

Challenges for Food Aid in Conflict Situations

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Introduction

Conflicts, especially those that occur within countries, are characterized both by intergroup divisions and by connections between the warring groups.

In spite of their best efforts to maintain non-partisanship in relation to the warring sides, international aid agencies inevitably affect these intergroup dividers and connectors. They can exacerbate, reinforce or prolong conflict by feeding into and worsening intergroup dividers or by ignoring and undermining intergroup connectors. On the other hand, their assistance can also help reduce intergroup dividers and/or build on and strengthen the connectors between people on different sides of a conflict.

By analyzing the context of a conflict and their aid program, humanitarian and development aid providers can do the good they mean to do—alleviating human suffering and promoting sustainable enterprises—and, at the same time, encourage and enhance people's capacities to disengage from conflict and find non-war options for solving problems.

These claims are neither theoretical nor speculative. They are based on the broad experience of many aid agencies providing assistance in many conflict areas in recent years and collected by the Local Capacities for Peace Project. Working collaboratively, a number of aid agencies joined together with support from several donor governments, to understand how aid and conflict interact. In place after place, in spite of the differences that exist among cultures, types of wars and aid agencies and projects, aid's effects on conflict followed similar and predictable patterns.

Theft is the most widely recognized process by which aid can feed into conflict. Theft is an issue of particular relevance to food providers. In the following excerpt from the book, *Do No Harm*¹, we outline some of the practical lessons the Local Capacities for Peace Project has learned about theft and how aid providers can reduce it to mitigate its impact upon conflict.

Theft: A Key Problem

Because aid resources represent economic wealth and political power, people engaged in the struggles of war will always want to control them.

It would be odd—even subversive to their cause—if they did not do so. Thus, it can be unproductive and naive for aid providers to expect warlords to accept fully the humanitarian principle that victims on all sides of a conflict have equal rights to aid. When the "enemy" receives any kind of support, including humanitarian aid, it is always viewed as counter to the sought-after victory.

Warriors often steal aid goods and use these resources to finance their war efforts. Stolen food aid, blankets, vehicles and communications systems can be used by armies directly or be sold to buy the supplies they need. Theft is the most widely recognized process by which aid feeds into conflict.

In order to steal, thieves need information about what, where and when goods are or will be available. They need a location where they can gain control of the goods (a check point, a narrow road, a

warehouse). They need to know that there will be enough goods of enough value to make the theft worthwhile. They need to be able "to get away with it"—not to be caught or, if caught, held accountable for their actions.

How to Discourage Theft

Thieves need knowledge, opportunity, incentive, and impunity.

Strategies to avoid theft must disrupt one or more of these. Aid workers have been extremely inventive in developing such strategies.

Some aid agencies deliver goods unannounced, episodically, according to no fixed schedule and never to the same location twice so thieves do not have sufficient knowledge to steal. Some advertise broadly their planned aid deliveries using radio, megaphones, bulletins or TV, so that communities for whom the aid is intended can hold thieves accountable if they do not receive what they expect. Some agencies consciously lower the re-sale value of their aid goods without damaging their usefulness, thus undermining thieves' incentives. Others make theft so inconvenient that the effort required is not worth the return.

Strategies for delivering aid secretly thwart thieves' need for knowledge. Strategies for dispersing aid thwart both opportunity and incentives. Strategies for lowering the resale value of aid also undermine incentives. Strategies for informing and involving civilian communities in monitoring the distribution of aid address the issues of impunity.

Below, we cite examples from a number of field sites. While each of these strategies made sense in the place where it was tried, no single one of these approaches can work everywhere. Aid workers always have to consider the realities in their own circumstance in order to come up with an effective approach that fits the realities in that setting. The Analytical Framework presented above helps aid workers consider what approaches could work in their immediate situations. The examples given here provide rich background that can prompt unconventional and imaginative ideas about what to do in other locations.

- *Not Worth the Effort.* In Somalia, the Red Cross distributed blankets to families. Theft was common as blankets were scarce and profits could be made by their resale. Agency staff began to cut each blanket in half. Families could easily sew their blankets back together for use. Resale value dropped. In other situations, aid agencies have ceased delivery of high priced grains and substituted sorghum or other less valuable but equally nourishing products. The food sustains recipients' health but, because resale is not lucrative, there is little incentive for theft.
- *Making Theft Inconvenient.* An aid worker who has supervised many deliveries of grain and cooking oil to war victims reports that, when shipments arrive, he routinely punches a hole with his knife in each bag of grain and removes the lids from the oil cans. Individual families can carry a bag of grain carefully, holding the hole closed to prevent spillage. They can stuff a bit of straw into the opening of an oil can so it does not leak out. But, when thieves load cut bags into the back of their trucks, much of the grain is lost as the bags bounce around. Oil cans piled in a truck slosh and spill and, finally, begin to slip and slide. The weight of shifting oil cans has, on occasion, caused trucks to tip over so that everything is lost!

- *Dispersal*. In Cambodia, one aid agency needed to bring large amounts of cash to an outlying field site to pay local staff. When the cargo plane carrying bags of cash arrived at the airport, numerous small vehicles met it. One bag was loaded into the trunk of a passenger car and the driver drove away. Two bags were tossed in the back of a truck, and it took off. A jeep took two; a cart was loaded with one. Each of these carriers took a different route to the office where the comptroller paid staff salaries as the money arrived. It was too much work for thieves to locate and stop so many vehicles; if they got one or two, the losses to the project were minimal. Gains to the thieves were not worth the effort.
- *Dispersal in a Hurry*. In Tajikistan, UNHCR imported housing materials for communities to rebuild war-damaged homes. These materials were in great demand. The local authorities that had seized their positions in the recent war used their control of local rail and trucking to divert large amounts of the material. Field staff knew that theft usually occurred at night and that a few watchmen would be powerless against the gangs. They organized the massive and immediate distribution of the materials, *on the day that they arrived by train*, ensuring that they were in the hands of the recipient communities by nightfall. They hired sufficient staff and vehicles to make this possible. Once in the hands of communities, the building supplies were better protected. Dispersal of goods and putting them in the hands of those who would use them reduced the ready opportunity for thieves to steal and heightened community ability to hold thieves accountable.
- *Identifying Thieves*. In a West African country, one agency worked with women on public health issues. As part of this program, they distributed inexpensive radios to village women so they could tune in to a weekly series of programs designed to focus on rebuilding the civil society. Soon, all these radios were stolen. So, the agency staff thought again. They reissued radios—this time painted a bright pink. Any man seen with a pink radio was immediately accosted by others and challenged. No one could easily get away with stealing these radios.
- *Civilian Protectors*. During one period of work in Chechnya, aid agency vehicles traveling between communities were often the objects of theft, either being stolen themselves or providing the focus where aid workers were taken hostage (for later ransom demands) or cash, computers or other valuables were stolen. Drivers were always told not to pick up hitch-hikers. However, some began to realize that if they offered a ride to elderly men from the local communities, and sat them prominently in the front seat of the truck, the car-jackings were less likely. This was because any action taken against a vehicle in which a respected elder was riding would be considered a hostile act by his clan. Reprisals would follow. The theft of aid goods would be associated with disruption of inter-clan relations, and these were closely guarded and controlled by elder councils. The "costs" of theft thus became too high to make it worthwhile.
- *Glut the Market*. In Afghanistan, a World Food Programme (WFP) staff person told of distributing seeds within the volatile circumstances of local, inter-group fighting. During the first year it was possible for one group to control the seeds but after that first year, because farmers will propagate, sell and trade seeds, seed value fell and everyone had access. In other circumstances, aid agencies have imported enough goods to glut the market. The resale value to thieves becomes marginal. A caution: these goods must not be in competition with locally produced goods or they will undermine local production and increase dependency on outside aid. This strategy should only be used when goods cannot also be produced in the recipient site.

Some options have been tried to avoid theft that, later, have been found to have a negative impact. These include: hiring armed guards to ride with convoys or to protect warehouses; threatening to pull aid programs out of a region if goods are stolen; and hiring local merchants to manage delivery. In some cases, hiring armed guards or threatening to withdraw can reinforce a war culture and hiring local

merchants can reinforce a war economy by making the continuation of aid (hence, the war that prompts it) profitable.

Theft is Not the Only Concern/Aid Should Not Worsen Conflict: Conclusion

The implications of these lessons about theft are clear. However, the theft of aid resources is just one way that aid can feed into a conflict. The Local Capacities for Peace Project has found four other ways that the economic and political resources represented by aid, including food aid, affect conflict.

- Aid affects markets, either reinforcing the war economy or reinforcing the peace economy;
- The distributional impacts of aid affect inter-group relationships, either feeding into tensions or reinforcing connections;
- Aid substitutes for local resources that would have been required to meet civilian needs, freeing them up to support conflict; and
- Aid legitimizes people and their actions/agendas, either supporting the pursuit of war or the pursuit of peace.

While solutions to these other situations may be more complicated than those for theft, experience shows it is neither inevitable nor excusable that aid should worsen conflict. Aid agency staff have ample knowledge based on past field experience of how aid affects conflict. They can predict, and thus prevent, the repeated patterns by which aid worsens intergroup tensions. They can identify existing connectors among groups and design their programs in ways that build on and support these. Using the lessons they and their colleagues have learned, aid workers can, and should, hold themselves accountable, not only for the intended consequences of their work, but also for its side-effects on the conflicts where they work.