

The Evolving Nature of Coordination in Complex Emergencies

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**Paper for the CREATE Meeting
Helsinki, 14 September 2003**

Blurring the lines

In the halcyon days of the Cold War era when things were clear and crises were “simple” affairs of single cause and single response, it was easy to define what was humanitarian and what wasn’t. ICRC was the ambulance operating in wars and the custodian of the laws of war; UNHCR provided assistance and protection to refugees away from war zones; the boundaries between humanitarian and other forms of assistance (economic, developmental) were clear; politics and human rights were in their own separate watertight realms constrained by bipolar crossed vetoes; intervention on both sides of internal conflicts was a taboo violated only by a handful of NGOs and, sometimes, ICRC. Moreover, solidarity was a form of political engagement that was clearly at odds with the concepts of neutrality and impartiality as understood by the “true humanitarians”. Finally, development as concept and aspiration functioned as a global mobilizing myth of social transformation and was conceptually and operationally distinct from humanitarianism. Crises were seen as potholes on the highway to development. Once these were repaired, linear progress could resume in earnest.

Now that crises have become “complex”, all these elements come together as an accordion. It is often difficult to distinguish the ambulance from the combatants’ soup truck, the military from the civilians, humanitarian from development assistance, cluster bombs from food drops, solidarity from neutrality. In North and South, the boundaries between State, Market and Civil Society have become more porous, thanks to, amongst other reasons, the exponential growth in delivery of State-type services by “private” organizations financed from public funds and, increasingly, from the corporate sector. And as for mobilizing myths, development as an agenda for transformation has imploded into the managerial concepts of governance, privatization and globalization. At the same time, while

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Empire expands politically, militarily and economically, international responses to conflict and crisis have become multidimensional and integrated in pursuit of the Holy Grail of coherence.

The issue of coherence and whether it fosters more effective and just responses to crises and human suffering, is central to the discourse on coordination as it has evolved over these past ten years. It has spawned a veritable cottage industry of studies and evaluations both in the political/peace-keeping and humanitarian schools of crisis response thought. Much effort has gone into the professionalization of the humanitarian enterprise. By and large, observers would agree that humanitarian responses are faster, more effective and more adapted to local needs than ten years ago. Agencies are more adept at what they do, whether it is delivering tents, managing camps or surveying nutrition. A degree of standardization and automaticity in responses has been achieved. Issues of accountability, the new buzzword of the 90s, to donors and beneficiaries, are increasingly on the table.

But the place and function of humanitarian action within the wider context of post-Cold War global ordering are seldom studied. Solid interpretative frameworks are few and far between. It is as if the combination of unipolar dominance and blurring of response agendas was coupled with the triumph of operationalism. The Nike philosophy rules ("Just do it!"). Our collective capacity, literally, to see and understand what is going on, around us, and our role in it, seems to have dimmed.

Closer to home, confusion has not by-passed the international community and its institutions for crisis management and response. To begin with, States have become porous and sovereignty relative. Practice has outpaced the Law. While states would be loath to codify it in any formal detail, "intervention" of the military and humanitarian varieties is rapidly becoming the norm in adjective bearing states (fragmented, failed, rogue, etc.). Humanitarian and human rights issues are increasingly debated in what has become the UN Human(itarian) Security Council, once the preserve of politics and diplomacy. In the field, political, humanitarian, development, protection, human rights and solidarity objectives, and their respective institutions, splash and overlap as in a Rorschach test. As in Afghanistan, where ICRC does agricultural programs; solidarity NGOs vie for public contracts; the military do "humanitarian" work dressed in civvies with weapons at the ready; UN humanitarian agencies do development; UN development agencies do relief; UN political and humanitarian entities do human rights work; UNHCR seeks development projects in order to raise money for protection; NGOs act as donor mouthpieces and vice versa... And donors, UN and NGO coordination bodies try to make some sense of it all while everybody speeds around in big white vehicles to the consternation of the locals and their leadership.

Coordination of what?

Coordination is a term, which is much used, abused and misunderstood. Few would dispute that effective humanitarian action requires that duplication, waste, and competition among agencies be avoided. However, agreement on the institutional, administrative, and operational dimensions of coordination is another matter. Traditional critics argue that coordination adds a bureaucratic layer, which hinders the speedy response to humanitarian needs or results in "coordination for the sake of coordination". Over the years, advocates for more assertive approaches have called for strong leadership, clear functional responsibilities and a "coordination as management" approach.

In simpler times, it was axiomatic that UN agencies would "coordinate" their particular functional sector of competence. When crises were seen primarily as mono-dimensional, there was obviously less of a need for multi-sectoral coordination. If the problem was one of refugees - for instance in El Salvador or Afghanistan in the early 1980s - UNHCR was in the driver's seat. If the problem was drought and famine - as in the Sahel in the 80s - WFP and UNICEF bore the brunt of the relief effort. In some cases, when there was a clear need to provide leadership to a joint UN effort, one organization would be designated as "lead agency".

In exceptional cases, because of the magnitude of the problem (famine in Ethiopia in the mid 1980s) or because of specific political considerations (UN relief operation on the Thai-Cambodian border; Afghanistan after the Geneva Accords in 1988) "special" coordination mechanisms were established. While more or less effective in addressing large scale humanitarian needs, these entities were *ad hoc*, built around the specific requirements and characteristics of a particular crisis with minimal effort or perceived need to systematize or institutionalize procedures either in the given crisis or for replication elsewhere.

The need to systematize UN coordination arrangements for the provision of humanitarian assistance came to the fore only with the end of the Cold War. The failure of the UN system to mount a rapid and coordinated response to the exodus of refugees from Iraq into Jordan in early 1991 triggered serious debate within the donor community and ultimately led to the adoption of General Assembly resolution 46/182 in late 1991 and the establishment in 1992 of the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA – now OCHA). At the same time, the realization that the international community was increasingly confronted with a new type of complex, conflict-related emergency in which humanitarian agencies began to interact for the first time with UN-supported peace operations reinforced the perceived need for coordination as well as for coherence in the overall response.

The magnitude of the problem of humanitarian coordination is illustrated by a simple comparison. In the 1970s and 1980s there were only one or two major

emergencies that needed to be addressed each year and that required the establishment of a special coordination body for humanitarian assistance. Typically, in the late 1980s, these would have been UNBRO and the Office for Emergency Operations in Africa. Ten years after the establishment of DHA/OCHA, the number of complex emergencies requiring UN coordination entities exceeds 30 in most years.

Generally speaking, coordination situations are understood to fall into the following broad categories:

- **coordination by command**, i.e. coordination where strong leadership is accompanied by some sort of leverage and authority, whether carrot or stick;
- **coordination by consensus**, where leadership is essentially a function of the capacity of the "coordinator" to orchestrate a coherent response and to mobilize the key actors around common objectives and priorities;
- **coordination by default**, where in the absence of a formal coordination entity only the most basic exchange of information and division of labor takes place among the actors.

The conventional wisdom is that given the present state of play in the international system, coordination by command is not a realistic option. Organizational culture and the decentralized nature of a UN system where agency mandates and profile trump unity of purpose would seem to preclude it. Until recently, there has been no stomach for robust coordination approaches nor for the institutional reforms that this would require. Carrots and sticks are not acceptable ingredients for a coordination mechanism. Donors and UN organizations are hostile to the notion that a coordination body should have at its disposal any sizeable amount of unearmarked funds as well as the authority to disburse or redistribute such funds to implementing partners.

Study after study has shown that the nature of the problem is systemic. Coordination cannot rely solely on personalities, goodwill, and intellectual leadership. It falls victim to the structural shoals of agency resistance. UN agencies have fought tooth and nail against reform and eminently rational changes in organigrams. Thus, institutional culture, vested agency interests and the decentralized nature of the aid system all conspire to undermine the viability of coordination in general and coordination by command in particular

In all recent complex emergencies, OCHA has exercised what is best described as coordination by consensus. It should be pointed out, however, that the quantum of consensus seems to vary over time. One lesson is that at certain points in time, usually during the initial phases of an emergency, "command" elements in coordination – and of course coordination itself - are seen as more

acceptable by agencies. These may even demand to be coordinated in those areas such as negotiating access with belligerent forces or dealing with the military where they are not keen to get involved.

For example, in Rwanda, the need and desire for coordination was high at the breaking stages of the crisis when all turned to the DHA coordination office for information, advice and even leadership, but started decreasing shortly thereafter as UN agencies and NGOs established their presence on a surer footing. A similar situation obtained in Afghanistan, where the need for active coordination ebbed and flowed with the fluctuating depth and breadth of the crisis. “Highs” occurred at the very beginning in 1989 and then again after the rise of the Taliban to power. In the first instance, “command” was a function of the strong mandate given to the coordinator by the Secretary General and the availability of resources. In the second, the aid community was in a state of disarray on the issue of how to deal with the Taliban and turned to the UN Coordinator for leadership.

Nevertheless, support for the coordination entity tends to shrink over time: agencies gnaw back what they perceive as lost terrain. It is also a function of available resources. In Afghanistan after 9/11, as soon as funds started pouring in, UN agencies that had hitherto been strapped for cash, soon found it convenient and possible to do their own thing. They took advantage of the delays arising from the “folding” of the UN Coordinator’s Office into the new UN integrated mission. Some were so bold as to declare coordination “dead”. Overall, it would seem that coordination, and the prospects of command elements therein, obey a law of diminishing returns. Command can sometimes work at the acute crisis stage; consensus is the template for protracted crises when agencies are well established; default seems to happen at the winding-down phase or when the humanitarian dimension becomes marginal in the overall political economy of the crisis.

Moreover, another law, relating more to the substance than to the process of coordination, has emerged: there seems to be a negative correlation between “international politics”, as in superpower involvement, and the ability of the international system to provide humanitarian assistance in a relatively principled manner. The “highs” in politics in Afghanistan (Cold War proxy war; post 9/11 peace-building) – or in Iraq today - correspond to “lows” in principles, and the risk of subordination of humanitarian action and human rights concerns to political imperatives increases. Conversely, superpower dis-attention to the Afghan crisis, as in the 1992-1998 civil war period, allowed more space for issues of principle and for significant innovations in how to do UN business in a crisis country, as well as for more assertive coordination. The same has obtained in East Timor, the Balkans, and the DRC.

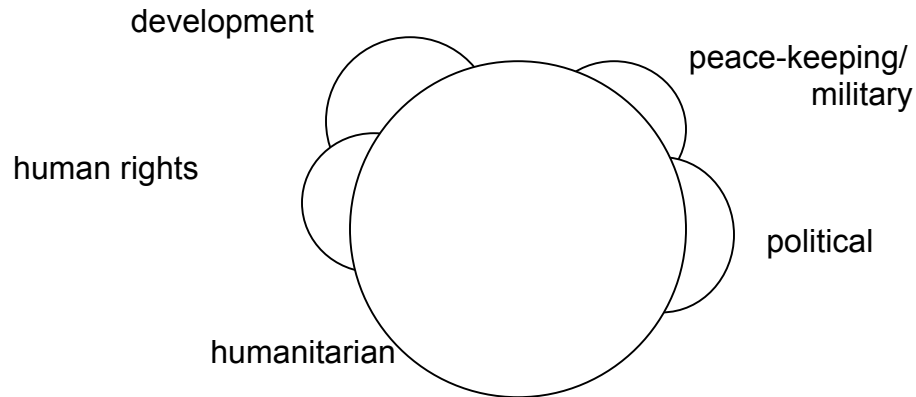
Coordination means different things to different people; it also means different things to the same people in different places and different times. Overall, the last

decade has seen an increase in the demand for coordination services. But this has not been consistent, nor have the naysayers disappeared. Some, particularly in the NGO galaxy, have argued that coordination stifles initiative and self-regulation and therefore effectiveness; others have lamented the direct, indirect and opportunity costs of coordination; others still, including donors speaking with forked tongue demand high levels of coordination and lambaste OCHA or its offices on the ground for lapses in coordination only to deny it the wherewithal to establish basic coordination services.

Most practitioners would nevertheless agree that a modicum of coordination is required in all crisis situations. Minimalists assume that some coordination by default would occur even if OCHA or another designated coordination body did not exist: UN organizations and some NGOs would at least share information and attempt to avoid duplication. However, experience clearly points to the significant advantages of a common strategy and an agreed framework for identifying priorities and a sensible division of labor, whether at the operational level in the field, between humanitarian partners at headquarters, or for mobilization of resources and interaction with the donor community. From this perspective, there have been major improvements since the establishment of DHA/OCHA. In 1994, after the genocide in Rwanda, it was still possible to indict the UN humanitarian system for its “hollow core”² or to deplore the absence of a “rule book” for coordination. Now the basic rulebook has been written, even if it is not always applied.

All this is fine, but it only refers to a slice of the crisis response cake. The standardization and improvements in the automaticity of response arrangements refer only to the humanitarian circle in the chart of the different regimes of UN action shown below. The relations between the circles are often unclear and they tend to evolve over time. For example, in the breaking phase of an acute crisis, it is likely that humanitarian action would be the main show in town and therefore its circle the largest. “Coordination” would encompass the humanitarian circle and its overlap with the other smaller circles. When there is a political or integrated UN mission, the relationship between the circles would likely be reversed with the political and peace-keeping circles overshadowing everything else. Today in Iraq, for example, the political and military circles clearly overshadow all the others. This changes the nature and meaning of ‘coordination’. Coordination might be perfect in the humanitarian circle but that would be only a very small part of the overall picture. The issue to explore, then, is how coordination of the humanitarian circle relates to the other circles of crisis response.

² Multi-donor study on Rwanda.



Does coordination get the job done? Is it such a bad idea?

Well, it depends on what the job is. Coordination in crisis situations was understood to refer principally, if not exclusively, to the realm of humanitarian action. This was the sense of GA resolution 48/182 establishing DHA. Its aim was to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action. The General Assembly rightly recognized that the rules of the game were changing and that UN institutions had to adapt. Now, it seems, another shift is taking place. Humanitarian action itself is increasingly subsumed or integrated into other – essentially political – realms. This is the key issue. In the post Cold War dispensation, peace-building – if not regime change - seems to be emerging as the mother of all frameworks encompassing all aspects of conflict management and resolution. But much actually depends on the substance with which one fills these concepts. The minimalist interpretation is that peace-building is an extension of peace-keeping: once the peace is kept, there is consensus for the resumption of development where it left off and aid agencies come in and do their technical work. The maximalist interpretation is where peace is imposed, including through regime change by military means, preferably sanctioned by the UN Security Council, which results in the replacement of the bad guys by the inevitable good guys of political choice. If humanitarian action (and other forms of intervention: human rights, development) is seen as functional to this type of agenda as was the case post 9/11 in Afghanistan, and now in Iraq, then many would say that such action no longer conforms to the basic humanitarian parameters of international humanitarian law (IHL). The resulting action to alleviate human suffering may well be a legitimate proposition but it should be redefined and clearly understood for what it is, namely action intended to meet a particular, but partisan, political objective.

In other words, there may well be a strong case to be made for integrated approaches to conflict solving based on robust action taken by UN sanctioned coalitions of the willing – if not the condominium of the powerful. Such operations may be legitimate, effective and sustainable, as well as sometimes result in

successful and just efforts to improve the human condition in countries in crisis. However, as they fundamentally imply a process of taking sides, the use of the “humanitarian label” in such situations is problematic. Massive humanitarian needs will likely exist, or be created by the intervention itself, and require humanitarian-type responses (provision of food, shelter, protection) as part of an integrated mission, but since they are part of, or functional to, a political/military intervention it is questionable whether organizations working under such conditions are able to fully respect the sacred tenets of humanitarianism (neutrality, impartiality, independence). In such situations should humanitarian organizations withdraw and allow the military, as prescribed by IHL, to fulfill their obligations in providing succor to the civilian population? This would make it clear that life saving assistance, or “relief” provided in the context of a political/military intervention, while sometimes necessary, is not strictly speaking “humanitarian”.

A digression on Iraq shows how crucial this debate is and how serious, even tragic, the consequences of devaluating humanitarian principles can be. From the “purist” humanitarian perspective, principles in Iraq have been properly swept under the carpet. By accepting to work in Iraq in the context of the US-led occupation, humanitarian agencies have put themselves in an ambiguous and dangerous position. Enormous pressure has been brought to bear on the UN including its humanitarian wings to perform a subordinate role to the US-led intervention. This is despite the lack of a formal SC blessing. Financial and political pressure on US NGOs – who are “Wilsonian” at the core – was even more overwhelming. This has resulted in the UN, the assistance community and even the ICRC being seen as “taking sides”. As a result the ICRC emblem and the blue flag have lost their capacity to protect. IHL clearly sets out the responsibilities of the OP and its obligation to provide for the security and well being of the civilian population. The obvious alternative was not considered, i.e. to let the occupying power face its IHL responsibilities at least until such time that adequate security and an uncontroversial UN mandate would have allowed humanitarian agencies to perform their traditional functions. Politically, the UN and most NGOs felt that they were unable to take this course. And now NGOs are leaving, with some citing as a reason “the weak position of the UN in the occupied country”³

This leads to a fundamental question for humanitarian actors. If our reading of the trend in the past ten years is correct, there has been an important shift in international responses to complex crises: the issue of coordination of humanitarian action remains a crucial one in and of itself but it can no longer be addressed in isolation. Coordination has become a subset – second fiddle some would say – to a much larger and essentially political agenda, which has to do with how the international community chooses to manage (or not as the case may be) its overall response to crises. The evidence of the last few years points to the incremental emergence of integration as a template, but only in high profile

³ Norwegian Refugee Council statement, 8 September 2003.

crises i.e. those that are driven by the Security Council or superpower interests. In low profile crises, principled humanitarian action has a better chance to survive. In some cases, as we have just seen, integration has meant instrumentalization of humanitarian action for partisan political objectives. This shift carries crucial policy and institutional implications for the humanitarian enterprise.

The choice for UN humanitarian entities is between full membership in the UN conflict management and resolution machinery – with potential loss of their independent and neutral humanitarian voice – and some degrees of separation or insulation from partisan politics so as to nurture policy and partnerships in the humanitarian community – with the risk of being less able to ensure that humanitarian concerns are given equal billing in the overall response. The experience with “equal billing” so far has been mixed at best. In Afghanistan, but also in many African crises, experience has shown that the political UN does not see itself as bound by humanitarian principles and often looks down on humanitarian work. Culturally and institutionally there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge that humanitarianism and human rights are central to the quest for peace.

The choice therefore is between **integration** of all conflict resolution tools and approaches under a single banner – that of the “political UN” in most cases – coupled with the recognition that in some cases such action will be seen by some as taking sides, on the one hand, and “**secession**” of the humanitarian (and possibly the human rights) segments of the conflict resolution enterprise from (UN) political action, on the other. A return to the clearer lines in the sand of the Cold War era in some ways, when humanitarian issues and human rights were in more watertight compartments, or perhaps the recognition that a new cold war is in the offing, built around GWOT or global war on terror and that humanitarian actors have to be much more cautious as to how they are perceived. One could envision, for example, a return to ideology and polarization in international relations with a superpower-driven anti-terror camp pursuing an elusive and impalpable enemy and a “third force” composed of groups and nations concerned that the anti-terror agenda undermines the prospects of attacking poverty and promoting justice. The risks for humanitarianism in such a scenario are significant and so are the implications for coordination.

What are the institutional consequences? What does this mean for coordination?

1. Un-blur the lines and insulate humanitarian action from politics: OCHA and the humanitarian agencies of the UN would reaffirm and regain the centrality of humanitarian principles in their work (and define better how to build safeguards against subordination to political agendas). This would mean working closer with the ICRC. A maximalist proposition would be a separate single UN agency for

humanitarian action, an idea that periodically resurfaces but whose time seems not to have come. An even more radical proposal was made some ten years ago by James Ingram,⁴ namely to devolve the humanitarian functions currently performed by the UN system to an “internationalized” ICRC, i.e. a new humanitarian organization acting as custodian and guarantor of IHL totally separate from the UN. The prospects for such a reform are dim, of course, but it is not unhealthy to think outside the box in order to clarify the terms of the debate.

2. Fully integrate humanitarian action into peace-making whilst ensuring equal billing for the humanitarian and human rights perspectives. This is the logic of the Secretary General’s reform agenda, of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan and the Brahimi report. So far the experience is not overwhelmingly positive, a fact not unrelated to the propensity to appoint UN Special Representatives chosen for their political rather than humanitarian credentials⁵. In the case of Afghanistan, the first test case for the Brahimi report, and with the most fully integrated mission so far, humanitarian and human rights issues have been clearly subordinated to the political agenda. Warlords have been reinstated and re-armed. As their return was functional to the coalition agenda, the UN has found it difficult to speak out about their human rights record or their attempts to instrumentalize humanitarian action. This does not necessarily mean that the theory was wrong; it could have been improperly applied. That there could be friction or even opposing perspectives between political and humanitarian actors is to be expected⁶, but it was assumed that day to day proximity and a clear understanding of each others’ perspectives would ensure better overall coherence in the response than separation or insulation.

There are of course various intermediary gradations between total separation and integration. What must be examined is where the UN humanitarian establishment sits in this debate. It would seem that it sits in the middle and that it has not quite decided whether it should opt for integrated crisis management and the centrality of the UN Secretariat in order to be the humanitarian cog in the UN conflict resolution machine or whether its comparative advantage lies in the more consensual “Dunantist route” where it can perform more traditional facilitation functions among its humanitarian bedfellows.

The key question, of course, is which route is more effective in terms of saving lives and protecting and promoting for the rights of civilians. Should the

⁴ See J. Ingram, “The Future Architecture” in Weiss and Minear (eds), *Humanitarianism across Borders*, L. Rienner, Boulder (CO), 1994.

⁵ As Larry Minear points out “experienced confirms better results when a person with humanitarian credentials and sensitivity takes on a diplomatic portfolio rather than the reverse”, *op.cit*, p 34.

⁶ Examples range from the relatively benign (pressure for humanitarians not to raise certain issues) to the outright violation of IHL (denial of access, militarization of refugee camps, bombing of humanitarian convoys (in Liberia), etc.

ambulance and the stretcher-bearer be working side by side with the sheriff, the judge and the politicians or at their behest? Or should they be separate?

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Whether integrated or separated, consensual or managed, humanitarian action is likely to remain a fundamental component of “world ordering” in the years and decades to come. Whatever the institutional arrangements, humanitarians know that the contexts in which they operate are eminently political. Since the end of the Cold War they have become adept at dancing with politics, even waltzing with warlords. The importance of coordination as a tool for strategy development in complex crises cannot be understated. Ultimately it is about saving lives. The effectiveness of humanitarian action is measured by the quantity of mercy, the amount of suffering averted. The humanitarian imperative dictates that all victims have the same fundamental right to assistance. *Realpolitik*, however, imposes triage: the quality of mercy extended to Pristina or Dili is fundamentally different from that provided to Kabul. Too often humanitarian assistance is a fig leaf for political inaction, a band-aid on a festering sore, a costly recipe that can hope merely to contain crises. Too often it borders on appeasement. Unless and until the root causes of crises are tackled, there is little hope that such imbalances will be redressed. On its own, the pale sun of humanitarianism projects but a dim light.

Clearing the underbrush in the forest and catching the occasional poacher will do little to save the ozone layer. More radical action is required and the consequences of procrastination serious. Similarly, the issues of coordination and coherence pale in front of the hard nosed realities of *Realpolitik*. Humanitarian action will in the coming years likely remain at the crossroads of globalization, anti-terrorism and attempts to reorder the periphery. Its role is key, but it should not be overburdened. It should not be forced to become a tool for agendas, which are anything but humanitarian, or a substitute for real political action to tackle the causes of poverty, underdevelopment and absence of accountable governance. Nor should we succumb to the temptation of seeing humanitarianism as a refuge from failed ideals or for failed idealists. Development as a concept, mobilizing myth and operational practice may well have failed, but humanitarianism is no substitute. It is hard and sometimes hand-dirtying work, not an answer to global problems. Moreover, unless the global problems are urgently addressed, its very future may be at risk. The prospects of humanitarian action in the age of anti-terrorism may well be “increasingly scant”⁷

We need to question the conventional wisdom and naiveté of the knee-jerk response to crises. It is necessary to look beyond the horizon of humanitarianism, to reappraise root causes of crises and the nature of North-

⁷ L. Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise*, p 198.

South relations in their evolving complexity. Issues of justice and solidarity, however difficult to raise, must not be avoided. It will be necessary to take a hard look at the strategies and at the very concept of "development". Complex emergencies and development policies are not unrelated. But the linkages between the emergence of the former and the failure of the latter have yet to be seriously explored. The fact that North and South are complicit in this failure is perhaps the starting point from which to unravel the knot of root causes.