

**Public humanitarian advocacy:
challenges, opportunities and
its channeling through the celebrities.**

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Disclaimer

The author worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) from 1999 through 2007. He served as communication delegate in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire.

The opinions expressed and the analyses outlined in this dissertation do not necessarily reflect the views of the ICRC but remain solely the interpretations and conclusions of the author.

The author also assumes the entire responsibility for the interpretation and eventual misinterpretation of the contributions from ICRC's senior officers interviewed within the specific framework of this Master dissertation.

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1. Introduction

It is largely accepted that advocacy, in its general meaning of a mix of persuasive communication and targeted actions aiming at ‘pleading the cause of’, ‘acting on behalf of’ and ‘speaking out for or in support of others’, is designed to change policies, positions and actions on a specific issue or cause on behalf of the voiceless. Its characteristics have been summarized in three elements: protect vulnerable people, give them a stronger voice and promote their rights. In this sense, the concept of advocacy is at the heart of humanitarian organizations intervening in today’s conflict-related crises that besides their relief logistical exercise also attempt to give the voice to unheard suffering people and plead their cause by shaping the context conducive to appropriate political, economic and humanitarian responses to their unmet needs. Traditionally, humanitarian agencies have tried to achieve their advocacy’s objectives through behind-the-scene initiatives enabling them to address complex and sensitive issues. Yet, when deemed necessary to the interest of the humanitarian goals and when ‘private’ advocacy was not producing any noticeable advancements, humanitarian agencies have also been ready to use ‘public’ humanitarian advocacy initiatives based on more visible actions with a clear public communication inclination. By raising the profile of a specific crisis or framing a specific humanitarian issue at stake in the general public minds they aim to put an indirect pressure on key leaderships on the need to give to these crises and issues appropriate attention and resources. Both private and public approaches have nowadays become fundamental components of a broad set of strategies put in place by humanitarian organizations for their advocacy’s objectives and in order to maximize their impact they are largely used in tandem. This discussion will focus the attention on the public humanitarian advocacy.

In recent years, despite its original and positive connotations, the word ‘advocacy’ seems to have assumed a negative significance when employed within the framework of public initiatives aimed at advocating on humanitarian issues and concerns stemming from conflict-related emergencies. Within this framework, it seems that nowadays the word ‘advocacy’ is largely interpreted in political terms and associated either with the increased use of the ‘speaking out’ approach aimed at publicly denouncing governments violating human rights and hampering the humanitarian action or with initiatives aiming at pure visibility objectives. The extended use of such form of advocacy away from its original people-and-their-suffering-centered orientation and from its focus on the humanitarian issues and concerns, the plight of suffering people and their right to access humanitarian assistance and largely centered on blaming governments and on the right of access to the victims for the organizations has shadowed the humanitarian character of agencies’ action and highlighted the political nature of their advocacy. These deviations have intensified and multiplied the challenges experienced by the humanitarian community in the operational areas essentially linked to the intertwined principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of sovereign states which have always represented a controversial aspect in the implementation of the humanitarian action. The globalization has complicated further these difficulties by projecting the consequences of strong public advocacy positions across political and geographical boundaries. Yet, it has also strongly emphasized the need for the agencies to

pursue the activity of pleading the cause of vulnerable populations at field level and to keep a global/local consistency in their public communication in order to avoid double standard criticisms. The analysis of the main reasons explaining this deviation and the examination of a possible balanced approach keeping public advocacy both away from the political/denunciation framework and more focused on humanitarian issues as well as on advocacy's original meaning will form the first crux of this discussion arguing that in today's humanitarian environment 'advocacy' has become a 'good word gone bad'.

In an increasingly image-driven society and in the era of globalization the use of international television stations was quite a natural way for humanitarian organizations to channel their public advocacy initiatives. The capacity demonstrated during the 1960s and 1980s to foster the international humanitarian responses and to mobilize both an extraordinary solidarity and resources by flashing the crises on the television screen reinforced their exploitation. Yet, especially during the 1990s, the challenges and the limits stemming from the humanitarians–media relationship increasingly becoming symbiotic surfaced very clearly and started to put into questions the reliance, if not a certain dependence, of the humanitarian agencies in using the media for their public advocacy. The challenges generally stemmed from the divergent driving forces and agendas which revealed not only the inability of the media to respond to the humanitarians' need of raising the awareness on the plight and right of vulnerable people but also the possibility of engendering counterproductive results for the trustworthiness and reputation of the agencies. The limits were largely linked to the declining capacity of the media to respond to the agencies' fundraising needs due to a growing 'compassion fatigue' stemming from the multiplication of the emergencies. Furthermore, the increasingly competitiveness of the relief market due to the proliferation of humanitarian agencies also fostered a greater use of the media to promote and improve the visibility of the agencies' work. This deviation towards fundraising and visibility objectives has further weakened the effectiveness of this major avenue for the humanitarian agencies' public advocacy. The recognition of the challenges, limits and counterproductive outcomes seems to have fostered the organizations to evaluate the opportunity to reshape the contours of their relationship with the media. But it might also have pushed them to explore the use of alternative vectors offering the prospect of reducing their reliance on the media and simultaneously to increase both the control on their communication initiatives and the possibilities of a more direct contact with their stakeholders. The analysis of these drawbacks and the examination of the use of alternative communication vectors will form the second crux of this discussion. In this respect, the paper argues that the need to overcome these problems coupled with the agencies' expanded role and responsibilities in today's conflict related humanitarianism and the widening of communication opportunities offered by the globalization and the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have prompted the humanitarian community to reorient and reinforce the use of different communication vectors for their advocacy purposes.

This discussion will initially analyze the contextual background that has influenced the development of the advocacy and fostered its deviations towards its political interpretation and public denunciation approach. In this regard the discussion will focus the attention, on

the one hand, on the evolution of the humanitarianism and its progression towards the politicization and militarization of the humanitarian action and, on the other, on the proliferation of the humanitarian agencies and the expansion of their role, responsibilities and activities. The paper will then proceed by delineating the contours of the advocacy, the humanitarian advocacy as well as the public humanitarian advocacy together with its objectives, approaches and global/local aims before turning to the analysis of the two cruxes. The first is that, in recent years, 'advocacy' has assumed the contours of a 'good word gone bad' when employed within the framework of public initiatives aimed at advocating on humanitarian issues and concerns stemming from conflict-related emergencies. The reasons and the challenges for this deviation will be analyzed and the contributions of senior officers working at the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) collected through semi-structured interviews will help assessing the arguments and the findings. Two examples of public humanitarian advocacy more in line with both the advocacy's original meaning and the humanitarian focus will be briefly explored to demonstrate that this approach is feasible and that the deviations of the advocacy towards its political interpretation and public denunciation approach are the results of both the evolution of the humanitarianism and the past misuse of the advocacy function by some humanitarian actors. The second crux is that the extended exploitation of the media to channel public advocacy initiatives has produced a symbiotic agencies-media relationship that produced an increasing reliance, if not a certain subordination of the former to the latter, and engendered challenges, limits and counterproductive results. The analysis of the reliance and the drawbacks will aim at verifying if they have contributed in prompting many agencies to explore the use of different communication vectors. Celebrities and the Internet are two alternative vectors whose exploitation by humanitarian agencies has largely increased in recent years but the discussion will conclude limiting the analysis to the use, effectiveness and challenges linked to the exploitation of the 'celebrity advocacy'. The contributions from the ICRC's senior officers will help assessing the validity of the posited arguments and the effectiveness and efficiency of the use of celebrities.

2. Literature review

The main challenge of this research has been the extremely scant direct literature looking at the communication function of the humanitarian organizations operating in conflict-induced emergencies, in general, and the almost non-existent research on their public humanitarian advocacy. Despite being among the key players involved in conflict-related environments the researches have mainly focused on the communication activities of three other main actors: governments, military and media. The analysis on the propaganda of the first and the studies on the psychological operations of the second abound (among others Ellul 1965; Qualter 1962; Taylor 1997). There is also a considerable up-to-date literature dealing with the general issues of the influence and implications that the globalization and the market-driven media environment have had on media's activities in covering humanitarian crises (among others Thussu 2006; Thussu and Freedman 2003) or looking at the media's role as observers, catalysts or participants in conflict and international crises or analyzing the so-called CNN effect (among others Allen and Seaton 1999; Carruthers 2000; Husdon and Stainer 1997; Ignatieff 1998, Moeller 1999; Robinson 2002; Perry 1991; Taylor 1997). Conversely, the communication activities of humanitarian organizations operating in such environment have largely remained under researched. The available resources focusing on this player confine their analysis to charting the history, development and structure of the main humanitarian actors. Other focus their attention on the evolution of the humanitarianism (among others Hoffmann and Weiss 2006; Lillich 1967; Tomasevski 1989 and 1994; Weiss and Campbell 1991). Some other shed a light on the agencies coordination and humanitarian practices, on the political analysis of their humanitarian response and on the moral and ethical aspects of the humanitarian action (among others Macrae et al 1994; Minear and Weiss 1993; Prendergast 1997; Slim 1994 and 1997). Furthermore, much of the recent studies focus on the networking and social activism of the variegated constellation of players categorized under the general label of 'non-state actors' among which agencies responding to large-scale humanitarian crises and the organizations operating in conflict-induced emergencies are commonly located. In other words, much of the obtainable literature touches on aspects relevant to the intended field of research but the core issue, the analysis of both the public humanitarian advocacy and the vectors used for its channeling, are largely unaccounted for or only tangentially explored and indirectly addressed. The reading of this general literature has therefore provided this study with a contextual background and guided further specific exploration within the available online documentation from the humanitarian organizations operating in conflict-related environments (among others ICRC, MSF, OCHA, OXFAM, UN). Yet, the majority of this material tends to focus on lesson learned or on the analysis of their public communication in specific contexts and only occasionally to directly explore their public humanitarian advocacy. Other sources have been the specialized agencies such as for instance the Humanitarian Policy Group, Geneva Humanitarian Forum, Humanitarian practice network, to cite only a few, and various authors who have broadly explored the subject from different perspectives. Together with the author's professional experience as communication officer for the ICRC, the reading has suggested the hypothesis of the discussion and shaped the questioning of the field research for the validations of the

arguments and the assessment of the findings. The analysis offered here on the public humanitarian advocacy is therefore necessarily tentative and by no means exhaustive.

The analysis of the celebrity advocacy presented the same challenges stemming from the paucity of the literature. Some aspects are relatively well documented. Literature ranges from the analysis of the ‘celebrity culture’ (Evans 2005) to the sociological and cultural analysis of this phenomenon (Boorstin 1971; Cashmore 2006; Roiek 2001; Turner 2004); or from the examination of the process of ‘celebritization’ (Gabler 2001) to the celebrities’ role as a ‘commodity’ in today’s society (Evans 2005; Pringle, 2004; Turner, 2004) and from the exploration of the relation of celebrities with power (Marshall 1997) or the politics (West and Orman 2003). Only one recent book titled ‘Celebrity Diplomacy’ (Cooper 2008) explores the role of the celebrities in endorsing humanitarian causes and the use by the United Nations of their goodwill ambassadors program. Other sources on this subject have been the websites of the various organizations exploiting this vector (among others UNICEF, UNCHR, WFP), the assessment on the goodwill ambassadors program by the United Nations Joint Inspection Unit in 2006 (UNJIU) and numerous online articles reporting or analyzing the celebrity advocacy.

3. Methodology

The author's professional experience as communication officer for the ICRC has greatly influenced the course and direction of this study. Along the years, the exchanges with several colleagues, the discussions with various interlocutors within the humanitarian community but also the numerous conversations with 'people in the street' revealed to the author that the main issue repeatedly turned around the tensions associated to the definition and application of the concept of advocacy within the conflict-related humanitarianism. The author's interest in the gap between the original meaning of advocacy and its 'deviated' interpretation within the conflict-related humanitarianism has engendered the general 'why' question and pushed the author to look for some answers. Having personally experienced the challenges stemming from the humanitarians-media relationship and having participated to the discussions concerning the increasing opportunities offered by the ICTs, the author has developed a curiosity about the reasons for the increased use by humanitarian agencies of alternative vectors to channel their public humanitarian advocacy. Having a better understanding of the causes behind the tensions associated to the word advocacy within the conflict-related humanitarianism and the reasons behind the increased use of alternative vectors to channel the humanitarian advocacy, and more specifically of celebrities, have become the two cruxes of the present investigation.

The professional link was not the only reason for selecting the ICRC for the field research. The ICRC is the oldest humanitarian organization intervening in conflict-induced emergencies and has a specific position about advocacy. Furthermore, especially during the last decade, it has developed several cutting-edged public communication initiatives and a public communication policy. Finally, over the same period, the relevance of the communication function has consistently increased to the point to be currently integrated in the 'Directorate' of the organization and in its operational strategy (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008. interview July 2008). The extended internal thinking about public communication is therefore unquestionable and its relevance to the present study obvious. Another reason lies in the ICRC's public communication approach considered discreet and "nuanced" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008), internally, but seen as very conservative within the humanitarian community. Besides gathering contributions from an authoritative source, the idea to turn to the ICRC was also to avoid relying on data from outspoken humanitarian actors or from agencies extensively using public communication initiatives, assumed by the author to lack objectivity and criticality, and to buttress the research with an alternative and balanced perspective.

The field research has been carried out using semi-structured interviews with six ICRC senior officers out of the eight scheduled while informal exchanges with three other colleagues have inspired further research and analysis. In organizing the interviews, particular emphasis was put on the relevance of interviewing the personnel involved in different aspects of the public communication function but also the importance of exchanging with operational officers in order to have a different and 'detached' perspective on advocacy and on the public

communication. Although the sample interviewed is small, the findings allowed to verify the arguments posited and to assess the findings emerged from the reading. Interviews were carried out face-to-face in Switzerland at the beginning of July 2008. They lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. They were recorded, and transcripts produced. They were guided by written questionnaires with one section common to all interviewees and a second section adapted to suit each informant's expertise in order to enable the interviewer to identify common features but also to tackle the different aspects of the research. The questions were left deliberately broad and this facilitated a wide dialogue to develop. Dependent on their working experience, each interviewee made specific reference to certain humanitarian crises. Yet, the concrete examples made on the crisis in Darfur and the peculiarities of the public advocacy approach of the humanitarian community allowed the author to verify and contextualize the limited data available on advocacy that tend to focus on this specific humanitarian context.

It is outside of the scope of this study to provide recommendations. Therefore, the few comments included should be interpreted as the author's reflections in the ongoing debate within the humanitarian community.

Should any of the contribution from the ICRC senior officers be not perfectly in line with ICRC official position, the discrepancies are to be considered as a misinterpretation of the data by the author who assumes the entire responsibility.

4. Discussion

4.1 Contextual background

4.1.1 Humanitarianism

Today, the term humanitarianism is largely used to refer to the policy, philosophy and practices behind the response to humanitarian crises sometime without much distinction between their man-made and natural origins. This discussion will refer to the former kind of crises and will specifically focus the attention on conflict-related humanitarianism. Within this field the evolution of its meaning, especially during the 1990s, has fostered severe critics about a humanitarianism seen to be in crisis (Rieff 2002) and fuelled debates about the emergence of a new and plural forms of humanitarianism (Hoffmann and Weiss 2006:81). But the transformations in the landscape of humanitarianism since then have impacted on the humanitarian policy, the humanitarian community and the humanitarian action and have led towards new policies of intervention, the emergence of new actors and the expansion of their activities. The premise of the present discussion is that these transformations have strongly impacted on the development of the advocacy initiatives and the evolution of its concept.

4.1.2 Evolution of humanitarianism

Since the post World War II period, the intertwined principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of sovereign states, recognized on an equal basis to all United Nations members (United Nations Charter Article 2.1), have represented a controversial aspect in the implementation of the humanitarian action. When large threatening and abuses of fundamental human rights in a country involved nationals of another state, this state could seek redress through the humanitarian intervention which basically referred to a forcible military intervention. Conversely, this forcible option was considered not viable (Lillich 1967:326-334) and technically illegal, as it implied a violation of the principle of non-intervention (Roberts 1996:19), when its use was aimed at halting abuses involving only nationals of the offending state or nationals of a third state. The lack in the United Nations Charter of any enforcement provisions to guarantee the observance of the fundamental human rights that it promotes and encourages (UNC Articles 1.3, 55 and 56), *de facto*, hampered the international humanitarian intervention in most of the conflict-related crises on the UN agenda in the aftermath of World War II. With the time the limits related to the principles of sovereignty started to impact also the humanitarian action as in the name of its defense some governments started to interfere with the work of external humanitarian agencies. The concerns for the respect of the human dignity and the frustration for the limited possibilities of intervention fostered the international community to develop new mechanisms capable of overcoming this impasse and of better responding to the multiplication of the humanitarian crises.

The *'droit d'ingérence'* (the right to interfere and/or intervene) emerged during the Biafra war as new operational principle capable of giving the humanitarian community a new and necessary framework for accessing suffering people. Originated from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), this operational concept based its legitimacy on the “rights-based universalism” (Rieff 2002:311) and posited that the international community could no longer accept the option that, in the name of sovereignty, a government could prevent, obstruct or interfere with the delivery of humanitarian assistance to its population. In the eyes of the proponents, frontiers had to be disregarded as the prime responsibility was to the suffering of the people anywhere whose rights represented a legitimate concern for people everywhere (Tomasevski 1994:80). The *'droit d'ingérence'* marked the beginning of the transformation of conflict-related humanitarianism. On the one hand, in the name of efficiency it affirmed the right of access *'to'* victims for the providers of aid but largely disregarded the rights *'of'* victims to access humanitarian assistance (Tomasevski 1994:86). On the other, it introduced two crucial and interlinked consequences. Firstly, by challenging the sovereignty principle, it exposed the humanitarian aid to the risk of politicization (Tomasevski 1994:86). The imposition of the right to intervene within a conflict could translate the humanitarian action into, in the wording of IHL¹, “an unfriendly act of interference in the conflict itself” (Miner and Weiss 1993:25) and therefore become part of the same conflict making “humanitarianism (...) irrevocably politicized” (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1996:104). Secondly, the politicization of the humanitarian action challenged the bedrock humanitarian principle of *'neutrality'*² largely considered a milestone of the humanitarian initiatives in conflict-related crises as it both creates the necessary apolitical space needed to legitimize the humanitarian action and presents it in a way that is both “ethically justifiable and politically possible” (Leader 2000:5). The implementation of the humanitarian assistance guided by the *'droit d'ingérence'* encountered growing challenges toward the end of the Cold War period when the realities of conflicts were increasingly shifting from interstates to intrastate (Taylor 1997:196). When sometimes in internal conflicts the suffering of the populations represented a war objective, this kind of action could be interpreted as politically biased with obvious consequences for the credibility and neutrality of the implementing agencies as well as for the security of their field personnel.

The 1990s saw the enchainment of the emergencies defined *'complex'* because “distinguished by multiple and simultaneous factors” (Slim and Penrose 1994:194) and because required multiple and complex responses at once. Most of them were linked to conflicts associated with non-conventional warfare and frequently developed in violent and volatile contexts characterized by the so-called failed states, if not their absence, and by an increased insecurity for the humanitarian interveners. The globalization started to make

¹ Applied exclusively during the time of conflict, international humanitarian law (IHL) aims at reducing the direct consequences of the conflicts by, on the one hand, limiting the means and regulating the method of warfare of warring parties and, on the other, protecting the people not taking direct part in the fighting.

² Principle of neutrality succinctly posits that the prime duty of humanitarian interveners is to avoid taking side in conflicts by embracing the political ideology or fostering the political agenda of one warring party or making any public statement that could be interpreted as being partisan. In other words, it requires humanitarian agencies to remain equidistant from all warring parties and be guided by the only objective to respond to human suffering of affected people who have not only the need but also the right to the humanitarian assistance.

globally known the large-scale human sufferings but it also reinforced the trend towards the “McDonaldization of human rights” (Volker 2004:23). This shifted the discussions from the legitimacy of the humanitarian intervention and of the principle of sovereignty to the need to create an international mechanism capable of producing new solutions to respond to the large-scale suffering within states but also to the increasing fears linked to the global and regional insecurity. The United Nations, with its reinforced moral authority emerged within the ‘new world order’, seemed to possess the necessary competences. It also showed the ambition to tackle the complex emergencies in a coordinated manner by assuming a simultaneous military, political and humanitarian role (Roberts 1996:11). The possibility to deploy peace-enforcement units to secure the ‘humanitarian space’ and the ‘Agenda for Peace’, stating the reciprocally supportive character of the humanitarian assistance and the peacekeeping operations (UN 1992: Section V Preamble), emerged as the new framework for humanitarian interventions. These were made viable by an unprecedented freedom to act in international humanitarian emergencies via the Security Council (Slim and Penrose 1994:206-7) no longer powerless by the non-intervention norms and paralyzed by vetoes. The interventionist approach became more visible, on the one hand, through the substitution of UN Charter article 2(7) for 2(4) in UN missions and the adoption of new forcible resolutions and, on the other, through the involvement of relief agencies under UN coordination and the widening of their humanitarian activities and approaches (Damrosh and Scheffer 1991:215). Yet, if on the one hand the forcible resolutions illustrated the new international consensus on the legitimacy to enforce minimum humanitarian standards within the states (Chopra and Weiss 1992; Garigue 1993), on the other, it brought humanitarian action to the fore of international politics (Roberts 1996:15). Furthermore, the creation of the ‘safe heavens’ pushed the concept of ‘military humanitarianism’ into the public domain (Weiss and Campbell 1991:451-65) marking the militarization trend of the humanitarian action. Finally, the new humanitarian approach under the UN umbrella was tarnished by the lack of a coherent and transparent international and long-term policy framework addressing the root causes of the post-Cold War crises. This stemmed mainly from the UN incapacity to set clear objectives often formulated through *ad hoc* resolutions weakening the international community mandate to intervene (Macrae and Zwi 1994:26; Duffield et al 1994:228).

The new millennium saw the humanitarian action irremediably perceived with politicized and militarized contours and with a human rights orientation. When in 2001 Colin Powell declared that the NGOs were “force multiplier (...) [and] an important part of our combat team” (Powell quoted in Burnett 2004) in the operational area the humanitarian actors definitively became the ambassadors of the Western policy and the troops of the Western army. Furthermore, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine that was gaining currency in international humanitarian debate fostered the idea of a duty of the international community to launch “human rights protection operations” (Rieff 2002:268) whenever the sovereign states were no longer able to protect their own citizens from avoidable catastrophes.

4.1.3 Evolution of the humanitarian community

The agencies responding to conflict-related humanitarian crises have generally been considered crucial players hinging between the crises and the relief, the haves and have-nots, the North and the South, the peace and the war. They are seen as a sort of “missing link” (Omole and Ajibade 2005:49) allowing the civil society at a global level to intervene and alleviate the human suffering at local level. An aerial view of the landscape of conflict-induced crises would reveal a variety of humanitarian interveners that for the purposes of this discussion will also be termed humanitarian organizations, humanitarian actors and humanitarian agencies in an interchangeable way. An analysis of the agencies’ differences in terms of legal status, mandate and operational expertise would fall beyond the interest of this discussion which will focus only on their differences based on their humanitarianism philosophy. Classified as either ‘Dunantist’ or ‘Wilsonian’³, humanitarian organizations belonging to the former are seen to insist on the neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian action kept away from any political involvement and interference while those belonging to the latter are seen to have a wider approach that aims at eliminating the root causes of the humanitarian suffering by attacking the responsible structures (Barnett 2005:728). In the paradigm of prevention, mitigation and resolution of conflicts the former would limit the focus on the mitigation component of the paradigm while the activities of the latter would slip into the prevention and resolution components.

Especially during the 1990s, an increasing number of humanitarian agencies started to shift from the ‘Dunantist’ to the ‘Wilsonian’ philosophy and therefore to expand their role no longer focusing on the traditional task of providing assistance relief but also aimed at tackling the political roots causes of the crises (Barnett 2005:724). Furthermore, when the implementation of the ‘*droit d’ingérence*’ was hampered or the humanitarian actions in volatile, insecure and lawless areas jeopardized, several mainline agencies “turned to what they called advocacy, that is, lobbying governments and the UN for funds, but also for political commitments and, as the decade progressed, military action” (Rieff 2002:26). Their appeals for these commitments and actions were seen by the local authorities as interference to their sovereignty and both reinforced the politicized and militarized perception of their action and weakened the credibility of their neutrality. This political interpretation multiplied agencies’ field challenges linked to their access to vulnerable populations and the security of their personnel. These difficulties were complicated further by the flourishing of the organizations founded mainly, if not specifically and solely, for human rights advocacy’s purpose that, generally speaking, privilege very aggressive public stands aimed at calling for interventions against rights-violating governments or at blaming state authorities for not acting appropriately. These controversial advocacy positions have often produced

³ Dunantist refers to Henry Dunant founder of the Red Cross Movement. Wilsonian refers to Woodrow Wilson’s who believed that it was possible and desirable both to transform political, economic, and cultural structures so that they liberated individuals and produced peace and progress and to attack the root causes that leave populations at risk. (Barnett 2005:728)

unwelcomed reactions from the local authorities. As, generally speaking, purely advocacy agencies do not implement field activities they were not exposed to the consequences of their strong stands. Conversely, because of the mix of the humanitarian actors in the eyes of people in power at field level the aid workers of operational agencies started to be increasingly targeted.

To the multiplication of the humanitarian emergencies, the international community responded with the creation of new humanitarian agencies, the enlargement of their tasks and the reinforcement of their role and responsibilities. These evolutions occurred mainly during the 1960s and the 1980s. During the 1960s, the humanitarian assistance channeled through government-government aid programs started to be considered both insufficient and ideologically biased because framed within the Cold War logic (Tomasevski 1994:60). This factor, coupled with the progressive disengagement of Western governments from the crises in less developed countries, opened the way to the option of increasingly channel the humanitarian aid through private voluntary association. Through the lenses of the neoliberalism wind and the ideology of privatization of the 1980s, the disappointing results achieved through the third World actions and the involvement of the state in development programs started to be considered no longer acceptable. In line with the suspension of bilateral development aid or the decline of its financial support, humanitarian agencies became “major players” (Duffield et al 1994:226) in the implementation of humanitarian assistance. Besides being seen more reliable than some recipient governments’ agencies and more responsive to the Third World communities’ needs, these new actors offered to Western countries the possibility to avoid the channeling of the aid through the Southern states (Borton and Shoham 1989; Duffield 1994:58). Furthermore, in the case of intrastate conflicts, they allowed to circumvent the official recognition of insurgent groups eventually implied by a direct involvement of a western government in the humanitarian action (Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1996:153). With the proliferation of the agencies, the response to humanitarian emergencies assumed the external contours of a ‘global enterprise’. Yet, it also developed internal divergent pressure and forces. The centripetal pressure to reach field coordination was weakened by the atomization of the agencies with often overlapping mandates, duplications of intervention and incoherence. The centrifugal forces related to the rivalry within the humanitarian community pushed many agencies to both exploit their links with governments and but also to compete to occupy the ‘mediascape’ for their promotion, visibility and funding goals.

4.2 Advocacy and humanitarian advocacy

It is largely accepted that advocacy, in its general meaning of a mix of persuasive communication and targeted actions aiming at ‘pleading the cause of’, ‘acting on behalf of’ and ‘speaking out for or in support of others’, is designed to change policies, positions and actions on a specific issue or cause on behalf of the voiceless. Its characteristics have been summarized in three elements: protect vulnerable people, give them a stronger voice and promote their rights (Barnes quoted in Rai-Atkins 2002:5). In this respect, the concept of

advocacy is at the heart of operational humanitarian organizations intervening in today's conflict-related crises that besides their relief logistical exercise also attempt to give voice to unheard suffering people and to plead their cause by shaping the context conducive to appropriate political, economic and humanitarian responses to their unmet needs. The concept is also not a novelty within the conflict-related humanitarianism. It is largely recognized that the establishment of the oldest humanitarian actor responding to conflict related emergencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as the original First Geneva Convention of 1864, were both the result of its promoter, Henry Dunant's public advocacy (Meyer 1996). Although nowadays advocacy is considered a critical component of the international response to complex emergencies (Prendergast 1997:145) and listed among the core organizational competencies of many agencies, it seems that its contours remain quite blurred. Researches would confirm that apart from notable exceptions advocacy was not included in the original mandate of many operational humanitarian organizations. Especially over the last decades, the majority of them have broadened their initial scope of activities in order to include advocacy and, in some cases, this has in turn influenced a re-conceptualization of the organizations' mandate (Lindenberg and Bryant 2001:180-1). Researches would also reveal that the definition, the approach and the extent of the involvement in the advocacy initiatives vary in each organization making very difficult to establish communitywide guidelines.

4.2.1 Humanitarian advocacy: objectives and its private and public approaches

In the available documentation of major humanitarian agencies operating in conflict-related environment some commonalities can be found in the terms of formulation of advocacy's general objectives, strategies, tactics and type of activities to implement it. General advocacy's objectives would aim, among others, at influencing the awareness on humanitarian issues and agencies' work of international decision-makers and general public and at reshaping the perception on humanitarian concerns and agencies' action of key players operating in the crisis environments and having a weight on the plight of affected populations in order to elicit changes in their general opinion, attitudes and behaviors. These objectives clearly show that the reach of the advocacy is simultaneously at global and local levels. Some of the humanitarian agencies would also include within these general objectives the mobilization of the necessary financial support to implement their actions.

Humanitarian agencies seem to have usually addressed complex and sensitive issues related to conflict-induced emergencies through behind-the-scene initiatives more conform to the discreet and bilateral practices of the humanitarian diplomacy⁴, largely considered to be the most effective route to impact the future of the humanitarian issues and concerns. The

⁴ Minear and Smith define humanitarian diplomacy a "small D" diplomacy because of its being more "improvisational and ad hoc", because it "does not regard sovereignty with the deference of traditional diplomats" and because humanitarian diplomats have very limited range of compromise in their negotiations whose agenda is set by the humanitarian principles and humanitarian law. "Humanitarian negotiations have a greater chance of success if it is clear to all parties that there are things that are not negotiable" (Minear and Smith 2007:7-31).

privileged position as ‘major players’ gained during the 1960s and 1980s, offered to the humanitarian agencies excellent occasions to openly influence the debates about the policy addressing the root causes of the crises. But they also provided direct opportunities to actively carve a niche for themselves at the table of the discreet and private advocacy about conflict-related humanitarian issues and concerns.

When deemed necessary to the interest of humanitarian goals, the organizations have also been ready to use other visible advocacy initiatives with a clear public communication orientation. The role of the public humanitarian advocacy initiatives is aimed at influencing or shifting targeted audiences’ opinion and at mobilizing their support in order to put an indirect pressure on key leaders and decision-makers. The ability of the public opinion to provoke an eventual reaction of politicians is based on the “salience hypothesis” (Burnstein 1999:16) positing that when there is a discrepancy between the public preferences and the policy framework targeted advocacy activities, aimed at increasing an issue’s salience in the public minds, can have a strong impact on politicians (Mchale 2004:6). The indirect role that the pressure from grassroots public can play has gained an increased relevance especially with the development of the cross-boundaries broadcasting services that, coupled with the advancements in the ICTs, have both shrunk the world into a ‘global village’ (McLuhan, 1996:63) and given to this pressure a global dimension. At global level, the public humanitarian advocacy initiatives seem to show few main specific objectives. The first is to raise the profile of a specific crisis or to frame in the public minds a specific humanitarian issue at stake in order to create an international environment characterized by large support and mobilization of multiple constituencies on such issues conducive to appropriate political, economic and humanitarian responses or actions. The second is to reshape the awareness on the roots cause of the humanitarian outcomes of key political actors at international level in order to influence their policy formulation or policy implementation. The third is to sensitize the international decision-makers about the plight of affected population in order to ensure that their humanitarian needs receive appropriate attention and resources. The fourth is to put an indirect pressure on reluctant key leadership and shake them from inaction. At local level, these public initiatives aim at shaping the perception of the local key players involved in the environment of conflict-related crises, such as for instance the people in power or the arms carriers, in order to sensitize them on the hardship for the crises-affected populations and the need to ensure their humanitarian assistance and protection. They also aim at responding to the central imperatives governing the humanitarian action notably the guarantees for unhampered accesses to vulnerable populations and the security of the humanitarian staff in the field.

Both private and public approaches have become fundamental components of a broad set of strategies nowadays put in place by humanitarian organizations for their humanitarian advocacy purposes and in order to maximize the impact they are largely used in tandem. An analysis of the more discrete and confidential practices of the humanitarian diplomacy would fall within the international relations or international politics domains and therefore beyond the remit of this dissertation that will proceed limiting its attention to the public humanitarian advocacy and focusing its analysis on the two cruxes posited above. The first is that advocacy

has become a ‘good word gone bad’ but that public advocacy initiatives more in line with its original meaning are possible. The second is that the drawbacks of the increasingly symbiotic humanitarians–media relationship have fostered the former to explore the use of vectors alternative to the latter.

4.3 Public humanitarian advocacy

4.3.1 In conflict-related humanitarianism advocacy has become a ‘good word gone bad’: three main factors

The argument of the present discussion is that in recent years, when used within the conflict-related humanitarianism, advocacy seems to have lost its original and positive connotations and to have assumed negative significances transforming advocacy into a ‘good word gone bad’. Nowadays, especially in its public form, advocacy seems to be largely interpreted in political terms and increasingly associated both with the ‘speaking out’ approach aimed at publicly denouncing rights-violating governments and with initiatives aiming at pure visibility goals.

From the contextual background examined above, two main factors seem to have largely contributed to this shift. Firstly, being increasingly involved in intrastate conflicts-related crises characterized by their volatile, insecure and lawlessness nature, humanitarian agencies started to face serious challenges in the implementation of their actions. When their advocacy initiatives on the plight of the suffering population did not produce any visible results or when in extreme situations their access to needy populations was being hampered and the security of its workers threatened, main relief agencies started to openly deplore the restrictions to their actions and to advocate Western governments and the UN for more political commitments and military protection (Barnett 2005:727; Rieff 2002:26). The positive answers to these appeals often put the humanitarian organizations in the embarrassing and controversial situation to implement their humanitarian programs next to the military forces present in the same area in order to enforce peace or to guarantee the security of the humanitarian space under an international political resolution. Furthermore, helping and condemning at the same time in the same country blurred the image of the humanitarian actors shadowing the humanitarian character of their actions and highlight the political nature of their advocacy. With the time, the extended use of public advocacy initiatives centered on the blaming of governments hampering the humanitarian action and on the right of access to victims for the humanitarian community rather than on the humanitarian issues and concerns or on the plight of suffering people and their right to access humanitarian assistance contributed in making advocacy increasingly “difficult (...) not to be judged as deeply politicized” (ODI 2007 October).

Secondly, being growingly frustrated with the acknowledgement that the problem of complex crises had political contours, many humanitarians started to give credit to the position of former UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who declared that “there are no

humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems” (Sadako Ogata quoted in Rieff 2002:22). Yet, the lack of both a coherent international and long-term humanitarian policy framework addressing the root causes of the post-Cold War crises coupled with the agencies’ reinforced tasks and responsibilities seem to have prompted many humanitarians towards more individual interventions enabling them to overcome the limits of their ‘Dunantist’ approach that was only producing increasing dissatisfaction and “well-fed dead” (Barnett 2005:728). The spreading of the ‘rights-based universalism’ paved the way towards advocacy initiatives increasingly framed in terms of condemnation of human rights violations (OCHA 2007). Furthermore, in using such angle many agencies privileged the ‘speaking out’ approach aimed at attracting the media’s attention or pushed for different highly mediatized forms of aggressive advocacy sometimes overestimating the assumption that in today’s media-driven environment “exposing the parties to the conflict to the judgment of the public is the best way to exert positive pressure” (Minear and Smith 2007:104). To these strong condemnation stands, local authorities have often reacted by framing the humanitarian initiatives within the political terms of interference in their sovereignty or, in failed states environments, in terms of interference in affairs of a territory under the control of one of the parties to the conflict and by interpreting the human rights based advocacy as a further articulation of the Western imperialism. One among other citable examples, is the attack of the Sudanese President calling the humanitarian agencies operating in Darfur “the real enemies of Sudan” (Reeves 2008) when the public advocacy of some of them shifted from its emphasis on issues concerning the humanitarian context, assistance and funding needs to issues relating to insecurity, demands for international action and human rights violations (HGP 2007:2).

Another reason that seems to have contributed in transforming advocacy into a ‘good word gone bad’, concerns the increased exploitation of the television to channel public advocacy initiatives. Dragged by media’s practices to focus on the latest ‘bad news’, what frequently appeared on the television screen were the agencies initiatives advocating the plight and the rights of suffering populations of the sudden-onset complex emergencies while the humanitarian and financial needs of other chronic crises experienced more difficulties in receiving attention. Furthermore, the increasing competitiveness of the crowded relief market coupled with the mass visibility offered by cross-border media sometimes produced perverse results linked to the rivalry to occupy the ‘mediascape’. In the available literature on the humanitarian action, examples of agencies attracting the media’s attention by “citing the highest numbers of victims” (Minear and al 1996:67) or privileging the implementation of photogenic activities rather than the needed interventions or concentrating their programs in zones more covered by television while ignoring other areas off the media light (Mohamed Sacirbey quoted in Gowing 1994:11) are not rare. Besides casting serious doubts about the professionalism and accountability of humanitarian interveners, this fostered the perception that the use of this medium by some humanitarian agencies was primarily visibility-driven and that advocacy initiatives channeled through it, in reality, aimed at raising money for the latest emergency, promoting agencies’ work and satisfying donors’ need to know that their money was being effectively spent rather than pleading the cause of the vulnerable. In this sense Pupavac’s argues that “the contemporary preference for advocacy is not unrelated to the narcissistic cult of publicity (...) [and that] the distinction between doing good and being

seen to be doing good is getting lost in high-profile contemporary campaigning, which seems too often focused on appearances” (Pupavac 2006:266).

4.3.2 The verification of the premise and the first argument through the field research

Although not completely sharing the argument advanced by this discussion that advocacy is a ‘good word gone bad’, the contributions from the ICRC’s senior officers seem to go in the same direction. Rather than gone bad, advocacy is seen to have a “very limited interpretation” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). ICRC’s officers seem to share the view that people link advocacy with the work of human rights organizations and, because an increased number of them conceive advocacy as just denouncing, with the denunciation approach (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008. July 2008; ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008 July 2008). The Senior Officer of the Communication Division adds that the problem is not the notion of advocacy but the evolution of the notion of humanitarian that has had an impact on the meaning of advocacy. Besides the fact that the many humanitarian actors behave in totally different ways, he reminds that especially during 1990s the word ‘humanitarian’ often preceded war, bombing and intervention (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008. July 2008). From the interviews it emerges the confirmation of the association of humanitarian with the right to intervene, the military intervention and the Western agenda and that this connection engendered the consequent correlation of the humanitarian advocacy, especially in its denouncing form, with the Western values, Western leadership and cultural imperialism (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008; ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). The premise of this discussion, advancing that the transformations of the humanitarianism and of the humanitarian community have impacted on the evolution of the advocacy concept, finds a confirmation in the field analysis when the Senior Officer of the Communication Division underlines that the blurring of the line between humanitarian action and military intervention and the evolution of the humanitarianism have produced “an impact on advocacy and a negative impact, clearly” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008).

The argument that advocacy is a ‘good word gone bad’ in today’s conflict-related humanitarian environment seems to find an indirect corroboration in the fact that the ICRC does not use the word ‘advocacy’ in its current literature despite the implementation of initiatives that would be usually classified within the advocacy framework. “For us clearly if you take perhaps the more old-fashioned meaning of the word advocacy I think it does apply. Advocacy really is more linked to raising attention and provoking action and stimulating action on a particular problem” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). But when the ICRC implement both private and public activities aimed at persuading those “who have an influence direct or indirect on the fate of

war victims and (...) [those] who can oppose or facilitate the ICRC action” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008) what it does is to plead the cause of these vulnerable people on their behalf with the ‘powerful’ actors. But the ICRC prefers using a different wording to define and describe these activities. From the interviews clearly emerges that the ICRC is “not referring to humanitarian advocacy because we are not an advocacy organization” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008) and because its connotation is something the organization does not “want to be connected with” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008). “We don’t want to be, because of a heading, being put on a side of organizations which are denouncing and using (...) denunciation as their main way to operate” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008). In the ICRC, “we are talking about communication and communication is by all means to serve the purpose of the organization which is to assist and protect victims of conflict. (...) But we do not call it and we do not consider it as humanitarian advocacy” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Adding that the ICRC uses both humanitarian diplomacy and public communication, which “both have precisely the same objective” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008) the Senior Officer of the Operations Division stresses that the public communication “it’s not exclusively to position the ICRC in the public scene nor on the public place but it is really first and foremost as part of an overall strategy to improve assistance and protection of victims of conflict” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Besides supporting the humanitarian action, this approach aims at giving the organization’s own reading of the humanitarian situation, at focusing on the human cost of the suffering people and at explaining the organization’s response. But, above all, it is an approach aimed at talking about the people and putting the people at the centre (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008).

4.3.3 Conceptual and theoretical perspective

From the conceptual perspective, it seems that the deviations towards advocacy initiatives structured in political and public denunciation terms occur when the circle of the advocacy process is interrupted. This process sees, in theory, agencies using public advocacy initiatives in order to frame in the public minds a specific humanitarian issue at stake or raise public awareness about a humanitarian concern. This public advocacy is assumed to influence the opinion of large constituencies whose mobilization is assumed to put an indirect pressure on decision-makers engendering their appropriate responses and actions affecting the humanitarian issues and concerns. Yet, from a more realistic angle, the circle of such process is not always closed either because the advocacy does not succeed in mobilizing the constituencies or because the decision-makers do not feel the pressure of a successful mobilization. Observations of past examples would reveal that in the former scenario some agencies have often entered into a spiral of public advocacy actions and kept on using different strategies and initiatives in the attempt of mobilizing the general public. But when

the insistence on advocacy was not producing any visible results, its initiatives became an end in itself rather than a means to achieve advocacy's objectives and turned into activities 'just for the sake of doing advocacy' or with strictly fundraising and visibility goals⁵. Conversely, in the latter scenario some humanitarians have often shown the penchant to increase the tone of their communication or to reorient their strategy of putting pressure on decision-makers by using direct attacks to governments and their responsibilities or calling for external political and military interventions. The problem that has emerged in recent years is that an increasing number of operational humanitarian agencies have resorted to the latter aggressive public advocacy, not only, as an option or when the circle did not close but, also, as a deliberate main public advocacy strategy expecting that this choice would facilitate or hasten their humanitarian response to the emergency. Referring to Darfur, the Senior Officer of the Operations Division confirms the grown number of agencies making advocacy their first and foremost tool and purpose and the increased use of aggressive approaches (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). But in doing so, operational humanitarian organizations blurred their differences from the mushrooming purely advocacy agencies. For the people in the field they became "all the same" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008) and the extended use of such controversial advocacy by some fostered the perception equating 'all' public humanitarian advocacy to political and public denunciation actions transforming 'advocacy' into a 'good word gone bad'.

Conner's "strategy and stance advocacy framework" (Conner 2005) seems to provide a theoretical structure through which these different approaches can be interpreted. Referring to advocacy in its general terms, Conner argues that the 'strategies' that can be used to "cause the target [of advocacy] to change (...) can be arrayed along a continuum from 'push' to 'pull' where push strategies are coercive and pull strategies are invitational" (Conner 2005:7-8). Conversely, the 'stance', which is the attitude or frame of mind through which an advocacy person/agency "relates to the target (...) [of advocacy], fall[s] on a continuum between friend and foe" (Conner 2005:7-8). The combination of these strategies and stances produces four broad styles into which advocacy initiatives can be categorized. Limiting the application of this framework to the focus of this chapter it can be said that the 'pull-friend' combination seems to be typical of advocacy initiatives producing the expected results and therefore typical of a closed circle of the advocacy process. Conversely, the direct attack on decision makers and their responsibilities would fall into 'push-foe' box characterized by the strategy of delegitimizing the other and the attitude of considering the other through negative lenses if not an enemy. Conner adds that when falling within this last combination both sides enter what he calls the "advocacy trap" (Conner 2005:10) in which each side feels justified to continue using 'push-foe' tactics and to blame the other's behavior. Conner sees two risks connected to this approach. The first, that both sides enter what he calls the "circle of blame" (Conner 2005:13) that intertwined with the advocacy trap might distort advocacy person/agency from "fulfilling the calling that drew them into public advocacy in the first

⁵ I owe this insight and the stimulus to further research to the Senior Officer of the Internal Communication Office at the ICRC headquarters in Geneva, informally met in July 2008.

place” (Conner 2005:15). The second, that both sides become “locked in [a] ritual combat” (Conner 2005:10) in which they continue to use push strategies from a foe stance long after it is evident that they can no longer achieve their advocacy objectives (Conner 2005:10).

4.3.4 Challenges and dilemmas of a public humanitarian advocacy structured in political and public denunciation terms

The multiplication of public advocacy initiatives structured in political and public denunciation terms pushed the humanitarian assistance, apolitical by mandate, to face the operational challenges stemming from being perceived as integrated into the realm of politics while the globalization started to extend the consequences of strong public advocacy positions across political and geographical boundaries. The public advocacy in Darfur is generally considered a success as it helped to raise the profile of a barely known crisis and pushed it onto the international agenda. Although within the humanitarian community this is not denied, some discordant positions emphasize that, beside the global attention on the plight of Darfur, strong advocacy actions by a cross-section of humanitarian agencies have not only triggered the rift between the humanitarian community and the Sudanese government but also created significant operational complications. The arrest of MSF’s senior official in May 2005 after the publication of a report about the problem of rape in Darfur is one illustration but examples of harassment, arrest or of a ‘*persona non grata*’ stamp on aid workers’ passport abound. In some occasions a strong public advocacy stand has also led to the dismissal of the humanitarian operation, as experienced by MSF and the ICRC expelled from Ethiopia in the 1980s, with serious humanitarian consequences stemming for the impossibility to provide further humanitarian assistance (Minear and Weiss 1993:67).

This and other incidents forced operational agencies to evaluate the impact, pressure and repercussions of their strong advocacy positions on the security of field staff and on ongoing and future field programs because their *raison d’être* lies in their possibility of accessing needy populations. The agencies that faced operational problems in Darfur started to adopt, in a later phase, a lower profile, if not a virtually silence, and apart from few exceptions agencies started to centre their advocacy on issues relating to humanitarian assistance (ODI 2007 October; Gidley 2007; HGP 2007:3) and to avoid further strong public positions that could complicate and restrict their actions or obliged them to dismiss their operations. These experienced challenges seem, in fact, to have raised within the operational organizations the dilemma to which extent an aggressive public advocacy is compatible with enacting programs. But when the effectiveness of the strong advocacy approach started to be questioned, the alternative of eschewing its use created a second dilemma as some operational agencies started to ponder whether through this option they were entirely fulfilling their responsibilities of trying to attack the roots causes of large scale suffering. “Agencies that do not seek to change government policies may have an easier time pursuing humanitarian aid activities (...) [but] they expose themselves to criticism for having applied a Band-aids to systemic problems” (Minear and Weiss 1993:67).

Today, there seems to be two tendencies. The first is to doubt that advocacy is critical to successful humanitarian actions. "The assumption that advocacy has a positive impact is by no means proven" (O'Callaghan quoted in Gidley 2007). The second is to reduce the above dilemmas to the oversimplified dichotomy 'speaking out' or 'remain silent' and to equate discretion with efficiency. But from the analysis above it seems clear, at least to the author, that the essence of the issue is not the validity or effectiveness of the public advocacy initiatives but rather the past misuse of this function and the vagueness of its objectives. "In the absence of greater clarity on objectives, advocacy may be more easily undertaken for non-humanitarian reasons, whether institutional visibility, fundraising, competition between organizations for media space or even rivalry between career advocates seeking to raise their profile" (HGP 2007:7). But with the time this loose path led the advocacy to become limitless in its range and turned it into a 'good word gone bad'. Humanitarian agencies do not walk on the tightrope of public advocacy between accusation and silence. There is a vast spectrum of stances available in-between. Among them the possibility to engage in public initiatives framed within strict humanitarian terms or based on the original advocacy's meanings of 'pleading the cause of' the unheard people in order to make their plight known, their rights respected and to engender the appropriate political economic and humanitarian responses to their needs. Two examples seem to confirm the feasibility of such approaches.

4.3.5 Feasibility of public humanitarian advocacy in humanitarian terms and within the original advocacy's meaning

The first example concerns the advocacy effort to ban the landmines widely celebrated as one of the most successful examples of humanitarian advocacy. Its main comparative advantages have been summarized in three dimensions: favorable negotiating conditions, effective coalition building and clear campaign messaging (Hubert 2000:57). Focusing on the public advocacy and communication aspects, four points seem relevant for this discussion. Firstly, this initiative confirms the possibility to implement a public advocacy capable of tackling the causes of human suffering in conflict-related crises keeping away from the slippery ground of politics and to 'denounce' the responsibilities (instead of the responsible) without fearing the repercussions on humanitarian field activities (MSF website quoted on Lindenberg and Bryant 2001: 199). Being a single issue of concern to many countries, those producing or using the landmines were not publicly blamed but by deciding not to sign the Ottawa treaty⁶ few notorious countries singled out their own responsibilities vis-à-vis an issue on which there was a large global consensus. Secondly, in "reframing the (...) issue away from its status as political and military issue to the realm of humanitarianism" (DeChaine 2005:107; Hubert 2000:xii) the targeted communication campaign succeeded in persuading the decision-makers of the humanitarian dimensions of the issue making, for the majority of them, very difficult "to resist the logic of the ban" (Hubert 2000:xii). Many other arguments could have been used to buttress this initiative. Yet, it is its framing of the landmines issue in

⁶ In very general terms it aimed at banning the production, use and stockpiling of landmines.

humanitarian terms that constituted the main strength of the advocates and the main weakness of their opponents (Hubert 2000:64). Thirdly, it represents an example of a communication pushing into the background the right of access *'to'* victims of humanitarian agencies and repositioning at the center of the public advocacy the plight and the right *'of'* the victims. The essence of its message, in fact, was continuously focused on the human costs that outweighed the military utility of the landmines (Hubert 2000:29). Finally, since the beginning it had a very clear advocacy and communication objective: the ratification of an international treaty. Being at the intersection between political domain and humanitarian action, this advocacy success confirms that it is possible to intervene in the former without compromising the latter and suggests that “even where multiple discourses are available (...) advocacy is often best couched within explicitly humanitarian terms. (Hubert 2000:65).

The second example concerns the advocacy campaign in Darfur that show that even in a highly mediatized and politicized environment it is possible to advocate the plight of the suffering populations and raise awareness on their hardship without falling into the political and public denunciation framework. Having worked as communication coordinator for the ICRC during the most intense phase of the humanitarian community's public communication on Darfur, the second and third quarters of 2004 (HPG 2007:2), the author⁷ recalls the strong advocacy positions of some agencies framing and speaking out about the plight of the populations in Darfur in terms of ‘genocide’ perpetrated by the Sudanese government and denouncing the operational hampering they were experiencing. The author also recalls the effort of some agencies to mark their distance and distinction from this strong public stand (HPG 2007:6) as well as the position of the ICRC that, in line with its public communication policy⁸, did not join the euphoria of condemnation of the moment. The nuanced ICRC's approach emerges also in the interview with the Senior Officer of the Operations Division when he says that differently from the entire Western world the ICRC consistently refrained from labeling the good and bad guys (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). The author recalls that during the intense communication phase on Darfur, the ICRC's public communication was based on regular bulletins and operational updates and on the appeals to the parties to the conflict to respect the fundamental rules of the humanitarian law. With a better understanding of the situation in Darfur, based on the results of a field food-needs assessment published in September 2004 (ICRC 2004), the ICRC started to frame its public communication in the humanitarian terms of food insecurity putting at centre of its communication the daily challenges and needs of the rural communities (ICRC 2004)⁹. It has also continued to use its usual framework urging all parties to the conflict to respect their ‘obligation’ to protect the civilian populations which

⁷ The reflections included in this paragraph reflect the views and the analysis of the author alone and not necessarily those of the ICRC.

⁸ In 2004, ICRC Assembly adopted an internal doctrine on public communication policy titled “ICRC public communication: Policy, guiding principles and priority audiences” (ICRC internal document). Broadly speaking this policy is based on the guiding communication principles of credibility, identity and impact. It establishes a public policy framework within which both the ICRC communication initiatives are originated and developed and its communication strategies at local, regional and global levels outlined.

⁹ The stimulus for this analysis emerged during my informal meeting in July 2008 with the Senior Officer of the Field Communication Unit at the ICRC headquarters in Geneva, whom I wish to thank for the enlightening exchange.

seems to represent a way of advocating the ‘rights’ of the vulnerable but from its mirrored perspective. This is not to suggest that the ICRC never condemns. It does. In August 2004, talking about Sudan, ICRC President publicly referred to grave violation of IHL. The latest example is in June 2007 concerning the situation in Myanmar (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). But, in line with its public communication policy, the ICRC usually considers this option its “second- or third-best alternative” (Kellenberger 2004:601), it avoids “one-sided or at least too explicit condemnations of individual parties to conflict” (Kellenberger 2004:600) and usually uses it when the other persuasion means have failed and this option shows clear benefits for the victims (Kellenberger 2004:604).

These reflections do not aspire to suggest a recipe for the public humanitarian advocacy as each situation, obviously, requires a tailored approach and careful considerations. Neither does it imply that one form of advocacy is better than the other. They only aim at emphasizing that keeping public humanitarian advocacy within the original advocacy meaning and focused on humanitarian terms is possible and that this approach can produce results, surely debatable, but probably less controversial than its alternative. For the ICRC the achieved aim of this public communication approach was, and is, the possibility to keep its access to vulnerable populations.

4.4 Public humanitarian advocacy and the media

4.4.1 Humanitarians - media relationship: challenges, limits and counterproductive outcomes

In an increasingly image-driven society, the exploitation of the television was quite a natural way for humanitarian organizations to channel their public advocacy. Unable to justify the use of funds allocated to humanitarian programs for expensive ‘publicizing’ tools to raise public awareness about humanitarian issues and concerns, agencies have started to privilege news media as vector and, to a certain extent, considered this opportunity free advertising. The use of news media finds a first reason in the assumed causal link that crises usually attract the news organizations and that their coverage can contribute to raise the profile of crises and to frame the context within which the political, economic and humanitarian responses could be formulated and transformed into concrete programs. Other reason is the role that media can play in society as opinion shaper and their ability to mobilize the support of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983). Further ones are the opportunities that cross-borders media offer to make the large-scale suffering of populations ‘over there’ relevant ‘over here’ and to engender responses to ‘their’ emergency that in the globalized world becomes ‘our’ emergency (Carruthers 2000:198). The last reason is the possibility to give high visibility to agencies’ work that in an increasingly competitive relief market represent an important feature for operational agencies although not all of them seem to be “camera hungry” (Rieff 2002:110).

Forgotten crises constantly remind how important the media are in making the world aware about the suffering engendered by conflict-induced crises that otherwise would remain a reality to the restricted group of victims. Yet, this aspect has usually fueled the debate about the media constructing the emergencies that seem to be nonexistent until they are publicized (Benthall 1993:27). Forgotten crises also remind how important the media are in fostering the international humanitarian responses. The often cited example is the one about the Ethiopian famine in 1984 that, initially ignored by the American media, received a spike of humanitarian help once the crisis hit the headline news (Minear et al 1996:47; Seib 1997:92-3). In this case the process worked well: the media covered the story, the public responded, the Regan Administration felt the pressure and reacted. The recognition of such power implies a tacit credit to the so-called ‘CNN effect’¹⁰ (Shaw 1996, Strobel 1997, Robinson 2002) repeatedly called into question by researchers who have rather underlined the presence of a ‘myth’. Yet, being a myth, it is largely believed also within the humanitarian community. Although the causal link between the publicity of a crisis and the humanitarian response is not the rule, its believed possible effects have contributed to its increased exploitation by the humanitarian agencies.

Yet, especially during the 1990s this humanitarian–media relationship became increasingly symbiotic and started to show its challenges, limits and sometimes some counterproductive results. From the humanitarian organizations perspective, what is relevant is a sustained media interest able to raise both the profile of a crisis and the public awareness on the plight and right of the victims. But what the media have showed to be able to offer is a coverage linked to the emergencies’ newsworthiness and, in its qualitative and quantitative terms, responding more to the media interests, practices and aims of producing “sellable products” (Holm 2001:121). This approach fostered sudden but usually brief rising of the profile of the crises with the direct consequence that disappearing from television screens the crisis vanishes from the public minds. It also produced a kind of coverage in which the plight and the right of the victims were superficially tackled, if not absent. Aid workers’ criticisms to contemporary news organizations turn around, among others, the well known ‘pick and choose’ approach and the meteoric and peaks and valleys coverage usually guided by ‘infotainment’ criteria and framed within the perpetuated binary stereotypes. In the interview with the author on 2 July 2008, the Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit links the pitfalls of the media coverage of humanitarian crises also to the fewer correspondents working in the field and their shorter presence and to the media practice of “favoring the anecdotal over the complex” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008).

¹⁰ The buzzword “CNN effect”, initially referred to the ubiquity of CNN, to its role as primary source of information and back channel for head of states to communicate with their current or potential adversaries. Later it started to be used to indicate the assumed monolithic and unilateral power possessed by the real-time and rolling news media covering humanitarian crises to influence policy making and foreign policy decisions to the point to eventually produce a certain outcome such as the deployment of a military intervention or the withdraw of the troops.

Media's ability to create an emotional response capable of mobilizing both an extraordinary solidarity and resources by flashing the crises on the television screen is well documented. The response to the Biafra crisis in the 1960s and to the emergencies in Bangladesh and Ethiopia during the 1980s confirmed that the "old compassion sells" (J-F Vidal quoted in Rieff 2002:55) and demonstrated that obtaining donors and people's financial support was simply "a question of getting the message to them" (Aengus Finucane quoted in Rieff 2002:84-5). Yet, the recognition of this media's fundraising power has been nuanced both by some researches concluding that their decisive role in influencing donors' large financial response is only occasional (Olsen et al. 2002:15) and by some evidences confirming that after an initial surge, possibly linked to media visibility, financial support declines because "repeated or long-lasting emergencies do sap donors' goodwill" (Benthall 1993:39). The nuanced impact is also reinforced by the so-called "compassion fatigue/burnout" (Carruthers 2000:237; Moeller 1999; Seib 1997:96) on the side of the public at large showing clear signs of tiredness of the sameness of victimhood packaged in different ways. The little response to the crisis in Ethiopia in 1988 comparing to the previous outpouring donations in 1984 (Donovan and Scherer 1992:158) confirmed that the capacity of the media to translate an "emotion into a contribution" (Rieff 2002:48) fades with the time.

The divergent driving forces and agendas within the agencies-media relationship sometimes engendered counterproductive results for the trustworthiness, reputation and operations of the humanitarian agencies. When the media's reporting on a humanitarian action, still not entirely operational, led to an interpretation of inefficiency; or when away from the boiling point of the crisis journalists turned their attention to the use of public funds loosely scrutinized in the name of the audience back home; or when focusing on the political aspects of the crisis reporters quoted the aid workers on political issues, the consequences for the agencies were that their effectiveness and accountability were questioned, their respect and trust undermined and, more important, their image as neutral and impartial actors further dangerously weakened.

4.4.2 The need for a new interaction with the media and the opportunities offered by alternative vectors

The other argument of this discussion is that with the time the symbiotic agencies-media relationship has engendered an increasing reliance of the former in their exploitation of the latter in order to give mass visibility to both the crises and their work. The recognition of this dependence, together with the challenges, limits and counterproductive outcomes, fostered the agencies to reshape the contours of their relation with the media and to explore the use of alternative vectors offering them the prospect of simultaneously reducing their dependence on the media and increasing the management and control on their own communication initiatives. The set up of tailored and professionalized media relations units by main humanitarian agencies during the 1990s (Rieff 2002:293) testifies the importance they recognized to news media and shows their first concrete response to the need of developing new ways of interaction with the media without succumbing to the previous drawbacks. The

developments of the ICTs, and more specifically of the Internet, offered to the humanitarian agencies the opportunities not only to establish a more direct and tailored contacts with their different stakeholders but also to enlarge and diversify their financial sources. Alternative vectors also offered to the humanitarians the opportunity to develop their own communication initiatives and to implement more proactive communication strategies enabling them to effectively and efficiently convey their own messages. The relevance of being proactive in current communication society has emerged during the interview with the Senior Officer of the Communication Division who underlines the importance, in today's communication environment where everybody publishes its own news, to "put your message forward [because] if you don't yourself manage your message then you're part of their message" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008). The recently increased independent production of audiovisual material by some of the largest humanitarian organizations is an example of the humanitarian agencies' trend towards a more autonomous and proactive communication approach. The Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit confirms that at the ICRC "we produce more and more television footage" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Yet, he does not link this trend to the drawbacks stemming from the symbiotic relation suggested by this discussion. He rather underlines that the sometimes limited interest of traditional media makes it harder to convince them to cover ICRC's stories and therefore "for us the real reason for exploring all these alternatives (...) is really (...) to look at all conceivable ways of getting our story across" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Yet, he stresses that because of the credibility stemming from the coverage by an independent media outlet and the need to make the difference from the corporate public relation, the ICRC will continue to engage with journalists (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Two seem to be the main advantages that the alternative vectors such as the Internet and the independent productions offer to the organizations. On the one hand, they allow them to grab media's attention and to occupy the 'mediascape' and the public minds according the crises' necessities and agencies' pace rather than the media speed. On the other, they let the agencies 'package' the content of their own messages according to their view and needs. The production and release of the ICRC's audiovisual material, for instance, is specifically designed to serve the needs of the organization, first through the international television network and then through the webcasting, and it has the declared aim "to record the realities behind the news headlines" (ICRC 2008).

Celebrityhood is another alternative vector whose exploitation for humanitarian advocacy objectives has increased in recent years.

4.5 Celebrities as an alternative vector to channel the public humanitarian advocacy

4.5.1 Celebrity culture and humanitarian organizations.

The contemporary society, increasingly image-driven and ever hungry for entertainment, has produced what has been called the “celebrity culture” (Evans 2005:12). This is currently considered not only the expression of new cultural significances and values but also “the natural end-point of (...) the development of a capitalist market society” (Evans 2005:14). It is within the latter that the idea that “celebrity sells” (Pringle 2004), initially born within the business domain, is explained. Yet, the convergence of the media and entertainment industries has reinforced further the power of the celebrityhood and extended its exploitation as a “commodity” (Turner 2004:34) to ‘sell’, among others, political candidates and ideas. It is within the domain of the ‘selling ideas’ that in recent years the celebrity activism for social and philanthropic causes has grown and that the exploitation of the celebrities’ power by the humanitarian organizations has increased.

The UNICEF was the first organization to recognize the star ability in fostering both worldwide awareness of humanitarian issues and causes and support for the organization. In 1953, it established the ‘Goodwill Ambassadors program’. These Ambassadors are renowned individuals who have traditionally been identified within the show business but that in recent years have also been selected within sports stars, first ladies, journalists and top models, to cite only a few. Yet, despite the UNICEF example shows that celebrities are not new in the endorsement of humanitarian causes, the emergence of what is generally called ‘celebrity advocacy’ with its high-level access to and possible influence on political officials as well as its ability to both generate wide press coverage and shape public opinion seems to be a more recent phenomenon. In this sense, Cooper argues that its “full scope (...) emerged after the end of the Cold War, with the massive surge of technical innovation and the expansion of space for nongovernmental organizations in the international arena” (Cooper: 2008:vi). It is especially over the last decade that the humanitarian organizations using this tool for their advocacy have multiplied.

4.5.2 Reasons for an increased exploitation of celebrities by the humanitarian organizations

Four reasons, among others, contribute to explain the increased exploitation of celebrities by the humanitarian organizations. Firstly, they offer the possibility of reinforcing their persuasion and mobilization capacities. Being a “mediated persona” (Evans 2005:17) whose existence largely depends on media and whose status and popularity are mainly linked to the audience ‘consuming’ them (Evans 2005:19), celebrities are placed at the intersection between the media and the public at large and have the capacity to attract the former and reach the latter with messages about which issues people should feel concerned about and why. In the wording of Grunig and his four models of public relations theory (Grunig

1992)¹¹, it could be advanced that celebrities allow the organizations to shift from the ‘public information’ model mainly based on press releases and distribution of organizational information to the ‘one-way asymmetrical’ model whose main characteristic is to influence the audience to behave as the organization desires. Secondly, they allow overcoming the deficiencies of their public messages frequently considered not particularly ‘sexy’ by media’s gatekeepers when they are conveyed through traditional vectors and sometimes not particularly newsworthy in the moment they are released. Conversely, when a celebrity is involved the message has better chances to soon enter the “global newsroom” (Paterson 1998:88) because, in line with the infotainment and tabloidization trends, “mainstream media are [usually] more likely to bite on a (...) story if there's a Hollywood worm on the hook” (Bowman 2006). Thirdly, in accomplishing the same important function for both the humanitarian organizations and the media, that is to attract public’s attention, celebrities represent a mediation point able to reconcile their divergent objectives and practices analyzed above. Finally, and this is what this paper posits, being a vector whose utilization can be more directly managed by the organizations it facilitates a better control of its exploitation that is not limited to the management of their media exposure. It also concerns the opportunity to formulate the content of the agency’s messages according to its perspective and to convey them according to its needs and pace rather than to those of the media that, in this case, perform the pure function of amplifier. Two examples, among others, show the existence of a certain control over the content of the messages conveyed and the possibility for the agencies to convey their messages according to their needs and pace. The head of the UNICEF’s ambassador program states that celebrities are well trained and that before becoming ambassadors they go through a process of learning about the organization and the humanitarian issues (Soden 2007; Cooper 2008:30). In his book, Cooper emphasizes how well rehearsed were UNCHR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie’s remarks during her appearance on television in 2006 suggesting, among other reasons, “a substantive amount of organizational backing” (Cooper 2008:116). The video showing Jolie drawing attention on the refugees’ plight and appealing to an increased mobilization (<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>) is an initiative that allowed the agency not only to broadcast selected images and its specific message but also to release it when it deemed more opportune or useful: on the occasion of the ‘2008 World Refugee day’.

4.5.3 Advantages and challenges of the ‘celebrity advocacy’

At the conference entitled ‘Celebrity Advocacy for the New Millennium’ held in 2002 UN Secretary General Kofi Annan summarized celebrities’ main added values in their contribution to push reluctant governments to translate their policies and pledges into actions, their capacity to raise the profile of humanitarian issues and organizations’ actions among the policymakers and their constituencies and their ability to break through the barrier of indifference and inspire otherwise passive international public opinion (Alleyne 2005:179).

¹¹ I owe my introduction to this author and his theory to the Senior Officer of the Field Communication Unit – Asia Region - informally met in Geneva in July 2008.

Concerning the latter, celebrities show to possess the communicative skills, charisma and credibility among large audiences that make them able to speak to people “in ways that Oxfam spokesmen cannot (...) [and to] reach out to people who might not normally listen to what Oxfam has to say” (Oxfam UK’s head of advocacy quoted in Cooper 2008:114). The advantages in improving agency’s access to financial resources and in spiking both humanitarian causes and organizations’ visibility are well documented (Bowman 2006; Boustany 2007). But, the contribution of celebrities in humanitarian advocacy is not limited to the increase of public awareness, media interest and financial resources. It also extends its possible impact on the policy concerning humanitarian issues and on the influence on political actors. It is largely recognized that Princess Diana’s endorsement of landmines issue has contributed in creating an international environment conducive to the final changes of landmines’ policy and in accelerating the signature of the so-called ‘Ottawa Treaty’ (Lange 2002). Mia Farrow’s public action raising the issue of “China’s efforts to block action in Darfur” (Cooper 2008:119) seems to have contributed in pushing Beijing to play an assertive role in getting Khartoum to comply with U.N. mandates and to authorize the deployment of UN peacekeeping forces (Cooper 2008:119; Traub 2008).

Yet, the exploitation of this tool for operational organizations advocacy purposes seems also to show various limits and challenges. People’s weariness for the same famous faces and the doubts about the genuineness of the celebrities’ engagement might have repercussions on the celebrities’ attention-grabbing and fundraising capacities and on the credibility of the cause. Celebrities’ inclinations to lend their name to popular causes and to shy away from issues that they perceive as too controversial or linked to a complicated politics (Abramson 2007) might suggest a certain opportunism but also raise complex questions and foster conclusions of double standard. In today’s polarized world this could assume controversial significance and could spill over its negative effects to the organizations for which the celebrities volunteer. Furthermore, the preference of humanitarian organizations to court celebrities from the “northwestern quadrant of the globe” (Cooper 2008:91) and agencies’ “anglo-sphere centric” (Cooper 2008:92) penchant might be good for sensitizing western public opinion but in current juncture of world history this, again, might assume controversial meanings (Alleyne 2005:183). Finally, the proliferation of the celebrities created an overlapping of roles of different celebrities associated to different organizations sometimes defending the same cause and produced both duplication and perplexity in the messages (Fall and Tang 2006:vi). Moreover, their simultaneous endorsement of products and humanitarian causes add a further layer of confusion. The Senior Officer of the Communication Division refers to the concrete example of George Clooney and underlines, on the one hand, the simultaneous exploitation of his fame to promote the cause in Darfur to enhance the business of Nespresso and to sponsor the Omega watches and, on the other, the consequent risk that people might remember the celebrity but not the organization for which he is campaigning or the humanitarian cause he is endorsing (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008).

But from the available researches it seems to emerge that this partnership can produce other serious challenges when celebrities cross the line and become associated with controversial

ideas and political issues. Two recent examples seem to confirm this blurring. In August 2007, Mia Farrow posted on her website a letter signed with her title of UNICEF goodwill ambassador offering to trade her freedom for the freedom of a leader of one of Darfur's largest rebel groups (McDonald:2007). In an article recently published on The Washington Post, Angelina Jolie declared that the need to stay in Iraq was based not only on the “moral obligation to help displaced Iraqi families, but also (...) [on the evaluation that] the potential consequences for our [USA] national security are great” (Jolie 2008). She also called the United States “to devote more troops to protect UNCHR in Iraq” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Media Relations Unit. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). In these cases the braking down of the duality humanitarian/political role is clear and the confusion that this can create in the worldwide public opinion needs no further comments. But, shifting away from the humanitarian domain and spilling over into the political domain, such positions or declarations could engender the obvious negative effects that the humanitarian advocacy of the organizations for which these celebrity volunteer is interpreted to be within the same controversial and political perspective. UNICEF had to immediately declare its unawareness about Farrow's initiative in order to dissociate the agency (McDonald 2007) from a clear political interference in internal affairs of a sovereign state. This kind of challenge seems to be increasing with the new wave of goodwill ambassadors who, differently from the firsts who “kept within a restrictive boundaries of a tight script and mode of operation about what they could say and how they could act” (Cooper 2008:16), show both growing difficulties in keeping their role within fixed boundaries and an increasing willingness of autonomy (Cooper 2008:16-17). This tendency clearly nuances the hypothesis posited by this discussion that such tool can offer to humanitarian agencies the opportunity for a more direct management and control of their public advocacy communication. Organizations can brief celebrities or give them a script about the important messages they are requested to convey about the cause they endorse and, in order to maximize the effects, they can manage more proactively their media exposure. But, they cannot extend their influence beyond these boundaries or control the possible deviations stemming from the celebrities' willingness of autonomy. In other words the emergence of potential challenges shift from the media to the celebrities.

4.5.4 The verification of the second argument through the field research

During the interviews it clearly emerged the acknowledgment that celebrities can contribute in bringing awareness on a crisis or an issue (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008; ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). The Senior Officer of the Operations Division also recognizes that the use of celebrities “allows an organization to set out its priority and to communicate (...) [it] to a wider public. (...) [Celebrities also allow] to be heard, to be seen, to pass messages more easily than if you use more traditional tools such as press releases (...) [that in today's media environment are] not really making headlines anymore [e]xcept if you use unusually strong words” (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Yet, he does not link the increased use of

this vector to the direct and proactive management and to the better control of the messages' content by the agencies that this discussion advances. He gives to it a complementary reading by arguing that the increment is much more a result of the nowadays' oversupply of information that makes more difficult for a single organization to pass distinctive messages through the traditional channels. In such unbelievable and constant stream of information "using a celebrity, of course, has a better chance of capturing the attention of a wider public than using a press release to say the situation in Darfur is extremely preoccupying" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). During the interviews it also emerged that the ICRC is "parsimonious" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Communication Division. Interview with the author on 4 July 2008) or "very cautious" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Marketing Department. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008) in its use of celebrities. The main reason for this choice turns around the "fear of image, it's a fear of what they might say. It's the association fear rather than, I would say, more formal research into why not" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Marketing Department. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). But above all it seems to be a question of identity. "Many of these celebrities are in the West (...) [while] 60% of our operations take place today in Muslim countries. [W]e feel (...) [that the use of celebrities] does not necessarily enhance that type of identity that we want to give ourselves, which is a neutral, independent, humanitarian organization" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). Referring to Sudan the Senior Officer of the Operations Division adds that in the eyes of the Sudanese many celebrities were not considered neutral and impartial and therefore the ICRC has never thought of using a celebrity as this "would have indeed, in our opinion, jeopardized our stance, our neutral and impartial stance" (ICRC Senior Officer of the Operations Division. Interview with the author on 2 July 2008). The fear of the potential challenges analyzed above seems clear.

5. Conclusions

The international division labor would give to the humanitarian agencies the task of providing temporary needs-based assistance and to the political and diplomatic actors the mission to tackle the roots causes of conflict-related crises. Some scholars argue that this no longer exists because although humanitarian agencies strive to present themselves as nonpartisan, they are “deeply enmeshed in politics” (Weiss 1999:20) and their action, despite the effort to keep it officially apolitical and neutral, “has always been a highly politicized activity (Curtis 2001:3). The contextual background in this discussion has emphasized the progressive shift of many humanitarian actors in their humanitarianism philosophy moving from the ‘Dunantist’ to a ‘Wilsonian’ approach and pushing their remits and objectives growingly into the political domain. This reflected the perceived need to reshape the agencies’ role no longer willing to be considered both the emblem of failure as they respond to a tragedy already happened (Rieff 2002:21) and the “after-sales service of politics” (Kouchener quoted in Volker 2004:24). In line with their enlarged tasks and reinforced responsibilities, operational humanitarian agencies started to increasing use advocacy which offered them a number of options, private and public, for engaging in the “broader political arenas” (Leader 2000:4). But, its focus putting at the forefront the ‘*droit d’ingérence*’ of the international community in the name of the ‘right based universalism’ and its approach privileging the denunciation approach have lent advocacy to the criticisms that it was not aimed at pleading the cause of the vulnerable but at allowing and justifying Western interference. Within an increasingly militarized and politicized conflict-related humanitarianism that developed during the 1990s, this aggressive approach shadowed the humanitarian character of the agencies’ actions and highlight the political nature of their advocacy. The reactions of the local authorities to these strong stands framed within the politics confirm that the project of “a stateless humanitarianism transcending the boundaries of international society has ultimately failed” (Volker 2004:6). The extended use of controversial advocacy positions by some operational organizations blurred their differences from the mushrooming purely advocacy agencies usually using aggressive tone in their public initiatives and made ‘all’ humanitarians look alike and fostered the perception equating ‘all’ public humanitarian advocacy to political and public denunciation actions. The argument advanced by this discussion was that this evolution has turned ‘advocacy’ into a ‘good word gone bad’ in current conflict-related humanitarian environment. This claim finds only an indirect confirmation in the field research through the fact that the ICRC does not want to be associated with it because of its specific connotations. Conversely, the interviewees seem to share the analysis that advocacy is increasingly, if not mainly, structured in political and public denunciation terms. The two examples analyzed in this discussion of the advocacy effort to ban the landmines and the ICRC public communication position during the intense phase of the humanitarian community’s public communication on Darfur confirm that keeping public humanitarian advocacy within the original advocacy meaning and focused on humanitarian terms is feasible. They also show that agencies can remain neutral in their daily relations with the warring parties and at the same time actively advocate on the political front. The results that this approach can produce are surely debatable, but probably less controversial than its alternative. The voice of the operational agencies was increasingly

channeled through the media. But besides the benefits, humanitarians have soon discovered the pitfalls of an increasingly symbiotic relationship. The argument posited by this discussion that the increased use of alternative vectors was fostered by the agencies' recognition of the drawbacks of their relationship with the media does not find confirmation in the field research that rather emphasizes the willingness of the agencies of being proactive in their communication and of looking for alternative ways to get the humanitarian stories across as well as the oversupply of information in today's communication environment. The analysis of the celebrities has also nuanced the argument that this alternative vector offers to the humanitarian agencies the opportunity for a more direct management and control of their public advocacy communication.

Within the humanitarian community is emerging the need for a better understanding of the operational agencies' role and limits in public advocacy as well as for an assessment of the use, effectiveness, impact and risks of its aggressive approach. The specific field of public advocacy and the broader domain of the public communication of operational humanitarian organizations have been the object of very limited studies. They both represent, therefore, interesting areas for further research.

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