
Reviewed Work(s): Humanitarian Action under Fire: Reflections on the Role of NGOs in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations by Francis Kofi Abiew

Source: *International Peacekeeping*, Apr., 2012, Vol.19, No. 2 (Apr., 2012), pp. 203-216

Published by: International Peacekeeping

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2012.665698>

Humanitarian Action under Fire presents a perspective on 'new humanitarianism' which over the past two decades has gained significant traction. Ensuring the safety of aid workers within conflict zones has always been an issue. However the steady increase in attacks against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) over the last two decades (AWSD, 2020) has increasingly led scholars and practitioners alike trying to account for this trend.

Abiew contends that the integration of humanitarian action and politics is responsible for this increase in attacks on humanitarian aid workers. To elaborate; western government attempts to incorporate NGOs as part of their strategy and foreign policy goals fundamentally challenges the underpinning of humanitarian action as a neutral and impartial endeavor. This co-optation of NGOs as "an extension of their military and political agendas" by the US and its western allies, have blurred the line between western government agendas and those of NGO's in the eyes of combatants (Abiew, 2012, p. 203). The result in which Abiew argues, leads combatants to no longer accept the neutrality of NGOs. This lack of perceived neutrality is thus responsible for the attacks on NGOs. Abiew concludes by calling for the 'insulation' of humanitarian aid from political objectives as a way out from this impasse, maintaining this is only possible through the reaffirmation of traditional principles that have previously characterised humanitarian aid (Abiew, 2012, p.204).

Abiew's explanation for NGO insecurity is not so much a new study or revelation but a

revisiting of a series of previous influential studies released in the early 2000's. Abiew's thought has been heavily influenced by the work Nicolas de Torrente's *Humanitarian Action under Attack* (2004). Besides their titles, there is a striking similarity of thought and similar lines of enquiry between the two. It would appear that Torrente's conclusions are the foundations in which Abiew starts from. A pertinent example can be found in Torrente's conclusion:

The United States and its allies, however, have also compromised humanitarian action. When government drape their military and political actions in the cloak of humanitarian concerns, they undermine humanitarian action's essential purpose: the unconditional provision of assistance to those in need. (p.29)

Such a sentiment can be seen throughout the whole of Abiew's article (see page 203, 204, 208, 210, 212). The bulk of Abiew's work is dedicated to reflecting on the historical shift from traditional principles to 'new humanitarian' principles. The rationale seems to be here that by demonstrating and re-emphasizing this shift in humanitarian principles across time, the explanation as to why NGO aid workers have experienced and increased attacks becomes self-evident. Prominent sources that Abiew frequently cites to reference the transformation of the humanitarian principles guiding NGO action are the works of Fiona Fox (2001), Antonio Donini (2009), Chandler (2005) and Barnett (2005). Undoubtedly the works cited are all from well-respected authors within the field and have all been substantially cited.

However the problem Abiew faces is in substantiating a causal link between the lack of neutrality and independence of NGOs and the subsequent violence in which they face. In part, because the article relies solely on qualitative evidence such as surveys (Atmar, 2001 & Hansen, 2008) to advance the point that locals on the ground find the distinction hard. The lack of any quantitative data makes it near impossible to calculate the extent to which these opinions are held. While Abiew documents in great detail the doctrinal shift of humanitarian aid of the 1990's (p.206-207) and the subsequent issues that ensued regarding NGO neutrality and the idea of 'coherence agendas' (p.208-210), that simply isn't enough to substantiate claims such as:

The integration of politics and humanitarian action has been a major reason behind the attack on humanitarian aid workers and their inability to deliver aid the neediest, as the traditional humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and universality are undermined by the coherence agenda." (p.208)

It is unfortunately all too easy to draw conclusions from anecdotal data or what historically are believed to be 'truths'. However when examining the quantitative analyses of aid worker casualties and deaths, Abiew's 'blurred lines' explanation becomes questionable (Schreter & Harmer, 2013, p.6). No doubt the concern regarding the politicization of aid is well founded, as Abiew demonstrates. However actual evidence regarding integrated humanitarian operations and their impact on aid worker security is weak (Harmer, 2008). The lack of empirical data prohibits Abiew from considering possible alternative explanations for aid worker insecurity, which will now be examined.

Hoelscher, Miklian & Nygård's (2015) statistical analysis, produced interesting findings. Firstly, contrary to the existing

analysis, they found no effect of a NATO presence on the numbers of aid worker attacks (2015, p.3). Areas in which NATO forces were deployed saw just as many (or as few) attacks on aid workers. Stoddard, Harmer & DiDomenico (2009) analysis of Aid Worker Security Database (AWSDB) data found that despite aid agencies that made considerable efforts to "dissociate from political actors and project an image of neutrality have not been immune from attack" (2009, p.6). This led them to the conclusion that in itself the provision of aid justifies attack as it represented an obstacle to belligerent groups. Finally, Jillani's statistical analysis of AWSDB from 2000-2019 found that "although the numbers of major attacks have unquestionably increased over time, the analysis shows the rise is driven by specific cases and is not a global phenomenon" (Jillani, 2020, p.4).

Humanitarian Action under Fire correctly highlights a contributing factor to aid worker insecurity in the field. However as demonstrated, it is a mistake, and indeed misleading to posit that a return to 'traditional' humanitarian principles will in itself result in increased security for humanitarian workers. Furthermore the conclusion that Abiew reaches is neither novel nor provides any concrete solutions to the problem. Regrettably, this may lead some to question the extent to which this work contributes to the field other than a partial attack on 'new humanitarian' principles and western agendas.

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