BOOK REVIEW


Ilan Kelman
Center for International Climate and Environmental Research – Oslo (CICERO)

Email: ilan_kelman@hotmail.com

As humanitarian operations have become bigger, more prominent, and more professionalised, it is reasonable to ask: Are they becoming better? Rather than assuming that any disaster-related assistance is or must be beneficial and welcomed, such assistance should be subjected to evaluation, introspection, and critical analysis. That would contribute towards ensuring that good-hearted humanitarian efforts, often backed by millions of dollars and garnering international media headlines, achieve what they expect to achieve and are meant to achieve.

In _Crisis Caravan_, Polman takes one approach to such critique. Drawing on her personal experiences in crisis zones—including interviews with aid donors, aid recipients, government officials, NGO workers, and combatants—she analyses humanitarian aid, concluding that it is flawed at multiple levels. Aid, she argues, does not have enough oversight and is not thought through enough to ensure that it is not causing more harm. Her thesis is effectively that “Humanitarianism is based on a presumed duty to ease human suffering unconditionally” (p. 7) yet “No matter how often the Red Cross rules may be trampled underfoot…the humanitarians persist in brandishing their Red Cross principles and accept no responsibility for the abuse of their aid” (pp. 10-11).

The well-written book begins with an “Introduction” that goes back to Western historical roots of humanitarianism—the contrast between Henri Dunant’s views that founded the Red Cross and those of Florence Nightingale. Polman suggests that Dunant felt that humanitarian treatment of soldiers wounded in battle was a non-governmental responsibility while Nightingale placed that on the shoulders of governments. A wounded soldier is a human being deserving of help, yet a healed soldier can return to fight.

Fundamentally, _Crisis Caravan_ asks: Can aid be neutral? Thus begins the journey through Polman’s experiences in humanitarian crises. Although the book starts with the Red Cross, it expands to the entire aid industry, well beyond Red Cross principles and actions.

Chapter 1 covers Goma in 1995, with Polman’s anecdotes of relief worker behaviour setting the stage for the rest of the book. Relief workers are portrayed as arrogant, almost callous, in their views and treatment of locals, while their attempts to assist the often-
ungrateful recipients remain ineffectual. Chapter 2 continues with Goma, but also steps back into history. It covers the humanitarian industry’s contract culture while exploring media representations of crisis. Journalists, according to Polman, are as culpable as relief organisations in creating the problems with aid.

The next two chapters focus on Sierra Leone, interspersed with vignettes from other locations to illustrate the difficulties that aid can cause. Polman reports on her own experiences with NGOs, government officials, and aid recipients. The focus is the showboating of child amputees by the media, donors, and NGOs, which leads to corrupt and dangerous aid practices. The frustration of some committed staff at the circumstances in which they find themselves is highlighted.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are an account of ethics disappearing in conflict, with the chapter titles summarising the material: “Aid as a Weapon of War”, “Refugee Warriors”, and “The Hunger Weapon”. Humanitarian aid, the chapters demonstrate, can encourage and support violent conflict. Backed up by anecdotes, the chapters make provocative statements such as “Once inside a war zone, it’s essential to have a blind spot for matters of ethics” (p. 99) and “Even humanitarian aid organizations deploy the hunger weapon if it serves their purposes” (p. 122). Anyone connected to humanitarian aid is condemned as contributing to the reported problem.

Are these apparent transgressions in humanitarian relief deliberate? Chapter 8 repeats earlier themes, reinforcing the framing of flawed humanitarianism as a form of mission creep. The humanitarian sector aims for appropriate action, but is caught up in the reality of everyone involved trying to take advantage of the aid funds and supplies. Humanitarianism slides down the slippery slope of trying to do something, anything, related to aid, partly so that they feel they are succeeding and partly because it perpetuates their own job situations.

Again, blame is distributed amongst donors, journalists, and humanitarian workers. They are all caught in the mesh created and manipulated by those in the war zone who are creating the war—and who benefit from the war and from the humanitarian aid. Chapter 9 titled “Afghaniscam” is another pointed case study.

Chapter 10 focuses on the donors, namely their lack of logic in decisions about the allocation of money to emergencies. The stories here explain that some violence in conflict zones is wrought in order to get aid in response. Featuring Polman’s interview with a brutal rebel leader, the ethos presented is that donor decisions are based on neither humanitarian need nor effectiveness in improving a situation. That creates the Crisis Caravan.

Throughout these chapters, little doubt exists that Polman is portraying her experiences, through her own eyes, accurately. That also describes the book’s main weakness—lack of balance with case studies and examples of good practice and helpful aid. Does Polman truly believe that humanitarian operations never work? No, as shown by a few throwaway lines complimenting humanitarian workers, yet seemingly added just
to highlight criticism. An example is “Many MONGO doctors did a good job, but several made incorrect diagnoses” (pp. 57-58).

The imbalanced approach condemns all aid workers, even if they might have helped. It would be unfair to disparage or deny Polman’s statement “I’ve known aid workers who cared for child soldiers and war orphans by day and relaxed by night in the arms of child prostitutes” (p. 50). That does not mean, and should not be taken to mean, that all (or even the majority of) aid workers support the sex trade.

How much of the aid industry is beneficial, how much makes no difference, and how much causes more problems that it solves? From Crisis Caravan, the reader has no idea. Instead, the impression is that a few scattered personnel or projects might sort of assist sometimes, but otherwise disaster aid always harms those it seeks to help. Contrasting the ugly with good practice examples, and engaging more with previous research, would have enhanced the book’s credibility.

The volume displays little academic rigour, and the reader may be inclined to question some of the statements. In 1968, the reader is told, Biafra’s self-proclaimed President diverted aid and “it probably made him a multimillionaire” (p. 118). Rather than “probably”, research into the topic (or sticking with substantiated statements) would have been preferable.

Crisis Caravan does well in quoting many key, relevant publications and integrating Polman’s own work and observations with others’. Nevertheless, extensive academic literature on many of the case studies and on the aid industry is not mentioned. That would have provided perspectives and analysis different from Polman’s own experiences.

Some direct quotations and data regarding named agencies are referenced with verifiable sources. Sometimes no source is given, as in a damning quotation about George W. Bush’s foreign policy attributed to Bush’s ex-Deputy Secretary of State (p. 141). In discussing war in the Horn of Africa, Chapter 8 mentions three times that infants were tossed into fires—without any referencing. Crisis Caravan might be entirely factually accurate, but the poor sourcing is not convincing.

The final chapter, the “Afterword: Ask Them Questions” refutes these critiques. Polman states that she does not have answers, because answers are contextual and cannot be simple. Instead, she fairly explains, we witness major problems with aid, so we need to ask why those problems occur and how to do better. Hiding behind nineteenth century principles, and claiming that lessons are learned when they clearly are not, does not provide an answer to those whose suffering has worsened due to aid.

Polman does not try to give answers, leaving the reader to aim for their own in-depth analysis of “why” and “how”. Instead, as per the Afterword’s title, she starts the process by asking questions and by encouraging others to do the same.

In short, Polman seeks accountability from the aid industry. The evidence that she presents, mainly contemporary but nicely ensconced in historical perspectives, shows that
is sorely needed. I would add only that information from good practices should be added to the mix, to show what could be achieved.

Yet even dedicated humanitarians doing solid work are forced to play the game not of their own making. The 26-page “Aidspeak” glossary at the end, just before the Acknowledgements, Notes, and Index, is worth reading all the way through, as perhaps the most devastating indictment in the book.

The entry for “autumn remainders” describes how, towards the end of the year, donors lower the quality required to fund proposals because the donors must spend their budget. “Dutch disease” details how an aid influx can devastate already disaster-stricken economies. The “white Land Cruiser crowd” is ex-patriate aid workers driving “to development aid projects or to the local bars” (p. 206).

The most surprising part about Crisis Caravan is perhaps that it has sparked intense controversy. Despite Polman’s undue focus on the bad aspects of humanitarian aid, nothing that she writes is new. The academic literature has plenty to say on the topic, the humanitarian industry itself continually debates and tries to resolve the problems, and Polman herself details how the questions go back to Dunant and Nightingale. To think that any donation is a good donation and that any aid must inevitably help has too often been lambasted as the height of naïveté.

So why are so many people so upset by the book? One disaster research journal refused to permit me to review the book for them, alluding to the controversy, but stating that the book’s topic was not within the journal’s mandate, even though the journal frequently publishes papers on humanitarian aid. Polman’s book is a necessary contribution to the debates over humanitarian aid that we should be having. Her work is admirable for trying to ensure that those discussions are dealt with straightforwardly, openly, and honestly.

Crisis Caravan is not important due to its controversy. Nor should it be avoided due to its imbalance. It is a must-read precisely because it should not be controversial, but instead depicts one side of the humanitarian reality that few seem willing to admit exists.