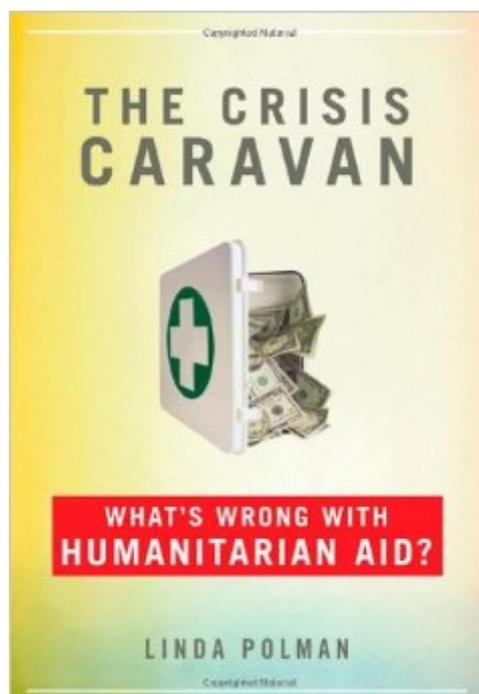


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The Crisis Caravan: What's Wrong With Humanitarian Aid?



Synopsis

A no-holds-barred, controversial exposé of the financial profiteering and ambiguous ethics that pervade the world of humanitarian aid. A vast industry has grown up around humanitarian aid: a cavalcade of organizations—some 37,000—compete for a share of the \$160 billion annual prize, with "fact-inflation" sometimes ramping up disaster coverage to draw in more funds. Insurgents and warring governments, meanwhile, have made aid a permanent feature of military strategy: refugee camps serve as base camps for genocidaires, and aid supplies are diverted to feed the troops. Even as humanitarian groups continue to assert the holy principle of impartiality, they have increasingly become participants in aid's abuses. In a narrative that is impassioned, gripping, and even darkly absurd, journalist Linda Polman takes us to war zones around the globe—from the NGO-dense operations in "Afghanistan" to the floating clinics of Texas Mercy Ships proselytizing off the shores of West Africa—to show the often compromised results of aid workers' best intentions. It is time, Polman argues, to impose ethical boundaries, to question whether doing something is always better than doing nothing, and to hold humanitarians responsible for the consequences of their deeds.

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Customer Reviews

I happened on this book by accident, but I'm very glad I did. I think one result from reading it will be that I won't be giving any money for aid in a conflict zone unless the would-be recipient NGO convinces me it has very strong controls to ensure that what I might give will not become part of the problem. The book is a very quick and easy read. It consists of a series of chapters that talk about

one particular negative phenomenon associated with foreign aid. Chapters that stand out for me include: the one about how the victims of forced amputations in Sierra Leone have become a magnet for aid that they frequently don't need, want, or can use while other deserving souls go without- one about how the Governments of Sudan and Ethiopia have manipulated aid organizations into subsidizing murderous campaigns against their own people- one about how the aid community responded to the genocide in Rwanda by deluging the Hutus who had perpetrated it against the Tutsis with aid while the Tutsis went without. The book is not perfect however. I found myself disagreeing with her on several arguments she made:

1. The US dropping food aid along with bombs in Afghanistan in 2001: The author seems to share the belief that some NGOs expressed about this that such action blurs the difference between armed forces and humanitarian groups. My rejoinder on that is that given the US was in the process of occupying Afghanistan, it had obligations under international law to take care of the population there.
2. The fact that the US and EU make NGOs taking their money conform broadly to what the US and EU would like to see happen in Afghanistan: The author argues that this makes the aid workers targets of the Taliban, who see the aid workers as an arm of the US and its allies. To that, I'd say that NGOs expecting to get large sums of money from governments with no strings attached is totally unrealistic. As for the Taliban targeting the aid workers, I'd argue that it has a very elastic definition of what being an arm of the US and its allies are.
3. Claiming the US tried to starve out the city of Fallujah in Iraq in 2004: The author argues that this is an example of deploying hunger as a weapon. I'd respond to that by saying that by the time of second Battle of Fallujah most civilians had left the city and that "food aid" was likely to wind up in the hands of the insurgents.
4. Madeleine Albright's stupid comment about deaths in Iraq supposedly caused by sanctions: The author cites Albright's unbelievably foolish statement that the supposed deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children from sanctions "was worth it" as another example of using the "food weapon." Albright was wrong to say that because the number of Iraqi children who died because of the sanctions is very much in dispute and that those who did die, died mostly because of the intransigence of Saddam's regime.

But despite these four flaws, "the Crisis Caravan" is an outstanding book and very enlightening about the darker aspects of something that normally gets dressed up as something utterly noble and beyond reproach.

Having been involved in international child welfare aid efforts as an independent citizen, consultant, contractor, and a private donor, I found this book very enlightening and sad. While the author may have focused on the negative ends only, I know first hand that her main themes are not too far off

the mark. I have not directly witnessed aid organizations and consultants do harm, but even in the non-crisis setting, I have seen arrogance and ignorance and massive waste of resources (including resources wasted on consultants like myself, either putting them to the wrong use, or putting the wrong consultants to use.) As insightful and sharp as the author is in pointing out everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong -- I really hoped that the author might point a way forward beyond "let us start asking the tough questions". We ought to, of course. But for the many donors and well-intentioned aid workers, asking questions without a glimmer of hope can be paralyzing. As a private person, I found myself doubting my monthly donations to Doctors without Borders, Oxfam, and a number of other aid organizations. I found myself pessimistic about the future of my self-initiated aid work (though not giving up). Does the stinging critique offered by this book expose all the wrong paths so we renew our commitment to find a good one ... or does it remove all visible paths so that there does not even appear to be one? There are two other books, one old and one new, that had offered some "the way forward" ideas. Both are coming from the Christian perspective and may not necessarily suit everyone. But they are at least examples of critiques moving into solutions (and these solutions are not easy). When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty without Hurting the Poor ... or Yourself by Fikkert and Corbett, 2009 Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life [Hardcover] Donald P. McNeill (Author), Henri J.M. Nouwen (Author), Douglas A. Morrison (Author), Joel Filártiga (Illustrator), 1982 A special note on the second book: this was a textbook for many Notre Dame students during their "service" course, co-written by one of the most beloved Christian writer and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen. I thought it was a beautifully written and thoughtful book that reaches far beyond Christians, including ideas such as we are too bound by "clock time" in our modern world or that we are "bombarded" by negative news and crisis (ideas which the most recent books on international aid all point out.)

Only a few books over the last decade have noted adverse results of humanitarian aid. Here now is the most extensive and disturbing catalogue by a Dutch author who spent 15 years reporting from war zones for European media. The author intends to provoke soul-searching by the "humanitarian industry" of the western world. In a long series of disturbing anecdotes, she demonstrates that humanitarian projects have increased famine and lengthened wars. Oxfam, Bob Geldorf's Band Aid, Bill and Melinda Gates, Madeline Albright, the International Red Cross--no one escapes this book's indictment. Anonymous aid workers are derided for living in a style unimaginable to the local population with Land Cruisers, drivers, interpreters, expensive meals and exploitation of children. "Wherever aid workers go, prostitution instantly soars." Journalists come off no better, depicted as

co-conspirators overeager to glorify and propagandize the aid effort, while averting their eyes from deleterious effects. Equally frank is the "Aidspeak" chapter in the appendix. While the book is primarily focused on Africa, this section explains why those of us concerned with the 1999 Kosovo war observed the KLA coercing Albanians to leave Kosovo. Refugees must be outside their home countries to command major international aid. Of course, there were other tactical and propaganda reasons as well. And that is the shocking story this book details--the unintended but crucial assistance by humanitarian organizations that helps violent actors achieve their goals. "If you use enough violence, aid will arrive, and if you use even more violence, even more aid will arrive." It's not pleasant to learn how badly our efforts to help may turn out, but closing our eyes is no solution.

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