

The Crisis Caravan - What's Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?
Linda Polman

A compelling history. Confirms one's darkest fears. Well translated.

This is a beautifully done book, the more remarkable because it comes across so clearly in translation. I come to expect that the Dutch speak English, and that surely the author must have worked in English during the course of her far-flung field work.

It is especially powerful coming from a European. Europeans, lacking the American ability to project power through military force, enthusiastically project "soft power" through humanitarian means. Or so-called humanitarian. Linda Polman investigates the effectiveness of aid in crises throughout the world, but especially in Africa. She is especially harsh on the Africans themselves, from whom little has ever been expected, except that they be perennial victims, but who by her account even invent more and more monstrous atrocities because, perversely, it generates more aid.

The author thoroughly and critically catalogues the abuses of aid, how difficult it is to identify the true victims, and how much aid money gets siphoned off by the aid organizations themselves, the dysfunctional governments, and the perpetrators of the most heinous crimes which the aid is intended to ameliorate.

It is beyond the scope of this book, but a good subject for a subsequent work would be an analysis of the motivations of the donors, those good churchgoing people in the rich world, those Bob Geldorf and Bono concertgoers who somehow imagine that they are doing un-alloyed good works, when in fact they are throwing money into a deep pit in which there are few enough bona fide successes and very little accounting. It is this charitable impulse which powers the entire, rather smarmy industry which she describes. Charity is compounded by the political interests of heavyweight players and donor countries; Bill Clinton who loves to be photographed with African orphans, Congressman who demand visas for Liberian amputees who will look wonderful in campaign photos. Christians who have a completely non-introspective conviction in their own righteousness and their right to assert their will on the primitives whom they would convert.

In this vein, readers will find on my website, following the link "Volunteering," a humorous and sobering account of my own experience with a church group in Haiti a few years before the earthquake. Ukraine, where I live, is crawling with representatives from USAID, UNAIDS, and myriad charities dedicated to taking care of orphans and cleaning up after Chernobyl, which disaster after 25 years is getting a little long in the tooth. This book feeds my cynical ruminations about whether they are more dedicated to serving Ukraine or themselves. Most live nicely by local standards.

Polman appears to be ahead of the curve. This Economist magazine of November 13, 2010 has an article entitled "Faith, hope, and charities" that goes to the same point. Charities have a high level of public trust, but most of them are quite beyond accounting. Their records are confused, and their recordkeeping procedures so inconsistent that comparisons are very difficult.

Bottom line – a well-written book, well focused, and especially well translated. Congratulations to Liz Waters!