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Beyond disaster framing: exploring multi-mandate INGOs' representations of conflict

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Abstract

This article examines how and why multi-mandate INGOs represent contemporary armed conflicts in particular ways. Based on empirical analysis of NGO communications and interviews with staff, it finds that these organisations typically adopt a two-track approach to representing conflicts. They use mainstream media to present consequence-oriented accounts to the general public, while utilising alternative channels to represent more nuanced depictions of conflict to more targeted audiences. These alternative forms of communication often aim to disrupt the dominant narratives of conflict produced by influential policy or media actors. Decisions about how to represent conflict are shaped by organisations' histories, identities and funding relationships.

Key words: *civil society; conflict and security; disasters; humanitarianism; ICT and the digital economy*

Word Count: 9,243

Introduction

Multi-mandate international non-governmental organisations' (MM INGOs') efforts to promote development and respond to humanitarian crisis are deeply bound up with wider processes of armed conflict. While both INGOs themselves and academic commentators have long reflected upon the ethical and political dilemmas associated with working in conflict zones¹, there has been relatively little sustained discussion of the wider political implications that stem from the symbolic or representational aspects of this work. This gap is surprising given the extensive academic and practitioner attention to the ethical and political implications of NGO representations of poverty, development and distant suffering more broadly.² This article fills this gap by examining how large MM INGOs represent contemporary armed conflict, and exploring the varied organisational and environmental factors that shape these representations.³

Large MM INGOs such as Oxfam, Save the Children or the International Rescue Committee (IRC) play an important role in communicating ideas about the causes, consequences and solutions to contemporary civil wars to policymakers and general publics in western countries. Their influence is rooted in their expertise in the fields of humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding as well as their links to policymakers and media organisations.⁴ This influence is bolstered by these organisations' experience of operating in conflict-affected regions, their close links with local communities and organisations, and their privileged access to elite international policymakers, donor governments and inter-governmental organisations. Based on these capacities and connections, MM INGOs are well positioned to bridge the gap between 'top-down' narratives of peace and conflict typically promoted by international governments and organisations and 'bottom-up' narratives generated by local people or communities, potentially fulfilling a progressive role in empowering 'bottom-up' voices and challenging dominant accounts.⁵

NGOs communicate ideas about conflict through a range of channels including press releases, policy reports, media interviews, fundraising advertisements, and campaign videos. These representations are bound up with a range of activities including attempts to influence elite policymaking, public campaigns work, and efforts to raise public awareness about humanitarian conditions facing war-affected communities. During the current crisis in Syria, for example, large MM INGOs have used these varied channels to highlight the devastating humanitarian *consequences* of the violence, identify neglected *causes* of the violence such as income inequality and climate change, whilst also proposing a variety of policy responses or *solutions* including condemning the proposal to arm rebel groups, or emphasising the need for European countries to improve provision for refugees arriving by boat on the shores of Greece and Italy.⁶

This article examines how INGOs represent and communicate violent conflict to western publics. In doing so, it contributes to two main bodies of literature. First, it builds on an emerging international relations literature on conflict framing that has emphasised how conflict frames influence policy outcomes, for example by pathologising conflict, neglecting 'bottom-up' narratives, negatively impacting on local civil society, or legitimising particular policy responses.⁷ This literature has made significant advances in understanding of how framing processes shape and structure international interventions in conflict zones, and identified a complex network of actors involved in this process including western media organisations, inter-governmental organisations, and NGOs. Much of this research has shown that NGOs, whilst promising to challenge dominant discourses about conflict or conflict response, have tended to reinforce the positions and priorities of more powerful actors such

as donors. Existing research on the role of NGOs in this network, however, has tended to neglect the influential role of multi-mandates, focusing instead largely on the role of single-issue advocacy groups such as the Enough Campaign, human rights organisations, or conflict specialists such as the International Crisis Group.⁸ No existing study focuses solely on these MM INGOs' role in framing conflict, and as a result questions about how and why different MM INGOs communicate ideas about conflict, how these organisations' approaches differ from other kinds of NGOs, and whether multi-mandates INGOs are able to challenge the priorities of more powerful international through these communications, have been largely neglected.

Second, the paper builds on findings from an extensive body of academic and policy-oriented research focused on media and humanitarian agencies' representations of under-development and humanitarian crisis.⁹ This literature has concentrated largely on the influential role of news agencies, though a smaller body of literature reflects on NGOs' own communication practices.¹⁰ This research highlights a tension between NGOs' need to fundraise and their wider responsibility to build public understanding of development-related issues. This work demonstrates how NGO communication practices involve inevitable compromises such as the potential trade-off between providing simple accounts that can help to raise funds and to catch public attention, and wider efforts to present empowering and nuanced accounts of the everyday experiences of communities affected by poverty, humanitarian crisis or poverty. Existing studies have emphasised that despite a growth in humanitarian advocacy since the 1990s, many NGO representations of humanitarian crises continue to be constrained by concerns about access and funding, resulting in representations of conflict that privilege the humanitarian consequences of violence and limit exploration of long-term causes and solutions.¹¹ Although few existing studies have systematically examined how MM INGOs frame conflict, there is a widespread view that these organisations (in contrast to UN agencies or human rights organisations) tend to adopt a traditional 'disaster' or 'humanitarian emergency' frame that diagnoses the problem NGOs face as a humanitarian one, over alternative framings that present their primary challenge as relating to civil war or a breach of international law.¹² While existing research has helped to elucidate the drivers and decision-making processes that shape NGO communications and messaging in general, there has been little sustained analysis of how these decisions are worked out in relation to contemporary armed conflict and today's more diverse media and organisational landscape.

This article therefore fills two key gaps in the existing literature. First, it provides a sustained analysis of *how* large multi-mandate NGOs represent the causes, consequences and solutions to contemporary

conflicts, highlighting tensions between the accounts presented in mainstream and alternative channels, and assessing how these tensions have changed in response to an evolving environment for INGOs' work. Second, it reflects on *why* NGOs decide to frame conflicts in particular ways, illustrating how these decisions are shaped by funding concerns, relationships with supporters, and legitimacy and identity issues.

The article will be structured as follows. The next section examines the changing environment in which NGOs represent conflict, highlighting a number of key shifts in NGO approaches and the wider political and media landscape that surrounds their work. Section 2 explores how six prominent UK-based MM INGOs (Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, IRC UK, Islamic Relief, Christian Aid and Action Aid UK) represent violent conflicts through traditional and alternative channels. This section draws on detailed discourse analysis of these organisations' press releases, focusing on press releases that mentioned the three most prominent conflict-related crises between 2013 and 2015 (Syria, South Sudan, and Israel/Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)). These traditional forms of communication are then contrasted with alternative forms of communications, based on an analysis of the organisations' policy reports, campaign material and websites. This analysis finds that MM INGOs focus largely on humanitarian consequences in their press releases but that this classical 'disaster framing' is complemented by efforts to diagnose causes, propose solutions and assert organisational principles or values, as well as by efforts to challenge dominant conflict narratives by drawing attention to neglected conflicts and conflict-related issues. Although the INGOs considered here vary considerably in the wider responses to conflict, analysis of the press releases shows a high degree of uniformity in the structure of their public representations of conflict.

Section 3 draws on ten semi-structured interviews with representatives from UK-based MM INGOs (senior managers in communications, policy and operations departments) to provide a preliminary exploration into the organisational and reputational factors that have shaped decision-making about NGOs' representations of conflict. This analysis indicates that variations in NGOs' approach to conflict can be best explained by differences in organisational histories, identities and funding relationships. It also shows that while the growing use of digital technologies has provided a wider set of channels for communicating ideas about conflict to the general public, use of these media is still influenced by familiar concerns such as the need to maintain funding streams, or to balance local and global accountabilities.

Background and emerging trends

NGOs' work in conflict zones has long generated significant operational tensions between maintaining access and speaking out.¹³ Narrative tensions have been well documented in the academic literature, with NGOs being criticised both for framing humanitarian responses 'not as they look to locals but as they appear to cosmopolitans', and for presenting accounts of conflict that emphasise humanitarian consequences and play down the political drivers of conflict.¹⁴ This approach has been driven by a lack of 'political capacity' within aid agencies and concerns that politicised framings may undermine public sympathy and hinder access.¹⁵ These tensions are particularly acute for multi-mandates who typically combine advocacy and operational roles.¹⁶ INGOs involved in humanitarian relief are also constrained by their public commitment to humanitarian principles and the interests of the wider humanitarian community.

The nature of INGOs' role in shaping governmental and public understanding and responses to conflict has changed in recent years in response to four key changes in the wider landscape. First, leading multi-mandate INGOs are growing larger¹⁷ and their responses to conflict are becoming more multi-faceted. Since the 1990s, INGOs have sought not only to provide relief or promote development in conflict-affected regions, but also to resolve societal tensions and lobby western governments to promote peace.¹⁸ During this period, NGOs' work has become more closely bound up with a complex network of governmental, private and non-governmental actors engaged in liberal peacebuilding interventions.¹⁹ The language of humanitarianism and human rights has been appropriated by western governments, posing new challenges for NGO legitimacy in conflict zones.²⁰

Second, the geopolitical space for peacebuilding has changed radically over the last twenty years. While NGOs have become more deeply involved in proposing solutions to conflict, this terrain has become more contested, with renewed public and academic debate about the efficacy of existing mainstream peacebuilding approaches, and growing pessimism about the scope for effective third-party intervention.²¹ In the past, NGOs were amongst the most fervent interventionists, but their stance today has grown more ambiguous.²²

Third, information communication technologies (ICTs) have provided NGOs with a more varied set of channels for communicating ideas about conflict and have allowed them to develop more variegated and sophisticated strategies in response to conflict-induced humanitarian crises. NGOs' traditional appeals to public sympathies through the mainstream media outlets can now be supplemented by 'from the field' blogs and direct communications to supporters through Twitter. Social media present opportunities for the recipients of aid to communicate and narrate their own stories directly, but

some commentators remain ambivalent about their transformative potential. Mainstream media outlets remain by far the most important channel for communicating to the general public and there is evidence that online communication channels are ineffective at engaging new audiences.²³ Social media also create new difficulties for NGOs including reduced control of organisational messages, and emerging problems associated with viral campaigning.²⁴

Fourth, the wider organisational landscape within which INGOs operate has grown more complex. Single-issue advocacy coalitions such as the *Save Darfur Coalition* or the *Enough* campaign have become increasingly prominent in shaping international narratives of certain conflicts such as Congo and Sudan, diluting INGOs' influence. These groups seek to short-circuit established advocacy approaches by taking their messages directly to the general public or a targeted policy audience. This is often done without an established institutional following and using popular media tropes to raise publicity for a campaign.²⁵

This article explores the internal tensions and inconsistencies facing NGOs working on conflict that arise from this altered institutional, media and political landscape. As will be explored below, these emerging inconsistencies intersect with long-standing tensions facing multi-mandate organisations working in conflict-affected regions.

Traditional and non-traditional channels for INGOs' representations of conflict: uniformity and diversity

This section analyses how UK-based MM INGOs have framed conflict by contrasting their traditional engagement with the mainstream media with their efforts to represent conflict through social media and other web-based communications. It shows that while INGOs demonstrate a degree of uniformity in how conflict is represented through mainstream press releases, they exhibit a more varied set of representations via social media. These different channels are used to fulfil different operational goals. While press releases are largely concerned with raising general public awareness about specific conflicts and highlighting the consequences of conflict for ordinary civilians, new social media channels are generally used to mobilise specific constituencies as part of a broader campaign, or pursue more nuanced strategies such as subverting dominant policy and media narratives about conflict.

Frames can perform a variety of goals for INGOs: they can help to diagnose problems, highlight the urgency of a particular issue, rally support behind certain issues by 'aligning' events and experiences,

or outline specific solutions.²⁶ This section explores the extent to which MM INGOs predominantly focus their attention on diagnosing problems or ascribing blame (diagnostic framing), proposing specific solutions (prognostic), or motivating others to support a particular course of action (motivational framing), by examining the relative attention paid to causes consequences and solutions to conflict. The identification of causes and consequences typically relate to diagnostic framing tasks, while the identification of solutions relate to prognostic or motivational framing.

The paper also explores the particular conflict frames deployed by these organisations. Existing research has identified a number of conflict frames employed by INGOs.²⁷ Three conflict frames were identified from the press releases and examined in this study. The disaster frame emphasises the central problem as the humanitarian consequences of violence, proposes 'solutions' that focus on maintaining humanitarian access or the welfare of civilians, and motivates action by primarily by emphasising the urgency of the humanitarian crisis. The civil war frame, by contrast, diagnoses the problem as a civil war, proposes solutions such as the need for a peace agreement or political solution, and motivates others to strive towards peace. The crime frame describes violence as criminal, proposes solutions based on adherence to international standards and laws relating to human rights or humanitarian law, and motivates action based on protecting these standards.

Engagement with mainstream media through press releases: a common template

Press releases are one of INGOs' main tools for communicating ideas about conflict to the general public. These short texts are standardised forms of communications sent directly to journalists in order to encourage them to report on a particular news event, story or a particular aspect of an ongoing news story, in which the organisation is involved. The INGOs examined in this article also publish press releases on their websites, meaning that they have taken on a secondary function of providing a general audience with an overview of the organisation's stance on specific topics or country situations. Press releases are designed both to raise awareness about humanitarian suffering associated with conflict, and to influence wider public and political debates about how governments or inter-governmental organisations should respond to conflict. In addition, they also frequently serve as a vehicle for raising awareness about a particular organisation's work in a specific setting. Analysis of press releases therefore is useful primarily because it provides an insight into how these organisations think about and seek to shape ideas about conflict. The analysis elucidates how INGOs 'read' certain conflicts, which aspects and actors they deem to be most central, and which solutions they perceive as most effective.²⁸ Press releases show the kinds of interpretations of conflict these INGOs seek to promote amongst the general public and to policymakers. This study has not sought to measure the

impact of these communications, however, it is worth noting that while some have questioned the continuing relevance and importance of press releases to INGOs, communications staff interviewed for this research argued that getting coverage in the mainstream media was still highly prized because this coverage allowed INGOs to reach a much wider and untapped audience than social media communications which tended to reach existing supporters.²⁹

In order to understand how large MM INGOs represent contemporary conflicts through press releases, six UK-based INGOs (Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, IRC UK, Islamic Relief, Christian Aid and Action Aid UK) were selected for analysis. These organisations are amongst the most well-resourced and prominent multi-mandate organisations working on humanitarian and development issues.³⁰ All except the IRC are members of the Disasters Emergency Committee, the leading UK humanitarian fundraising coalition. The NGO sector in the UK has a long history of co-operation and co-ordination around funding and policy. The UK's aid budget has grown substantially over recent years, and to date the major political parties have all been supportive of this increase. In 2014 the UK government introduced new restrictions on NGO advocacy and lobbying work. At the same time, INGOs in receipt of UK aid have been subjected to closer scrutiny and criticism from some sections of the media. These factors may have encouraged some INGOs working on conflict-related issues to adopt a more cautious approach to advocacy work, and in particular reduced space for criticising the UK government.³¹

Press releases that focused on or mentioned the three most prominent conflict-related crises from these organisations between August 2013 and August 2015 were drawn from the six organisations' websites. The three most prominent crises (measured by the total number of press releases that mentioned these particular crises) were Syria, South Sudan, and Israel-OPT. A total of 142 press releases were analysed (60 relating to Syria, 43 to South Sudan, and 39 to Israel-OPT). A total of 556 themes were drawn inductively from the press release text, recorded and then coded to identify the specific consequences of the conflict mentioned (e.g. refugees, health, sexual violence), the solutions proposed (e.g. calls for peace process, ceasefire, need to reduce inequality), and any discussion of conflict causes (e.g. lack of political progress, climate change). The 'solutions' category was further sub-divided into 'international' and 'local', where international solutions related to calls on international actors such as the UN, donors, or western governments and 'local solutions' were calls on conflict parties. Each theme was then also assigned to one of the three conflict frames (disaster, civil war, crime). The purpose of this exercise was to explore how INGOs balanced diagnostic and prognostic framing, whether they stuck to a traditional 'disaster framing' of conflict, and how they

combined attempts to publicise the humanitarian consequences of conflict with more targeted politicised messages or appeals.

The three conflicts under examination also provided scope to compare how INGOs represented conflicts with different underlying causes, at different stages, and with different consequences for conflict-affected communities. These differences were reflected in the press releases, and there was considerably diversity in the specific themes identified with regards to each conflict. The Syrian press releases emphasised problems facing refugees above other issues, while food insecurity and health issues ranked most highly in the South Sudan and Israel/OPT texts. Similarly, the conflicts demanded and presented scope for different policy responses. While the Syrian and South Sudan press releases privileged calls on international actors to maintain funding for humanitarian response, the Israel/OPT texts reflected the rapidly unfolding nature of the violence in Gaza in 2014 and 2015.

The main finding from this analysis was that, beyond the variations in content described above, there was a considerable degree of uniformity in how the organisations structured their representations of the three conflicts (for a summary see Figure 1). Press releases relating to all three conflicts placed more emphasis on the consequences of the conflict than on the solutions or causes. In the case of Syria, 47% of the 164 themes identified in the press releases related to consequences (with most focused on refugees and general humanitarian conditions), 29% related to local solutions to the conflict such as the need for conflict parties to ensure humanitarian access or engage in a peace process, while 24% related to international solutions (e.g. calls for western or regional actors to stem the flow of arms or increase humanitarian funding). In the case of South Sudan, 52% of the themes raised related to consequences (food security and children were particularly highlighted), 29% related to local solutions (e.g. conflict parties to ensure humanitarian protection) and 13% related to international solutions (e.g. international preventive action, UN resolution). In the case of Israel-OPT, 53% of the points raised related to consequences (the most prominent being health/water and the destruction of homes), 30% related to local solutions (e.g. calls for both parties to respect ceasefire, or calls on Israel to stop restricting humanitarian access), and 15% to international solutions (e.g. calling on donors to insist on an end to violence). In all three conflict cases, a very small proportion of the themes identified in the releases referred to conflict causes (between 2 and 6%).

Figure 1: Structure of press releases

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Overall, a total of 63% of themes relating to the disaster frame, 33% to the civil war frame, and 4% to the crime frame. Although the 'disaster' frame dominated the Syria and South Sudan cases (accounting for 75% and 74% of themes identified in these cases respectively), this frame was less apparent in the Israel-OPT press releases. In this case, a civil war framing was more prominent (57%). Examples of themes that were typical of this frame included statements that stressed the need for a ceasefire or peace talks, or references to the military actions of one or other of the conflict parties (or both)).

There was no major variation between the six organisations in terms of the balance of consequences, local and international solutions, when the totality of each organisations' press releases across the three country cases was measured. These results show that between 46% and 57% of themes focused on consequences, between 24% and 34% related to local solutions, while a smaller proportion (between 15% and 25%) related to international solutions.³² There was some difference, however, in the numbers of press releases each organisation devoted to each of the three conflicts, reflecting variations in wider advocacy strategies and operational focus. While Oxfam's 40 press releases were divided fairly evenly between the 3 conflicts (45% to Syria, 33% to South Sudan and 23% to Israel-Palestine), 5 out of ActionAid's 8 press releases were on Israel-OPT, with none on South Sudan (where they are not operational). Only one of IRC-UK's 27 press releases mentioned Israel-OPT. The reasons for these variations will be explored more fully in the next section.

These findings point to four wider conclusions. First, INGOs prioritise discussion of the consequences over solutions in their press releases. This finding was to be expected given these agencies are primarily concerned with responding to the humanitarian and developmental consequences of conflict and the use press releases as a means of highlighting these consequences, which are often neglected in the mainstream media at the expense of wider military or political analysis of the conflict.³³ The lack of emphasis on conflict causes is also understandable since press releases are necessarily short and there is very limited space to expound on the complexities of conflict. While few press releases explicitly discuss causes, the solutions proposed often alluded to these: for example, many press releases repeated the refrain that an underlying political solution to the conflict was needed, implying that the conflict was not simply driven by economic or social factors, but rather that a political root. The solutions proposed (e.g. need for inclusive peace talks) often reinforce the relevance of these organisations' existing concerns – i.e. their belief in popular participation and democratic decision making. Nevertheless, NGOs were conscious of the danger of presenting 'laundry

lists', and sought to strike a balance between presenting an objective account of any particular crisis and using their presentation of the crisis to highlight wider advocacy causes they are keen to promote.³⁴

Second, while INGOs do appear to conform largely to a 'disaster' frame, this appeared to vary according to the conflict covered, with the civil war frame most prominent in the Israel-OPT case. More detailed research on this case would be needed to ascertain whether this was because the conflict saw an intensification of violence during the period under analysis, because the armed conflict had a particularly high profile in western media, or some other factor.

Third, in all three cases although the solutions proposed involved a variety of actors (with some focusing on the 'international community', others on UK government, and others still on regional actors or conflict parties), greater emphasis was placed on local rather than international actors.³⁵ This finding challenges the argument presented by Slim and other critics of new humanitarianism in the 1990s that NGOs tended to focus most of their criticism at the door of international actors, neglecting the extent to which local actors or conflict parties are the primary drivers and hold the solutions to conflict.³⁶ These findings appear to confirm the view that INGOs were increasingly transitioning towards a two-track approach – seeking to influence processes at both the local and global levels.³⁷ This trend perhaps relates to a wider loss of faith in international decision-making, which has been undermined in recent years and has been particularly acute in the area of peace and security.³⁸

Although the analysis revealed a surprising focus on local solutions, the majority of press releases proposed solutions focused on the actions of either local or international 'elite' actors such as politicians or military leaders rather than focusing on structural solutions to the conflict, or approaches to resolution that involved non-elite actors such as local civil society organisations. This approach can be criticised on the grounds outlined by Mac Ginty and Firchow, who have argued that international narratives of conflict or formal peace processes often hold little meaning for local people and can sometimes serve to obscure ongoing violence.³⁹ A smaller minority of press releases did explicitly seek to counter this 'elite' focus by highlighting the need for talks to be more inclusive, so at least in some instances, INGOs were explicitly challenging the domination of elites.

The fourth main finding is that the varied nature of the three conflicts and these organisations' diverse histories did not appear to influence the balance between causes, consequences and solutions, suggesting that these organisations structured their press releases in accordance with a relatively

standard formula. This standardised approach may reflect a tendency towards professionalization within the NGO sector, which has driven a standardisation of operational procedures, and a homogenisation in normative outlook.⁴⁰ This trend is accentuated amongst MM INGOs who often work collaboratively in pursuit of advocacy goals and fundraising efforts, for example through the DEC: 18% of the press releases examined were released in coalition with another organisation. This finding chimes with the findings of a recent report on the international content of UK news coverage, where Amy Fairbairn, the media and communications manager of Mercy Corps (a multi-mandate INGO), stated that “[a]s NGOs often try to appeal to as wide a public group as possible, we’ve become increasingly homogenised in terms of our messaging and are not controversial enough or not provocative”.⁴¹

In summary, this section has shown that INGOs have structured their accounts of conflict through press releases in a largely standardised fashion that has tended to emphasise the wider humanitarian consequences of violent conflict, and, less prominently emphasised a range of potential solutions. While the solutions proposed consistently placed more emphasis on ‘local’ rather than ‘international’ actors, most tended to implicitly reinforce a ‘top-down’ account of conflict that implicitly asserted the central role of elite political actors and INGOs, rather than local civil society groups. A small minority of texts explicitly sought to counter this view by, for example, calling for talks to be made more inclusive.

Alternative channels: challenging dominant narratives

In addition to press releases, NGOs frame conflicts through a range of other channels, including blogs or short videos published on organisational websites, and via social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These channels are typically deployed to pursue more complex and subtle representations. This section will provide some preliminary examination into how these communications are used both to challenge dominant political and media narratives, and to draw attention to INGOs’ work in an increasingly fragmented media ecology. NGOs’ concern with critiquing mainstream accounts of conflict is not new. INGOs have long been concerned with drawing attention to conflicts that are widely deemed ‘forgotten’ either in the sense that international policy attention has moved on, or on the grounds that they receive little by way of humanitarian funding or external military engagement.⁴² This section argues that while NGO efforts to subvert mainstream conflict narratives have a long history, the mechanisms used to communicate these messages are changing with the growing use of social media, creating new tensions for the organisations studied in this article. These findings were drawn from a review of the six organisations’ websites and social media accounts

(Facebook, YouTube and Twitter), and from ten interviews with INGO policy and communications staff, which explored how the organisations sought to communicate and challenge prevailing ideas about conflict. The examples of blogs, videos and campaigns mentioned here were identified both through the review and by interviewees.

The NGOs interviewed in this paper sought to re-frame conflict in a variety of ways. A central aim has been to draw attention to particular causes or consequences of conflicts that they perceived to be neglected in public debate through communications to supporters and the general public, and through policy reports targeted at policymakers. One organisation, for example, sought to highlight the causal role of inequality, poverty and climate change in driving the conflict in Syria.⁴³ Another described how they wanted to draw attention to social violence in order to challenge the mainstream policy approach of focusing only on armed conflict attempting to challenge emerging policy focus on sexual violence.⁴⁴ In certain conflicts, such as Afghanistan, organisations attempted to challenge the idea that this was a 'post-conflict' setting.⁴⁵ One organisation, sought to assert the agency and resilience of conflict-affected communities, either by stating this in press releases, or highlighting the active role of local partners in conflict zones through their website.⁴⁶

While most of the organisations interviewed saw themselves as involved in this kind of re-framing work, most did not see this as a central driving goal of their work and several were clear that they did not see public education as one of their core goals. Some stated that they did not intend to replace International Alert, International Crisis Group, or other specialist groups who had greater capacity to provide a comprehensive overview of specific conflicts.⁴⁷

Social media provide new opportunities to present more nuanced and targeted messages. As Cooper and Cottle have stressed, it is not necessarily useful to set up an 'anachronistic dualism between 'old' and 'new' media because both are now intimately interconnected in and through today's new communication networks'.⁴⁸ NGOs therefore are using social media to supplement 'top line' messages presented in press releases with more nuanced or bottom-up impressions of conflict zones delivered via frontline tweets, blogs or videos, typically written by frontline staff.⁴⁹ These blogs have provided scope for organisations to present more nuanced accounts of the impacts of conflict, to explore wider political debates, and to highlight the active roles of local individuals and organisations working in conflict zones. While most of my interviewees listed benefits of these approaches, many were also keen to highlight the limitations of social media, stressing that these tools were not a 'game changer' in humanitarian communications because they did not reach a wide audience.⁵⁰

A key objective for several NGOs, which has been particularly noticeable in relation to the conflict in Syria, has been to overturn the sense of despair in the mainstream media and to overcome 'public sympathy fatigue' in the face of a long-running and desperate situation. NGOs have adopted a range of approaches to engaging the public on these themes. First, NGOs seek to engage specific audiences, for example through Oxfam's #lovesyria campaign, which sought to encourage festival goers to 'to show their love and solidarity for Syria's people' in the face of hostile media coverage of the refugee crisis.

A second key trend has been a growth in efforts to encourage the public to reflect on how the experiences of conflict-affected people contrasts with their own. A powerful example of this approach is Save the Children's YouTube video 'Most Shocking Second a Day Video', released in 2014. The short 90 second film involves a fictional dramatisation of a war unfolding in the UK through the UK. The film encouraged viewers to reflect on the humanitarian impact of the conflict in Syria and ended with the tagline 'just because it isn't happening here, doesn't mean it isn't happening'.⁵¹ The film received huge public attention (at the time of writing in April 2017 more than 56.5 million views on YouTube) and widespread coverage in mainstream newspapers in the UK and beyond.

These efforts to shape public understanding of issues deploy well-established strategies of bridging social distance between those directly affected by humanitarian crisis and the viewer. These adverts are increasingly drawing on the established tactics of private sector advertising, using optical illusions or hyper-reality to promote their brand and raise awareness of humanitarian issues. They can be seen as part of a broader shift in humanitarian communications away from the more emotionally-charged fundraising appeals associated with the Live Aid campaign of 1985. As Chouliaraki has argued, this shift can be viewed as a welcome move away from the doom-laden and sometimes exploitative messages that charities have relied on in the past, often presenting passive and helpless victims from poor countries to raise money. On the other hand, the more playful, ironic and less emotive approach used by many charities today can be morally ambiguous and undermine a sense of solidarity with people living in distant countries.⁵² A TV executive argued in a recent report that one perverse consequence of the growing sophistication and marketisation of NGO communication strategies was that TV News agencies would be 'probably less likely to use their material'.⁵³

These tensions are linked to the fragmented nature of the contemporary communications ecology, which has been prompted by a rapid rise in the speed and volume of citizen witnessing and user-

generated content.⁵⁴ This environment makes it difficult for NGO messages to reach beyond a niche audience, and encourages NGOs to privilege the 'dramatic over the chronic'.⁵⁵ These tendencies may be intensified in certain social media platforms such as Twitter, which encourage NGOs to develop novel and engaging messages with the scope to 'go viral'. Such an approach can be seen in GOAL's - #nowyouknow information campaign - where the organisation shared violent warzone footage through social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook alongside more traditional approaches including op-eds and petitions to raise awareness about the Syrian conflict. While these techniques can engage audiences and disrupt established perceptions, '[t]he sensationalist use of eyewitness imagery' potentially 'distances audiences away from...conflicts'.⁵⁶

Although the altered communications environment has raised new tensions for INGOs, the disruptive impact of these changes have not transformed all of the main underlying drivers of NGOs' responses to conflict.⁵⁷ As will be explored in the next section, organisational responses are also shaped by concerns about organisational legitimacy and wider inter-organisational competition. A number of factors are highlighted including pressures on organisations to maintain consistency between their representations of conflict and existing organisational goals and priorities, and the need for NGOs to balance their responses with wider organisational concerns around funding and relationships with supporters.

Managing organisational histories and legacies

Previous research has shown that a concern with organisational legitimacy (in Suchman's words 'the generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a social system') has a strong bearing on decisions about how to frame conflict.⁵⁸ INGOs are typically required to negotiate the conflicting expectations of different audiences.⁵⁹ Key audiences for MM INGOs include individual supporters or the general public, donors, other NGOs, and governments of the various countries in which they operate. This section provides a preliminary exploration of some of the key constraints that shaped INGO approaches to framing conflict.

Despite the considerable degree of uniformity in their public entreaties, the interviews suggested a number of constraints that shaped how the NGOs framed conflict in their work. It was important for NGOs that the messages they projected about conflict linked with pre-existing campaigns, goals or priorities. If, for example, an organisation was already campaigning on inequality or climate change, then highlighting the causal role of these factors in generating conflict would be more likely to be

selected as a key message, since it would be likely to complement other work and generate greater policy impact.

NGOs' communications on particular conflicts were influenced by their historic involvement in that context. Some mentioned that they did not feel comfortable making statements on conflicts where they were not operational since they preferred to draw on their own evidence and experience, or link statements to their activities. Being operational also allowed them to consider the local political space for speaking out, and the potential impact any pronouncements would have on local partners.⁶⁰ This tendency explains the variations in the extent to which different NGOs highlighted different conflicts in their press releases that were noted above. An organisation's operational approach could also be influential. Unlike the other organisations studied for this article, Christian Aid did not directly implement projects, and instead worked indirectly through local partners. This position was reflected in its press releases which foregrounded direct quotes from local partners.

The INGOs examined in this article are large organisations with complex federated organisational structures and numerous departments. Several noted that there was considerable internal debate between departments about how to frame their conflict-related work and that they found it difficult to develop unified messages across their various branches.⁶¹ For example, one conflict policy officer described how the policy unit had challenged her organisation's communications on the grounds that they presented an entirely passive view of women's role in conflict. Quite often, certain country branches would be more comfortable taking a strong political stance in relation to conflict issues – NOVIB (Oxfam's Netherlands branch), for example, has historically taken a stronger stance than other Oxfam branches.

The interviews also revealed that decisions were influenced by the preferences and concerns of their supporters. Although the organisations appear fairly homogenous in terms of their values and goals, their funding models and relationships with supporters often varied. One organisation was more willing to take a campaigning stance because it had a more progressive base of supporters, while another noted that its supporter base tended to adopt a 'victim-based' narrative of conflict, which made it challenging for them to campaign on particular conflicts without appearing biased.⁶² The character of an organisation's supporter base was often closely circumscribed by their preferred funding model. One organisation, whose funding streams relied heavily on child sponsorship, argued that while there was a strong push within the organisation to focus more on conflict-affected regions based on a desire to focus attention on the most vulnerable children, this approach was constrained

by the organisation's fundraising model and traditional support base.⁶³ Since its supporters were viewed as more conservative, they were harder to engage on conflict issues and were generally seen to be more receptive to fundraising appeals that focused on natural disasters or the plight of people in poverty.

The analysis presented in this section has illustrated that multi-mandate INGOs have attempted to shape public mood and understanding of conflict through a variety of channels, but that these efforts are shaped and in some cases constrained by various organisational factors – including the characteristics of their support base, their organisational structure, funding models and operational approach.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that multi-mandate INGOs tend to adopt a two-track approach to representing conflict. On the one hand, they deploy relatively standardised depictions of conflict in their press releases, which emphasise the humanitarian consequences of conflict above discussion of causes or solutions. While these accounts privileged 'local' solutions above 'international' ones, they nevertheless tended to reinforce 'top-down' conflict narratives that privileged the activities of national and international elites. On the other hand, INGOs engaged in alternative set of communications which presented more nuanced and complex accounts and were often concerned with overturning mainstream media or international policy narratives of conflict. Both approaches were affected by changes in INGOs' communications strategies and the wider political environment for advocacy around conflict and humanitarian issues. The 'traditional' approach that typified the press releases may have eroded INGOs' influence over time by turning off supporters. Some alternative messages communicated via online videos or blogs, generate concerns that INGOs might be sacrificing credibility by privileging attention-grabbing accounts to counteract a media environment that is increasingly fragmented, and to elicit a response from an increasingly cynical public. These findings provide some nuance both to the prevailing view in the humanitarian literature, which has often assumed that INGOs simply reinforce a depoliticised 'disaster' framing of these conflicts, and to the findings of the international relations literature on conflict framing which suggest that NGOs implicitly support the wider goals and interests of more powerful international peacebuilding actors.⁶⁴

The article has also provided a preliminary exploration of the factors that shape NGOs' decisions about how to frame conflict and argued that MM INGOs face a range of constraints when deciding how to represent contemporary conflicts. While these decisions are informed by long-standing dilemmas

about potential trade-offs between access and advocacy, the increasingly complex and fractured media ecosystem and organisational environment they operate within is generating new concerns. Although social media provide greater scope to challenge mainstream media narratives of conflict, the need to grab attention in a competitive media landscape poses new threats to organisations credibility and potentially undermines their capacity to influence through mainstream channels. This article has demonstrated how NGOs' decisions to reinforce or subvert mainstream accounts of conflict are informed by a range of representational and organisational considerations which cannot be understood in isolation from each other. In exploring how and why multi-mandate NGOs frame and represent contemporary armed conflicts, the article has highlighted three key tensions.

First, their representations of conflict are shaped by normative considerations. Multi-mandate INGOs' primary role is not simply to provide a dispassionate account of conflicts: their readings of conflict dynamics are also opportunities to assert particular underlying values – about the importance of participation for conflict resolution, or the need to address underlying structural causes such as inequality or climate change.⁶⁵ Second, these organisations' depictions of conflict are informed by wider concerns about funding, their relations with supporters and internal relationships between different branches. The extent to which NGO decisions were constrained by these considerations varied considerably across the small sample examined for this study. NGOs are rightly cautious about stepping outside their area of competency or to stretching beyond their mandate, based on the fear that this could undermine their relationships with other powerful actors or their claims to legitimacy based on expertise. Third, NGOs' representations of conflict sought to balance a concern with changing public opinion, against their interest in shaping government policy.⁶⁶ Their concern with influencing international policy outcomes reinforced their tendency to reflect 'top-down' conflict narratives; in order to shape the decisions of powerful international policy actors, INGOs needed to adopt the same language and discuss the same kinds of policy solutions.

There is a need for more research and internal reflection on INGOs' role in shaping conflict narratives. While this paper has presented a preliminary investigation into some of the factors that shape INGO decision-making about conflict framing, our understanding of these processes would be enhanced by more in-depth studies into the underlying power relations that shape these decisions, the negotiations that go on within organisations, and how staff from different departments and organisations understand the constraints and possibilities associated with different forms of communication. While INGOs have actively reflected upon how issues of under-development and poverty are communicated since at least the 1960s and codified efforts to respect the dignity of disaster victims in information

and publicity work, there have been few systematic attempts to examine or regulate their public representations of violent conflict.⁶⁷ Most of the multi-mandate INGOs interviewed for this study stated that they did not feel they had a role in educating the public about conflict, in the same way as they did about, for example, poverty or humanitarian crisis, arguing instead that this kind of role should remain the preserve of specialist peacebuilding NGOs.⁶⁸ Finally, there is a need for further research into the impact of multi-mandate INGO representations of conflict, and in particular how representations delivered via the different channels of communication explored in this article affect public opinion and policy.

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¹ See Goodhand, Aiding peace?.

² Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*; Orgrad & Seu, "'Intimacy at a distance" in humanitarian communication'; Dogra, *Representations of global poverty*.

³ Multi-mandate NGOs are understood here as organisations pursuing more than one goal. For example humanitarian, development and peacebuilding.

⁴ Powers 'The new boots on the ground'; Franks, 'Inserting political understanding into the humanitarian narrative'.

⁵ Mac Ginty & Firchow. "Top-down and bottom-up narratives of peace and conflict."

⁶ Oxfam, 'EU foreign ministers must bite the bullet and extend the arms embargo on Syria, says Oxfam'

⁷ Hughes & Pupavac, 'Framing post-conflict societies: International pathologisation of Cambodia and the post-Yugoslav states'; Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo'; Mac Ginty & Firchow, 'Top-down and bottom-up narratives of peace and conflict'; Jeffrey, 'The geopolitical framing of localized struggles'.

⁸ Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo', Ron et al, 'Transnational Information Politics', Zacher et al 'NGOs, IOs, and the ICC', Bliesemann de Guevara, 'Studying the International Crisis Group', De Waal, 'Advocacy in Conflict'.

⁹ Dogra, *Representations of global poverty: Aid, development and international NGOs*; Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*; Scott, 'Distant suffering online'; Darnton & Kirk, *Finding Frames*.

¹⁰ Scott, "The myth of representations of Africa".

¹¹ Slim, 'By what authority?'

¹² Zacher et al, 'NGOs, IOs and the ICC'; Franks, 'Inserting political understanding into the humanitarian narrative'

¹³ Rieff, *A bed for the night*.

¹⁴ Calhoun, 'The imperative to reduce suffering'; Franks, 'Inserting political understanding into the humanitarian narrative'.

¹⁵ Vaux, *The selfish altruist*, 47.

¹⁶ Slim & Bradley, 'Principled Humanitarian Action & Ethical Tensions in Multi-Mandate Organizations in Armed Conflict: Observations from a Rapid Literature Review'.

¹⁷ Yanacopulos, *International NGO Engagement, Advocacy, Activism*.

¹⁸ Goodhand, 'Aiding Peace'.

¹⁹ Duffield, *Global governance and the new wars*.

²⁰ Walton, 'Everything is Politics'.

²¹ Mac Ginty & Richmond, "The local turn in peace building: A critical agenda for peace"; Cairns, 'British Foreign Policy in an Unequal World'.

²² See Rieff, 'Humanitarianism in Crisis?'

²³ Yanacopulos, *International NGO Engagement, Advocacy, Activism*; Cottle & Cooper, *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*.

²⁴ Lynch et al 'Blogs and Bullets III'.

²⁵ Waldorf, 'White noise'.

²⁶ Benford and Hunt, 'Dramaturgy and Social Movements', Benford and Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements'.

²⁷ Zacher et al, 'NGOs, IOs, and the ICC'

²⁸ Used by Ron et al; and Zacher et al to

²⁹ Interview with INGO communications staff, 20th August 2015.

³⁰ Based on latest available figures from the Charity Commission, these six organisations had annual incomes of between £63 and £401 million. The mean figure for the group as a whole was £191 million.

³¹ Interview with INGO policy representative, 18th August 2015.

³² Islamic Relief was excluded from this analysis based on its small overall number of press releases.

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- ³³ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 7th November 2014, 18th and 20th August 2015
- ³⁴ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015.
- ³⁵ This tendency was less marked in the case of Syria where local solutions were only marginally ahead of international ones.
- ³⁶ Slim, 'Dithering over Darfur?'
- ³⁷ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2014.
- ³⁸ Walton et al, 'Understanding contemporary challenges to INGO legitimacy'.
- ³⁹ Mac Ginty & Firchow, 'Top-down and bottom-up narratives of peace and conflict'.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Magee & Scott, *Small Screen, Big World*, p.10.
- ⁴² Crocker et al, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*.
- ⁴³ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015
- ⁴⁴ Interview with INGO policy representative, 26th August 2015.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015
- ⁴⁶ Interview with INGO policy representative, 26th August 2015.
- ⁴⁷ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015.
- ⁴⁸ Cottle & Cooper, *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*, 225.
- ⁴⁹ See, for example, Save the Children's 'Voices from the Field' blog (Available at: <http://savethechildren.typepad.com/blog/syria-crisis/>)
- ⁵⁰ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015.
- ⁵¹ Video available at: <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/emergencies/syria-appeal/if-surrey-were-syria>
- ⁵² Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*.
- ⁵³ Magee, & Scott, 2016, *Small Screen, Big World*
- ⁵⁴ Cottle & Cooper, *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*.
- ⁵⁵ Richey & Ponte, "Better (Red)™ than Dead?"; Cottle and Cooper, *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change*, p.257.
- ⁵⁶ Ahva & Hellman, "Citizen eyewitness images and audience engagement in crisis coverage".
- ⁵⁷ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015.
- ⁵⁸ Suchman, 'Managing Legitimacy', 574; Walton, 'Framing disputes and organisational legitimization'; Walton, 'Peacebuilding without using the word "peace"'; Orgrad, 'Visualizers of solidarity'.
- ⁵⁹ Lister, 'NGO Legitimacy'.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with INGO policy representative, 26th August 2015.
- ⁶¹ Interview with INGO policy staff, 27th August 2015.
- ⁶² Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 7th November 2014, 20th August 2015.
- ⁶³ Interview with INGO policy staff, 27th August 2015.
- ⁶⁴ Franks, 'Inserting political understanding into the humanitarian narrative'; Autesserre, 'Hobbes and the Congo'.
- ⁶⁵ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015.
- ⁶⁶ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015, 26th August 2015, 18th August 2015
- ⁶⁷ See, for example, IFRC, 'The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief', p.370.
- ⁶⁸ Interview with INGO policy and communications staff, 20th August 2015.