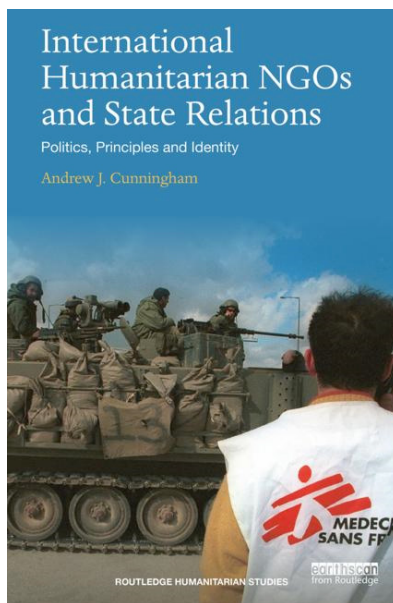


# Humanitarian Action: INGOs and State Flexibility

**F**lexibility in Humanitarian Action is not possible without a better understanding the policies, principles, and identities that shape the relations between international NGOs and the State. Andrew J. Cunningham, an expert and consultant on matters of humanitarian studies offers a book to humanitarian actors for this purpose.

He argues in his book that the relationship between the State and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) working in the humanitarian sector are complex and often contradictory. INGOs aiming to provide assistance to populations suffering from the consequences of conflicts and other human-made disasters work in the midst of very politically sensitive local dynamics. Police that does not police. Hospitals that keep the patients waiting. The involvement of these non-political international actors can be seen as a threat to the State that sees civil war as a state of exception where it is the government's prerogative to act outside 'normal' legal or moral boundaries. The book makes us think who has drawn these boundaries, for whose benefit, and how firm or flexible they are in the face of the reality of ongoing conflict. Drawing on first-hand experience of humanitarian operations in the contexts of civil war, Andrew J. Cunningham explores how the relationship works in practice and how often clashing priorities can be mediated. Thus the book is useful to those in the authority or official duty to offer relief.

Andrew J. Cunningham brings together key issues of politics, principles and identity to build a 'negotiation structure' for analysing and understanding the relationship



using case studies of civil conflicts in Sri Lanka, Darfur, Ethiopia and Chechnya. Each country offers a reality that is both universal as well as specific. He churned his ideas and over twenty years of experience in working with humanitarian organisations, especially Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and therefore the book becomes a must read for the leaders of INGOs trying to make humanitarian action more flexible.

Negotiations with authorities are often multifaceted. A theoretical framework used to conceptualise the relationship in the book offers a possible way ahead. The negotiation structure describes the relation of the external with the internal. But then what is "in" and what is "out" where boundaries are many and rapidly changing? Each of the four case studies are examined with care and analysis. The case studies represent a variety of civil conflicts, types of states and geographical areas. The Sri Lanka case study forms the reference point which examines the 2006 and 2008/9 periods of civil war. Experiences of those two

periods and why the relationship between humanitarian actors and the government changed over time has been compared with an insider's eye and an outsider's ear. The Chechnya study examines fear as discourse while the Ethiopia case examines the law as discourse. The Sudan case study explains expulsion as discourse. All four offer a rounded view of the complex reality of conflict within which the State and the INGOs relate with each other to serve the humanity. The case studies offer potent outlines to students and researchers of humanitarian action, may the action be in Myanmar or Bhutan, West Asia or South Asia.

Not only in conflict situations, but the framework and case studies equally provide guidance for INGOs working in disaster management sector. The time has come to revisit the relationships between INGOs and the State in disaster situations as well. This is more true in South Asia where the humanitarian sector sees decreasing funds for INGOs; the State moving ahead from the final responsibility; and the private sector developing business plan for their humanitarian response. South Asia networks such as Duryog Nivaran have shed light on this challenge in the South Asia Disaster Report 2016 titled Building Back Better.

Flexibility in the humanitarian action becomes more evident when we find the rigidity of the state policies, principles and identity. ■

- Book Review by Vipul Nakum,  
AIDMI

#### *Bibliographic information:*

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