

COVALENCE INTERN ANALYST PAPERS

Aiding and Hindering: The Impact of Multinational Corporations in Relief and Reconstruction Efforts in Humanitarian Crises

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1. Introduction

Humanitarian Crisis, natural and man-made alike, strike all countries of the globe in different forms and scales, but all require serious relief and reconstruction efforts to return stability and progress. Multinational corporations play important roles in this process positively and negatively, sometimes even rekindling or fuelling the crisis in the pursuit of profits. Underdeveloped nations may be the hardest hit by these crises as they lack the resources to rebuild infrastructure and provide the population with all their needs; making international aid of high importance and so a dependency on outside intervention. This leaves some nations vulnerable to being taken advantage of in order to provide for the ever increasing consumer markets demanding cheaper goods. The varying stability of developing nations and the actions of multinationals in them could create situations that lead to a renewed outbreak of conflicts, social turmoil or the dependency of people on aid as opposed to their own means.

Crises provide opportunities for multinationals to increase their social responsibility records and be seen as ethical and caring corporations who donate desperately needed funds and support; but their impact must be scrutinized deeper to determine the extent to which they are socially responsible. When crises arise, publications plague the media with diverse stories of how multinationals are acting to either improve or deteriorate the situation, but it is difficult to judge entirely what effect they are having from one single news story or event. When corporations donate anything, their actions are labelled as “ethical offers” in the Covalence Ethical Quotation System, but this creates a very broad idea of an ethical “offer”. For the short-term relief efforts, immediate provision of resources and help is certainly necessary, but corporations could take an extra step and help with the year-long process of rebuilding crisis-hit areas. Many reports concerning the aftermath of relief efforts stress the importance of long-term planning to fully rehabilitate the region and create a condition where outside help will no longer be needed. An example is the Asian Tsunami of 2004 where the immediate response focused on saving all possible, but the long-term reconstruction required a

sound strategy, taking into consideration many uncertainties and the lack of knowledge, that would lead to the future sustainability of the region¹.

This paper will look at the impacts of multinationals on both relief and reconstruction efforts as well as long term planning to determine how much they actually influence, and the extent of their socially responsible behaviour.

2. Background on Humanitarian Crises

Humanitarian Crises have affected all continents save Antarctica with civilians being ravaged by nature and social unrest followed by relief and reconstruction efforts with varying levels of success and long term stability. Crises can be very different and cause extensive destruction in many forms including social, economic, physical and even psychological. All of these must be addressed for the affected area to move forward and allow its people to improve their standard of living. According to UNHCR (UN High Commission for Refugees) figures at the end of 2008, 42 million people around the world have been displaced by humanitarian crises, around 80% of them are in developing countries, and around 5.7 of these have been unable to return home for over 5 years². Vast refugee camps must be set up to accommodate an ever increasing number of people forced to leave their homes with conditions often being very hazardous due to the overstretched capacity of camps and the long process of getting new ones approved and built³. Aid for the maintenance and care of these people is of great concern to prevent as much human loss from these crises as possible, making all contributions highly important. UN agencies have a limited budget that depends on member nations and resources may sometimes be insufficient to help everyone; multinationals may be the ones who can supply further aid.

Natural disasters may be very difficult to deal with initially due to their unpredictability and, together with armed conflicts, they create massive health, shelter, education, nutrition and many other issues. As such, emergency response programmes have been set up to improve the time and effectiveness of aid provided and numerous agencies have also been created for this purpose⁴. A vast number of bodies with different focuses play various roles as endless problems must be dealt with; each building upon the other. The WFP attempts to feed starving populations while the WHO works to prevent disease outbreaks, however their efforts would come to little without proper infrastructure to deliver aid and security standards for protecting the population and vice versa. This creates a great need for proper coordination and planning to address all present issues and those that could arise in the future. This is a job largely undertaken by the Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs but remains a highly complex process that cannot entirely rely on previous experiences and new challenges are always faced⁵.

External factors also play important roles and even if crises appear to be far away, the connections of our increasingly globalized world make it difficult for the actions and events in one country to not be affected

¹ VanRooyen and Leaning, (2005) <http://nejm.highwire.org/cgi/content/full/352/5/435>

² UNHCR Annual Report (16 June, 2009) <http://www.unhcr.org/4a2fd52412d.html>

³ Dadaab Camps Under Severe Strain (27 March, 2009) <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=49ccf5ad2&query=conditions%20in%20refugee%20camps>

⁴ Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Assistance (2009) <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/humanitarian/>

⁵ OCHA (2009) <http://ochaonline.un.org/AboutOCHA/tabid/1076/Default.aspx>

by the actions and events of others. The global market is a powerful force influencing the impact of multinationals in humanitarian crises by creating demands for both basic needs and commodities. There are around 6.7 billion people living in the world who use its natural resources in all aspects of their lives. While water is essential for life and all people have a right to the clean access to it, it is not the case with everything. Some argue we live in the age of consumerism and goods are in excessive demand; for example, global mobile phone sales totalled 286 million in the second quarter of 2009 alone even with an economic recession⁶ and in 2008, 1.22 billion devices were sold⁷. This is the example of just one product people buy every day and is considered by some as essential for their lifestyles, so resources must be exploited to satisfy this need. The problems arise when those resources are located in areas with humanitarian crises as the pillaging of the land may fuel conflicts or even create them when opportunities are found.

Rwanda, Indonesia, Uganda, Haiti, Congo, are all countries hit by different disasters and crises who received varying amounts of outside aid to end the conflicts or rebuild the remnants, and were sometimes even largely ignored, as was the case of Rwanda. The list continues and each country is accompanied by a list of multinationals and organizations that undertook relief efforts, but it is not a guarantee the country will be able to stand up on its own again. It takes time to see the effects of projects and they require constant attention and amendments in case the original plans prove insufficient or ineffective, so those involved must be prepared for a long journey. Countries attempt to keep going and multinationals will be present in all of them extracting resources, providing jobs for the local population, selling products sometimes with questionable ethical records and implementing socially responsible initiatives; their impacts are then varied, significant, positive and negative.

3. Natural Disasters

Natural disasters occur indiscriminately and without warning, leaving a trail of destruction and disruption in societies and the environment. Initial responses focus on salvaging those affected and providing basic needs and care. Then, reconstruction programmes must be implemented to return to the proper functioning of the area and rehabilitation of those physically, economically and emotionally injured. All these efforts require significant investments and resources that governments may not entirely possess and emergency response teams may be incapable of coping with unless outside aid is received. Apart from other governments and international organizations, multinationals could play a significant role due to the resources available to them. Of the 1,583 event entries in the Covalence Ethical Quotation System coded with the "Humanitarian Policy" criteria, 930 of these report multinationals donating funds, services and products for the relief of areas hit by natural disasters. The amount of aid provided varies widely as can be seen from each individual entry and they range from thousands to millions of dollars directly to affected regions or to humanitarian organisations coordinating responses.

⁶ Global Mobile Phone Sales top 286 Million in Q2 (12 August, 2009) <http://www.digitalhome.ca/content/view/3944/282/>

⁷ Global Mobile Phone Sales Down 5% in Q4 08 (5 March, 2009) <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/global-mobile-phone-sales-down-5-in-q408/350915/>

Many of the entries also mention the speed with which this aid is delivered and how programmes are often set up for individuals to contribute through multinationals should they wish to do so. Logistical help is sometimes provided as well, such as trucks and warehouses to deliver and store items and some go as far as having employees volunteering in the affected areas. This shows a significant contribution to disaster relief efforts by multinationals as they provide much needed resources and help in various sectors of the operations.

However, how far multinationals go in assisting relief must be questioned to gain a broader picture. Of the 930 entries showing provision of aid to natural disasters, only 61 mention long term commitments to the following reconstruction and the development of specific programmes targeted towards the empowerment of people and the region. With 59% of the entries under the “Humanitarian Policy” criteria referring to aid in natural disasters, it would suggest a very significant role of multinationals towards alleviating these situations; however only a mere 7% of that 59% continue to contribute years after, casting a shadow over company’s commitment to social responsibility. These few events have a higher impact since they show an extended intention towards alleviating the damages and issues created by taking steps towards helping the region regain its previous condition- or even an improved one- and providing people with ways to find new livelihoods as opposed to keeping them dependent on aid. Entries included commitments to the reconstruction of homes, health and education centres, training programmes to run such centres, and schemes to boost agriculture and production in areas left almost bare. This provides the community with basic needs plus the means to move forward as opposed to offering temporary shelters and medical assistance that would cease to operate when external aid stopped supplying it. From the information analyzed, multinationals take very little part in contributing towards these types of schemes that are needed to truly solve the problems created by natural disasters even if their contributions to the immediate rescue and treatment of those affected is considerable.

4. Armed Conflicts and Oppressive Regimes

Numerous armed conflicts devastate regions with upsurges and down surges in violence, some lasting for decades without an end in sight to many. Like with natural disasters, civilians caught in these conflicts must be provided with food, water, shelter, medical assistance and other services and new livelihoods must be found after the widespread destruction, trauma and loss suffered. This once again takes great efforts and countries in civil strife may be incapable of alleviating the human suffering caused. Currently, there are 18 peacekeeping missions run and supported by the UN peacekeeping force; all in developing countries and some dating as far back as the 1940s, including UNTSO (truce in the Middle East) and UNMOGIP (India and Pakistan)⁸. Clearly, these issues are not resolved easily and massive initiatives and programmes must be implemented to restore peace and order to conflict-filled regions. Peace agreements do not guarantee stability and cooperation as exemplified by renewed outbreaks of the conflict after missions have ended and even the continued presence of these missions after settlements and truces have been signed fails to prevent violence, for example in Sudan where militant groups continue to clash throughout the country⁹. Therefore, long term commitment is needed

⁸ United Nations Peace Operations Year in Review (2008), <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/pub/yir2008.pdf>

⁹ UN Peace Operations Year in Review (2008), <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/dpko/pub/yir2008.pdf>

to fully address all issues created by and linked to armed conflicts even if the immediate effects on the population are of high and urgent importance as well.

Of the entries analyzed from the Covalence Ethical Quotation System, 62 mentioned the efforts undertaken by multinationals to provide relief to humanitarian crises caused by armed conflicts and oppressive regimes. Most of these are contributions to aid in refugee camps, donations to international organizations working in the affected areas and sometimes information and other services to help with the coordination and implementation of humanitarian missions. With the number of displaced people ever increasing, the low availability of resources to help them and the poor conditions many find themselves in, contributions fund desperately needed projects to prevent massive human loss. Medication, water and food are amongst the most common donations which help prevent the outbreak of epidemics and widespread malnutrition. Disease and starvation increase with armed conflicts as people are forced to move and health systems often collapse, making it harder to access essential drugs that cost great sums to deliver¹⁰. Contributions of money and supplies on the part of multinationals then aid initiatives that are often overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis; nonetheless, the amounts donated vary considerably as does the extent of the impact they have..

While donations do not cause harm, the degree of their usefulness could be hugely different, making it hard to consider all at the same level. All kinds of donations and aid are classified as ethical offers under the ethical quotation system, but they range from a few thousand pounds to millions of vaccines. With corporate social responsibility being an ever increasing factor, companies could make small donations to improve their social image knowing that all aid is viewed positively. As such, understanding how contributions are used and the extent to which they help is necessary to judge more accurately the impact of multinationals and how socially responsible they are.

While there are many entries in the Covalence Ethical Quotation System regarding how multinationals provide aid to natural-disaster stricken areas, a mere 62, or around 4% of the entries, detail how aid is provided for the relief of humanitarian crises caused by armed conflicts. Furthermore, only 29% of these were for long term reconstruction programmes and commitments to continue providing aid in the future. Contributions to the relief of human suffering in these circumstances are significantly fewer on the part of multinationals even though some conflicts have been raging for long enough to give plenty of opportunities to help.

Apart from the limited amount of aid given by multinationals to alleviate human suffering in war torn areas, the effect they have when operating in them and frequency with which they contribute to the crises is considerable. 184 entries, more than twice of those talking about the provision of aid, detail how the activities of multinationals aid in funding armed conflicts and corrupt regimes that create the humanitarian crises in the first place. Extracting resources and having businesses around the globe is common practice for multinationals, but doing so in countries with ongoing civil conflicts can be difficult and harmful on many levels. Since corporate social responsibility has become increasingly more important and companies do not want to be linked to allegations of crimes against humanity, some links may be severed to avoid entanglement in unethical practices; but it is not always the case and denial is a common practise. The claims of corporations cannot

¹⁰ WHO's Intensified Essential Drugs Programme for Africa to Cost \$16.2 Million. (1999)
<http://www.afro.who.int/press/1999/regionalcommittee/rc1999300803.html>

always be trusted and reports on their activities must be carefully investigated to ascertain their validity. Anglo American and De Beers for example, are two mining companies who have denied any involvement in funding groups in the Congo, but they have still been accused of unethical activities leading to human rights violations¹¹. This hinders relief, peace and reconstruction efforts and also creates difficulties in assessing the true impact of multinationals. Profiting from illegal ventures can potentially be very lucrative for many parties, making countries with natural resources and business opportunities more vulnerable when attempting to address humanitarian crises.

The story of Coltan in the DR Congo is one of the better known stories as companies and the governments of neighbouring countries scramble to secure the profits provided by some of the largest reserves of this valuable mineral. It is a critical resource for many devices purchased by millions of people around the globe such as cell phones, DVD players and computers, and also happens to be extensively controlled and taxed by rebels¹². By profiting from the control of this resource, groups can then use it to fuel a conflict that has reportedly taken the lives of around 5.4 million people since 1998 in one of the longest running civil wars; creating a massive humanitarian crisis in its wake¹³. Even today, thousands of refugees are unable to return to their villages and must find new ways of sustaining themselves while also avoiding the widespread killings, violence and illness. Most deaths have not been caused by direct fighting, rather from diseases and malnutrition created by circumstances that would not exist without the conflict¹⁴. As such, multinationals may not necessarily be directly responsible for the skyrocketing death-toll, but they contribute towards creating the situations that lead to such disasters. While companies publish charitable ventures in their corporate social responsibility reports, the damage they inflict may be greater than the good they claim to provide.

Corruption then becomes a great problem as deals with both government and rebel groups disregard the interests of the population for the enrichment of a select few and the satisfaction of global market demands. Economic sanctions are a common tool called for mainly by the UN when attempting to resolve crises without resorting to the use of force; their strength has varying degrees as does their effectiveness¹⁵. These sanctions are made to prevent governments and multinationals from trading with corrupt or warring parties to stem their sources of funding, but some multinationals remain in business. Burma is a classical example of an oppressive regime where its military Junta eliminates all opposition to their rule. The Junta came to power in 1962 through a military coup and has remained in control despite constant protests and pro democracy demonstrations that are usually violently quelled¹⁶. As such, many sanctions have been imposed on

¹¹ UN Integrated Regional Information Network (2003) http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=30546&SelectRegion=Southern_Africa&SelectCountry=south%20africa

¹² Companies Accused of Fuelling Fight for Congo's Mineral Wealth (2004) <http://www.oneworld.net/external/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.gemininewsservice.com%2Fdefault.asp%3Fcontent%3Darticlesmp%26id%3D524>

¹³ Special Report: Congo (2009) <http://www.theirc.org/special-report/congo-forgotten-crisis.html?gclid=CKSKyoyJwJwCFU0B4wodXQ4gnA>

¹⁴ Special Report: Congo (2009) <http://www.theirc.org/special-report/congo-forgotten-crisis.html?gclid=CKSKyoyJwJwCFU0B4wodXQ4gnA>

¹⁵ Security Council Sanctions Committee (2009) <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/>

¹⁶ Burma's Junta has a Reputation for Not Budging (2007) http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2007-10-10-burma_N.htm

the Junta without much success both at preventing the further abuse of the Burmese people, and the restraint from some corporations. The country is rich in fossil fuels, something which has not escaped the interests of many, for example Chevron and Total. These two western companies have been working in the country for decades in off-shore gas production, but their presence has yet to be removed. According to some organizations, their activities are one of the most important sources of income for the military regime and both are in close contact with the generals; leading to a call for the boycott of these companies in an attempt to prevent continued human rights violations¹⁷. Clearly, even with sanctions and removal of investments in place, corporations cannot always be forced to relinquish profits for the protection of human rights and other methods must be found to end their continued involvement in funding those groups who violate them.

Reaction vs Initiative

From the data presented above, multinationals seem to respond much more often to sudden events causing massive disruption as opposed to taking the initiative of helping in long standing issues with peaks and valleys in the damage they cause. Apart from the entries detailing aid given to specific humanitarian crises, some entries were on ethical offers regarding standing commitments to humanitarian relief efforts and ongoing development projects that can be applied to areas affected in the future; however they only numbered 70 events. In the entries 1,583 analyzed, 1,370 were ethical offers- response to natural disasters accounted for 68% of them, aid in armed conflict and oppressive regimes being 4.5% and long term projects for aid and development being 5%. Reasons for the great difference between the aid provided to sudden crises instead of to more protracted conflicts or permanent projects could be many and very different, but no evidence was found to support any form of hypothesis.

The great devastation caused by unpredicted events may be a trigger for philanthropy as it comes as a great surprise and sudden high death toll with a need for immediate response; the effect of ongoing conflicts may be diluted by time and the sense of urgency could be lost even if the damages could be more severe. Armed conflicts and oppressive regimes are also more political, which could make some corporations unwilling to tangle in such matters or they may have political reasons for not meddling depending on their ideology. Some could want to improve their reputation but without having to spend much and so could make a one time donation as opposed to having projects with costs having some degree of unpredictability. It could even be that some do not want to publicise how much they have helped even if it seems unlikely; the reliability of the media and all types of publications must be questioned and it can never be assumed that everything is known. All these and many others could be reasons that explain the difference in when, where and why multinationals give aid, however there was nothing to support any one of them as a correct statement. Nonetheless, it does show that the impact of multinationals in alleviating humanitarian crises is limited and much more could always be done should they wish to.

Conclusions

¹⁷ Two Western Oil Companies Face New Pressure on Burma (26 October, 2007)
http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9125

The impacts of multinational corporations on relief and reconstruction efforts of humanitarian crises are both positive and negative with wide scales of effectiveness. With so many publications on donations and aid provided to victims, one would be inclined to think corporations are very philanthropic and without their help, crises would be much more devastating, however more must be taken into account than whether corporations give any aid or not. With massive yearly turnovers, the amount donated may represent a very insignificant amount of profits even though it is not the purpose of corporations to give aid, but it is important when evaluating their corporate social responsibility records. Under a façade of caring and giving actions, multinationals may be harming far more than they are helping or they may be attempting to soften their image with the least amount of effort possible for those who have become conscious consumers and are demanding fairer treatment of people and the environment from all companies.

Humanitarian crises ravage people and countries on a huge amount of levels and they are not even fully understood due to the chains of problems created. As such, crises cannot be easily solved and require attention on all sectors involved and dealing with only one aspect will do little to alleviate the entire situation. Furthermore, even after rebuilding programmes, situations may be created for conflicts to break out again, hence creating a cycle that must be broken for progress to be achieved. A town may be rebuilt complete with schools, hospitals and jobs, but if there are no defences against flooding in an area prone to flooding, what will prevent the town from being swept away in the future? Although natural disasters are not fully predictable, some knowledge still exists regarding which regions could be affected the most and proper planning could reduce the impact of future disasters. Armed conflicts are similar because they may erupt again at any time, hence actions must be taken to ensure that there is no cause for groups to resort to violence again. Truces and agreements can be broken at any time if there are reasons for doing so; for reconstructions to be more effective, those reasons must be addressed.

Rebuilding and laying down the stones for a better future is not an easy task and one that multinationals play an important role whether they decide to act for the better or worse or not at all. Exploitation has long been a practise and one easily overlooked by those whose interests are met by it. The troubles of others in distant parts of the world whose name some had never even heard of are easy to ignore, but it does not mean they should be. As consumers, our actions keep multinationals competing by creating the demand they supply, as such, everyone has the ability to effect change. Consumers can demand corporate social responsibility in addition to products and services, so it is not only in the hands of business giants to make a difference.

To demand this of corporations, consumers must also be made aware of what surrounds them. Humanitarian crises may get attention in the media, but details and reasons for the conflict may not be as well explained to or known by the public. With components of products being taken from different continents, assembled in one country, packaged in another and sold to a global market, it is increasingly difficult to know the entire supply chain of a single product, making all of its secrets even harder to find. One must know exactly what is in everything they buy and where it comes from to be able to find out whether it is influencing humanitarian crises. The story of coltan mentioned above is one example of this because it is used in many electronic devices like the 1.2 billion cell phones sold in 2008, but the instructions manuals fail to mention

where exactly the minerals included in the package were sourced from. In our attempts to stay connected with family members and make important business calls, we could unintentionally be contributing to funds destined towards purchasing weapons used to massacre and terrify civilians. Consumers must therefore take the necessary steps to ensure their purchases are ethical and demand from corporations that they do not engage in activities that support armed conflicts and oppressive regimes.

Corporate social responsibility has become more important in the past years and more people are demanding this with an ever increasing number of initiatives to achieve it. The projects undertaken by some multinationals have been impressive and have improved the lives of many all over the world. More lives would be lost in humanitarian crises without the help of corporations and goodwill efforts must be applauded and appreciated. Nevertheless, the real impact of initiatives must be taken into account when labelling corporations "ethical" and the creation of long term commitments and projects that will aid or prevent future crises should be encouraged. Multinationals have great resources at their disposal and could make a great difference should they choose to help instead of doing as little as possible merely for the sake of presenting a better public face. Consumers have taken a greater interest in corporate responsibility and while great breakthroughs have been achieved, even more are yet to come. Chevron continues to fund Burma's military Junta, Anglo American still extracts gems from Congo and Shell has yet to stop extracting oil in the conflictive region of the Niger Delta; so more steps must be taken to stop multinationals from fuelling or ignoring humanitarian crises altogether, and increase the number of those undertaking long term and well planned relief and reconstruction efforts to help people and areas regain the lives that were taken from them.

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