
Unaware Actors: Policies and Random Combinations of Aid Interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995)

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Summary

In the last ten years, international organizations have defined more clearly the role and the tasks of humanitarian aid in contemporary international relations. The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a good illustration of the advantages but also of the disadvantages of today's humanitarian operations. The peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the largest operation of this kind that has been set in motion by the international community. In its humanitarian aspect it is complex and multi-layered. Humanitarian campaigns today are more philanthropically- than organizationally-driven, but it is the latter aspect that makes them fail or succeed. It is not enough to provide humanitarian aid, but its distribution to the recipients who need it must be organized. That process involves several essential factors: international and inter-state organizations, governmental organizations as well as non-governmental (international and local) organizations and associations. The example of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows to what extent the mentioned factors contribute to the success of a humanitarian operation, but also the problems which stem from their undefined role and tasks.

Introduction

The role of aid interventions within the international relations system was reinstated more clearly than in the past by the recent scenarios of war crises, thus becoming a key element both in the receiving and the organising countries.

In particular, the case of the war in the former Yugoslavia and the subsequent Bosnian context stand out because of the proportion of aid poured into the country during and after the conflict, thus producing a very complex frame regarding the mobilised resources, the number of actors animating it, the type of interventions initiated, the wide institutional levels covered and the Western public opinion involved.

Nevertheless, the awareness of the increased problems of aid initiatives in the Bosnian case – and of their frequent inability to reach the established goals – was late in gaining ground in the *communis opinio* and in general among the professionals, within the international agencies and in the NGOs.

Public opinion continued to look at aid more as a 'philanthropic' than an 'organizing' issue, focusing more on the values inspiring solidarity\emergency and co-operation\development initiatives, than on its real impact. As for international agencies, they

persistently tried to adapt the new scenarios to the intervention models already consolidated elsewhere during other crises, instead of the contrary.

This article, even without denying the moral sphere of humanitarian intervention, focuses more on the different but complementary aspects that determined its ineffectiveness in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), estimated on the basis of both the technical execution and the political effects produced.

In order to do this it will be important to underline the characteristics that make BiH a peculiar 'scenario' in comparison with the known ones, as well as clarifying, by taking into consideration these peculiarities, how the type of 'actors' concerned has changed.

Thus emerges a quite negative overall perspective and a critical frame that does not mean to generalize, nor to deny the positive aspects of a great number of solidarity initiatives and co-operation projects in the Balkans, of which the writer had an opportunity to ascertain personally.

Unfortunately that did not apply to the majority of the interventions in that context.

The absolute uniqueness of the Bosnian scenario can be summarised in five points, each with an almost strict causality, that unleashed a set of new variables that complicated the work of those who take care of the organisation of the aid interventions, both in the humanitarian emergency and the reconstruction-development aspects.

A nearby country

Thanks to its location, BiH is an accessible and easily reachable country.

In a short time and with limited expenses, bearable even to individual citizens, it was possible to reach it from every part of Europe, even during the war.

An action area was then open 'round the corner', making the direct presence of a higher number of foreign actors possible (public but mainly private), unlike in the past when the distance from the crisis areas (and the absolute impossibility to get there) brought a physiological selection effect on the subjects working on-site, limiting their presence to the ones professionally dedicated to this kind of action.

With limited financial resources, many new organisations – a number tens of times higher than the one of the organisations that operated in recent African or Asian crises – not necessarily qualified for humanitarian assistance, have decided to move from a merely political and declarative level, and plunge themselves into the practical managing of the operations which in the past were delegated to big organisations recognised in this field.

The most direct consequence of these new possibilities of non-mediated action, together with the relatively easy accessibility of the context and the lack of close monitoring by the international subjects on the inward and the outward courses of the considered country, is the exponential increase of foreign actors operating in it, who in a very short time have reached several hundreds in number.

A developed country

BiH entered the crisis as a developed country.

In the years preceding the war, like most parts of SFR Yugoslavia, BiH could boast of high social and economic standards, more similar to the Western countries than to the ones of the Warsaw Pact, with which BiH is nevertheless in the Western public opinion often associated and homologated because of its Communist single-party regime.

The present social system and the good educational system, have left a legacy of a big portion of the population, and mainly residing in urban areas, with high know-how levels, expectations on social work and technical and Civil Service abilities of consequence, which can even be employed to take care of micro and small private entrepreneurial activities.

The former Yugoslav political class that used to see its way in the ideology of self-management and to reproduce within the 'federal' constitutional and party order the pluralism of the political game controlled from above by the regime, had developed a self-perception as a sophisticated and complex body as far as the dynamics of ruling it are concerned.

The crisis will produce a wide range of implications, precisely because it involves a social and political system that was already structured before the beginning of the war. The aforesaid implications will actually be far and wide from the ones that could be assumed by a strained depiction of a completely barren land, a stereotype fostered by Western journalism, which has lately been proved largely incorrect.¹

Actually, in BiH some sectors of the advanced pre-war system managed to resist the strong impact of the war, and influenced by the emergency, they developed the antibodies that have strengthened them and made them grow much bigger than they would in similar Western realities.

As a consequence, the biggest part of aid '*kits*', deeply rooted in the Third World-like scenarios where the problem was how 'to start from scratch' and to set development processes going in a certain country, have turned out to be inadequate in Bosnia when transferred *tout court*.

A rapidly changing country

An aspect partly linked to the preceding one is that BiH is a very fast changing scenario, where the range of needs during the war years was subject to weekly changes, in need of constant updating, not always easy to realise with the tools available to the subjects organising the intervention.

If compared to the severe – but in a sense reassuring for the people operating in them – African and Asian contexts where the crises, almost always concerning devel-

¹ Cf. Rieff, D. 'Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West', New York (1995).

opment, were crystalized in their main features (inveterate, but precisely for this reason 'stable' in their gravity), BiH introduces a kind of a break which demands, more than the quantity of the aid, the flexibility of the organization and of the administrative procedures in charge of the management and reveals the inability of the models and the kinds of interventions to adapt themselves to the new situations in which they're called to operate.

Delay, bureaucratic slackness, dissipating the aid and overlapping processes of parallel initiatives will be emphasized by this aspect.

A double transition and a political laboratory

As the first case of institutional and political rupture resulting in a war in a European state and following the disintegration of the international bipolar system, the conflict in BiH becomes the first chance to test the difficult course of Euro-American agreement on the new international dynamics: virtually a political laboratory.

Hence an increasing interest of the community of states for an aid-receiving country, so that absolutely for the first time in the peacekeeping operations the interest of donors – here lies the exceptionality – is equivalent if not higher than the interest of the recipient country. After an initial difficulty in judging the significance of a crisis whose losses among the civil population were underestimated, in the medium-term, however, the war in the former Yugoslavia assumed considerable visibility and prominence.

A strategic scenario: between effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian intervention

BiH's peculiarity is also due to the fact that it is squeezed between two transitions that intersect as a spiral and for the first time at the same time concern the same area of East Europe. Besides the shift 'war→ peace', BiH experiences the difficult and incomplete post-Communist transition from the one-party system to a democratic and liberal democracy.

Most humanitarian projects poured into BiH would instead be catalyzed by the military emergency only, underestimating the breadth of the second transition – more sneaky, but topical – so as to influence the same war events.

This will prevent many foreign subjects from thoroughly understanding the political significance of the war.

Unlike the territories where suffering is linked to natural catastrophes or developmental problems, the Bosnian scenario is characterised by a conflict that in every decision seems to be connected to an extremely clear and rational political clash, in spite of the fact that the bloody death scenarios going on during the whole war would long divert people from this analysis, giving to many the feeling of the exact contrary.

Hence a journalistic information (the academic inquiry into these aspects has been widely lacking), more inclined to linger on 'how' instead of 'why' of the conflict, will be late in interpreting the fights in the former Yugoslavia as a political confrontation between the ruling groups, seeking new room for their own survival, but not hesitating to give new strength to the national ruptures which SFR Yugoslavia had undoubtedly known before.

Following this interpretation, that sees ethnic hatred more as a consequence than a cause in war strategy, we may understand how in the Balkans during these years it has been impossible to disregard the political meaning that every activity coming from abroad, even the smallest, had, in one sense or another, regarding the rupture produced by the option 'one-nation' or 'multi-nation'. Instead of declaring itself 'impartial' and in favour of 'peace' (terms which imply many twists of the meaning and ambiguities) humanitarian aid has practically been forced to side with or against national separatism or the multi-nation reintegration in one state.

Therefore, each project or initiative carried out in the former Yugoslavia, will be subject to this evaluation, resulting in an exposure to great risks of being politically exploited by the local context. Most active actors in humanitarian aid campaign confronted with this problem and – even though proclamations of fairness were common, as if humanitarian field itself would warrant a super-parties position – foreign actors, and in particular non-governmental ones, will repeatedly come off as losers in the relationship with the local political élites.

The Bosnian context will reveal more clearly that humanitarian aid, even if carried out in a technically correct way (thus efficiently), doesn't necessarily grant 'correct' political relapses (thus being effective) in a scenario where everything gains a political undertone. Efficient aid, in other words, can result in the paradox of strengthening and stimulating the elements that keep wars alive.

Involved actors

As already seen in the past scenarios, this anomalous framework will alternatively see aid initiatives organised by subjects, either international/intergovernmental, or national governmental and non-governmental, in their turn linked to local, institutional or associations referees. The consequences of the interventions and the numerous types of actors appearing in each of these levels will have been changed.

The international and intergovernmental side

Called to operate in a sophisticated context, many of the international/intergovernmental agencies were asked to meet the humanitarian intervention demand emerged in recent years, found their political role strengthened in BiH through a process they found unexpected and which caused them certain embarrassment.

Without any clear guidance from the national diplomacies and, consequently, even from the international community bodies, the agencies become the repository of the political 'sense' to be attributed to every single aid intervention.

Crushed, on the one hand, by the inability to achieve a greater flexibility in the programmes and in administrative managing, necessary in a context in which the food programmes soon will no longer be sufficient and on the other hand, by exceeding structures in on-site organisations which see their costs grow excessively, international missions in the first years of the conflict found it hard to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in providing aid and registered many examples of political dispersion and exploitation of various initiatives.

Nor has the co-ordination/control on the myriad of associations and non-governmental bodies crowding the Bosnian area fared any better: for many of them going to the site of crises and working in them becomes possible even without a link or authorization by one of the international missions present there. In response to the growth of political discernment of the UN officers working on-site (firstly from UNHCR², an occurrence that will generate quite a few disputes within the United Nations themselves) the remaining institutional levels in their turn, in a framework of 'co-ordinators' without 'co-ordinated subjects' will generate a series of permanent missions which theoretically have different tasks, but in practice often experience overlapping activities. This will be aggravated by the inability of the agencies to modify their methods of intervention and management of the projects vis-à-vis the new needs, first of all the inability of providing themselves with the tools to pile up an institutional and political memory regarding the area in which they are operating. Certain that the scenario is highly political, a fast turnover in personnel imposed by the agencies operating in BiH has soon generated a situation in which the work experience accrued becomes difficult to transfer to the successor of a person leaving the job.

The governmental side

In the Balkan's 'merry-go-round', the diplomacy of different states, Western and Arab as well, showed to be willing to take initiatives not always corresponding to the international community strategies, in which some of them take part at the multilateral level anyway.

With time, the more the effects of the war were becoming devastating, the more the diplomatic initiative would demand, in order to be effective, a strong involvement on emergency projects of the co-operation governmental agencies of individual states. They became then a complementary tool of the diplomatic policies so much as to turn in the mid-years of the conflict into the sole real vector of the bilateral relations between the Bosnian scenario and European states, leaving behind the traditional diplomatic

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Cf. Cunliffe S.A. e Pugh M.: 'The Politicization of UNHCR in the Former Yugoslavia' in *Journal of Refugees Studies*, X (2), Oxford, June 1997; Pugh M.: 'Humanitarianism and Peacekeeping' in *Global Society* 10 (3), pp. 205-24

channels of career, an aspect that will bring about new psychological ambiguities within the administrations of individual states.

It should also be noted that in a similar grouping of states, the co-operation agencies act as self-relying 'microcosms', drawing their strength from being legitimated by the government of their countries of origin and they make the horizontal (between similar co-operation offices of different states) and the vertical co-ordination (with the international agencies and the myriad of associations and non-governmental interventions, within or outside their operating range) even more difficult.

At the same time, in many cases the state agencies will persist in the old and consolidated model of relationship with a restricted number of NGOs from their respective countries, which de facto cuts off the growing number of new subjects starting to operate in the area.

This activism sought by the single state co-operations and often protected from outside interference is sometimes a symptom (see for instance the complex relationship between USAID³ and the rest of European countries' co-operations) of the difference in the political approach of the various states, but it's also sometimes a manifest choice of isolationism, as it happens with many interventions coming from the Arab countries that mostly consider it essential to start up co-operation in Bosnian territories (especially in the areas with a majority Muslim population) without communicating to the third parties the features and the progress of their projects.

In general, for all of them the co-ordination level, whenever there is one, doesn't go further than the simple information released to the other actors operating in the area involved in the emergency or reconstruction intervention, which cannot in any case be blocked or modified through the decision of a different country from the one organising the aid.

The 'donation' is still a ruling value that puts the project in an extraterritorial area, makes it an untouchable activity and leaves to the receivers the freedom to define the objectives and the characteristics of intervention, as well as the choice of the local partners and the stages of implementation.

The foreign non-governmental side

The element that makes the crisis of the aid system in BiH more clear is the number of bodies that have been operating there during these years, so high as to make impossible – with the present instruments – any reliable survey.⁴ The non-governmental actors that poured in great numbers into BiH were the ones to make their total number grow out of proportion. This multiplying effect is due to the high number of European and extra-European countries which go to BiH, but also to the many new kinds of *'non-*

³ United States Agency for International Development, U.S. co-operation state-Agency

⁴ The difficulty in determining all the operating subjects may be guessed from what is by now the most thorough mapping of the subjects operating in the humanitarian field and in development in BiH: see I.C.V.A.: 'Directory of Humanitarian and Development Agencies operating in Bosnia and Herzegovina', Sarajevo, 1998

governmental entities' that have now appeared and want to operate personally. It's mainly due to them that, in the first part of the conflict, (1992-1994) traditional NGOs, engaged in managing co-operation projects in the African and Asian fields, almost kept aloof, uncertain about how to react vis-à-vis the new emergency requests coming from BiH.

To the traditional and sometimes exclusive dual relationship state-agencies/NGOs, a long series of associations and volunteer groups can be added, sometimes even political and/or denominational organizations that wish to work in BiH and to create – almost always autonomously – on-site aids and projects, self-financed with collection campaigns started up in their countries of origin.

Some of these new organizations are created on purpose (as an 'Aid Committee'), while others are pre-existing organizations, very different, that are not devoted to humanitarian intervention, but who decide during the crisis to implement directly those projects for which funds have been collected, without transferring them, as it used to be done in the past, to more organized bodies or bodies specifically engaged in this field.

The above-mentioned great visibility offered by BiH, together with moral choices, makes it possible for the numerous organizations involved at this level, in terms of legitimization/protagonism, to be used as a resource in their countries of origin. Being present in Bosnia is considered an element of prestige and of organization reliability, which will make co-ordinating their activities even more difficult. The risk of overlapping – previously foreseen – now becomes uncontrollable.

The issue of efficiency for many of these subjects represents an insurmountable barrier, even more than the problem of effectiveness.

Having matured through the experience in the sole field of quantitative political mobilization in their countries of origin on the occasion of different crises (like 'organization of pacifist sit-ins') these subjects find great difficulties in suddenly switching to a dimension of qualitative and technical action as well, demanded by the new areas of intervention (like 'managing a refugee camp in Bosnia and choosing the aid to be provided').

The 'goodness' of the subjects and of the message they bear is not enough to guarantee their efficiency anymore, so that the range of the 'good-and-incapable' operators widens.

This will show the problem of control of these interventions, betraying their limitations during their implementation and afterwards.

The complete autonomy of these actions, together with the will to avoid frustrating common emotionality and people's true involvement, that is the base of many aid collection campaigns in the countries of the origin of the associations, will make the criticism about the realization of the 'do-it-yourself' projects almost impossible and very rare anyway, even in case of a clear failure.

During the conflict years then, for want of any kind of *authority* in the countries of origin as well as in BiH, to exert control on the aid/solidarity projects, an evaluation will only be the concern of the Western public opinion that, devoid of information and

evaluation elements, will again let themselves think more about the 'goodness' of the initiatives than about their real impact.

Local referees and beneficiaries: institutions and associations

Beneficiaries and local institutional referees are an essential part of the aid organization whose assent is often the only requirement to operate on site, so that for many non-governmental foreign subjects in search of finances, their identification has been one among the few necessary steps between the conception and the realisation of the projects.

As far as local institutional referees are concerned, the Bosnian political class mainly converged in local authorities is becoming stronger, a class that – rooted in the territory and relatively autonomous from the centre – doesn't hesitate to use aid initiatives for political purposes, after granting a bureaucratic permission rarely denied through informal procedures (like 'Mayor's declaration of intents', 'general letter of support', etc.).

The scheme of the aid initiative, legitimated 'because it is requested by the Bosnians', soon becomes the common inflated trait of the various fund-raising strategies, so that it happens that the same Bosnian institution 'sustains' different interventions, some of which are in obvious opposition.

Apart from the programmes for the refugees' repatriation (that concern one of the most controversial issues of the war and for this reason are object of difficult negotiations) the Bosnian side seldom says no to the rest of the activities and donations coming from abroad.

On the other hand, the aid organizers' search for active local referees to be included in the project implementation process will have to deal with two aspects. Firstly, the concentration of numerous projects on the few referees, who – overloaded and yet unable to renounce them – accept to be local active partners for a number of disconnected projects coming from different countries that don't communicate upstream, with efficiency limits easy to guess. Secondly, we witness the mushrooming of Bosnian NGOs. While in the Afro-Asian context the role of international bodies was to favour civil society development through the promotion of the creation of local independent associations, in case of Bosnia – a developed country – the problem is the beginning of a selection among the tens of associations and non-governmental Bosnian bodies, partly inherited from the self-managing system and partly born during and after the war, especially in the BiH Federation, where the largest portion of the flow of humanitarian interventions can be found.

The trend among the local subjects is that, once a range of possible activities is determined, the main worry becomes the creation of *ad hoc* structures rather than the coordination with the existing ones. Also, clear examples of cross-cutting membership can be noted: the same restricted group of people participates actively at the local institutional level as well as in the associations, that are supposed to be their critical, non-governmental interlocutor.

Local NGOs, whose life is strictly linked to the approved projects for which funds have been allocated, become a privileged occupation in a country with extremely high unemployment levels and very low wage levels.

These organizations, born to operate from the inside to make the peace process easier, represent a real acceleration factor only in the beginning. Later on, experiencing a transposition process and worried about the survival of their structure, they see the progressive normalization of the framework as a risk of being abolished.

Conclusion: *After* Dayton

Now, three years after the Dayton Peace Accords, we can say that the war left the legacy of some malfunctions of the preceding years, even though we should underline considerable improvements in the political co-ordination of the diplomatic initiatives, an obvious result of the international political guidance that was much clearer than in the past.

The creation of OHR⁵ joint diplomatic mission that is still trying to reconcile the different European and American approaches, was actually successful in limiting the excessive activity of the single states and the spreading of disconnected diplomatic initiatives, that nevertheless are again the main protagonists in the political arena as regards governmental co-operation in the agencies' activities.

The shift, still going on and not completed yet, from an emergency stage to the reconstruction, changed many of the subjects operating on-site, that still remain numerous and difficult to set in an overall rational framework.

The idea of the co-ordination between the different projects and interventions still remains an unfulfilled plan and BiH on many occasions seems like a country that has to face the dimension of the 'forced aid' that generates an economy depending and feeding itself solely on the resources brought in by humanitarian as well as reconstruction\development projects.

Sarajevo has become the portrait of this 'after-war' and 'before the peace' stage. Coming out of a very tough three-year siege that had made it the emblem of the war, Sarajevo became the symbolic destination of all the subjects who could not get there during the war due to obvious practical difficulties and that are now setting up their headquarters in BiH.

Besides, we have been witnessing a Bosnian process of strong political and administrative centralisation on Sarajevo, that is a reaction to the phenomenon – unnecessary – of the increased municipal local authorities' competences witnessed during the war.

⁵ Office of the High Representative, executive instrument of the Peace Implementation Council. The Conference of Bonn of 9-10 December 1997 considerably widened its power, making it the main interlocutor of Bosnian institutions for all the democratic consolidation processes.

This makes an equal distribution of the aid between the centre and the peripheries quite impossible, and Sarajevo soon becomes – with its more than 12.000 international operators – the clearest image of a system 'overloaded' with aid intervention and personnel working there. Nevertheless, the myth of reconstruction overturns any other criticism on the international presence in BiH, in spite of the impression that, what with the war over, this is not simply a territory to be rebuilt, as promoted by the stereotypes that attract Western entrepreneurs who express their will to contribute in this stage.

With the wounds and the local political class that, at a close look, came out of the conflict quite invigorated, the issue of political mediation on reconstruction becomes central.

Foreign bodies do not always wish to invest into this, which is fundamental for setting the confidence building processes going. Today, trying to reconstruct a wall makes no sense if we don't previously create a solid political and social consensus so that that same wall will not be pulled down again in a few months or years.

Translated by the author