it is a tautology to say that aid is political, the degree to which different kinds of politics intertwine and inform each other in practice is often understated. As a result, what appears to be a principled discussion may veil organisational politicking or attempts to establish legitimacy. The final section of this article dwelt on the issue of humanitarian partnership and showed how the concept of partnership can hide diverse meanings that are subject to change and social negotiation. What is agreed on paper may be very different from how the partnership evolves in practice.

Starting from practice also has ramifications for the way in which we talk about humanitarianism. Discussions (and fundraising campaigns) relating to international aid conjure up a world of professionals who are motivated by high principles, bidding for the admiration and respect of the public at large. Media representations of agencies in the tsunami response project a different reality, often portraying humanitarian organisations as mainly self-interested and competitive. By relating the 'petty normality' of humanitarian aid, as we have tried to do here, it is possible to counteract distancing discourses about humanitarian actors. Humanitarians are not heroes. Neither are they selfish vultures. Nor indeed do they correspond to any other stereotype concocted by their friends or foes. Accounts of everyday NGO practices and dilemmas correct blind expectations, expose uncritical admiration, and put unrealistic critiques into perspective.

## Notes

1. This research was conducted together with Marijgje Wijers Tangalle, who did fieldwork on the tsunami response in Sri Lanka from the end of December 2004 to the end of March 2005. We thank Marijgje for sharing her insights and field observations.
2. Although one speaks of three factions, JVP is currently represented in the government.
3. The visit took place on 8 January 2005 by a group foreigners representing the aid agency that sent the money, accompanied by Udan Fernando.
4. At Tangalle on 16 March 2005 ([www.colombopage.com/archive/March16123144JV.html](http://www.colombopage.com/archive/March16123144JV.html)). Soon the Presidential Secretariat announced that 'The Sri Lankan government has categorically rejected media reports quoting President Chandrika Kumaratunga as saying that the government had not received even a cent in tsunami aid. The Secretariat reported that what the President had said was, 'The international assistance pledged as tsunami aid did not consist of cash and [the] cash funds received were only those remitted to the President's Fund and the Prime Minister's Fund' ([www.colombopage.com/archive/March21123438JV.html](http://www.colombopage.com/archive/March21123438JV.html)).
5. 'Sri Lanka accuses NGOs of ethnic bias and political agendas', *Asian Tribune*, 4 June 2005, available at [www.asiantribune.com/show\\_news.php?id=13943](http://www.asiantribune.com/show_news.php?id=13943) (retrieved 8 November 2005).
6. Estimate based on various interviews.
7. After a joint visit by Dorothea Hilhorst and Marijgje Wijers in January 2005, Marijgje stayed in touch with the programme, while Dorothea conducted several follow-up interviews at DCFA headquarters in The Hague.

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