



Aid Organizations and the Press

By Steven S. Ross

"The natural tendency is that money should go for food. There used to be a natural culture of modesty, and we felt good about it, that there should be little advocacy for the group, that everyone just wanted to do their work. This changed during the nineties with the Balkan conflict. [We] became a huge player. ... In those days we had no web site and only a five-page annual report", said one press officer for a large United States-based non-governmental organization (NGO) with small press operations.

Aid groups do indeed put as much money as possible into aid itself, and donors expect it as well. But there is also a realization that money spent on press relations produces more aid dollars down the road. A good image also helps smooth relations with host governments and improves staff morale. Can we do better?

Fritz Institute and Reuters AlertNet set out to study the relationship between humanitarian relief organizations and the press, with the hope that the findings could help NGOs benefit from the correlation between press coverage, operations and funding. Until now, no one had asked NGO journalists and press officers in any systematic way about the issues that bind and divide them. We surveyed NGO officials in the fall of 2003 and



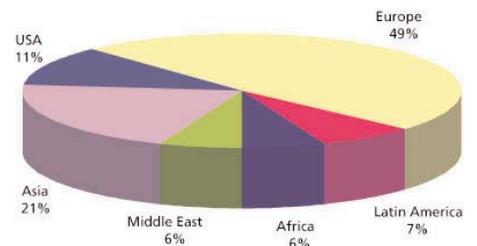
Steven Ross (in striped shirt, background) watches class of journalists and NGO personnel doing an exercise with geographical information systems, at the University of West Indies in Trinidad.

used their responses to help develop a questionnaire that was sent to journalists in mid-December.

This article focuses mainly on insights gained from that survey, which was conducted in person and by phone and e-mail with 54 NGO respondents, mostly from outside North America. The study shows that aid groups have been mistaken in their belief that journalists do not know about chronic problems. But they do know, and efforts spent to educate them further will be wasted—they just don't think these problems are worthy of immediate coverage. Few journalists cover humanitarian relief efforts full-time; thus, they bring to aid stories the news judgment of other "news beats". That news judg-

ment is, basically, that "we know you have a problem, but give me an excuse to cover that problem today. Otherwise, it will have to wait".

The NGO sample, by region



The NGO press officials we contacted and their organizations have responded to the changing environment. Organizations and individuals have gotten sharper, improved budgeting, reviewed priorities and have adapted to and adopted the World Wide



Web. But they have not moved fast or far enough.

Larger NGOs typically ask local press officers to "pass media up the line" to the home offices. But the process is often ignored, especially if a journalist has been doing stories in the region or specifically with a regional humanitarian aid organization's office. NGO press officers and journalists agree that execution—providing information and on-site visits—is fraught with errors. Many respondents described mistakes that led or could have led to unfavourable coverage of their work. Regional press officers are often young international hires or those who are not familiar with Western-style press. They talk about the need for more formal training: no one we talked to outside CARE and the International Committee of the Red Cross mentioned budgets for training that go beyond perhaps a few hundred dollars per participating employee. Because of the travel involved and a fairly high staff turnover, we suggest standardizing as much training as possible to spread costs among NGOs, and delivering such training on compact disc and online where practical.

Some NGOs lump press relations with marketing, fund-raising and running a web site, but fund-raising, for which output is most easily measured, is the one the multi-purpose staff will concentrate on. There's also little recognition of the specialized knowledge and skills involved with press relations.

The World Wide Web has increased opportunities for international visibility of humanitarian aid organizations. However, journalists believe mistakenly that Google will find everything they need. Fewer than 20 per cent of those we surveyed knew about organizations such as Alertnet and ReliefWeb, or displayed knowledge of the UN sites. In light of that, here are some of the problems that need to be solved:

- Many NGO web sites cannot be fully searched "from the outside" by search engines such as Google, because the pages are sparse on text or they are "framed". Framed pages load faster when bandwidth is low, but cannot easily be found and indexed;
- Most sites include only the basics—mission statements, organizational history, summary news of current projects—and many do not include press contacts. Few include links to other humanitarian organizations working on the same field or in the same geographical area;
- Newer Web technologies, such as streaming video and blogs, are virtually ignored;
- Older Internet technologies that pre-date the Web, which include chat rooms, LISTSERVs and Usenet newsgroups, are sparsely used;
- Often missing are press release archives, online video, and still images for use in journalists' stories and links to them;
- Groups often use e-mail to send press releases, but build their distribution lists in a hap-

azard manner, using fax and regular mail, despite the costs and potential for errors in distribution. E-mail is clearly underutilized, perhaps because address lists are poor;

- Few humanitarian organizations' web sites have internal search engines; and
- No one we talked to had a formal procedure in place to check, on a continuing basis, whether their Web site can be easily found on various international versions of Google, Yahoo and other search engines. Several assumed "technical" personnel handled such chores.

Journalists responding to the survey say they do not have the financial resources to report on the crises that need covering. In fact, they want an independent organization to help pick up the tab. NGOs, for their part, should provide more details on their web sites and through other communications channels for reporters to pitch stories, and they also have to be newsworthy to sell.

Instead, humanitarian NGOs often turn to public relations consultants for marketing and fund-raising. But these organizations should be aware that not all strategies are suitable; for example, turning their chief executive officers into "industry spokesmen" who will be quoted by journalists seeking coverage in business magazines to attract upscale readers for fund-raising efforts, and relying on the pull of celebrities. Some executives do make great spokespersons



and some NGOs realize that the "gold standard" for coverage does not always have to be a national newspaper or television show. One press officer in the United States, speaking about why she stretches to find time for reporters from small media outlets, said: "The Korean population, Indian, Pakistani—they are the future wealth in this country. Entrepreneurs in those communities who have not picked what charities to go for, that's our future. I'm not ignoring the Latino press either."

Another example of the synergy is the ability to use an aid mission to give public health advice: "We've been working in the Dominican Republic, where 14 of 16 pregnant women tested at clinics had AIDS; in six years, they will be very sick, but people don't believe it because they are walking around. So we did a piece on getting the warning signs for AIDS, aimed at informing the Latino community. NPR couldn't carry it—too specialized an audience. But a Latino network did." Whatever an NGO

does, it must be in tune with its own strengths. It must grow naturally from the scope of a group's work and the personalities of its leaders and staff. And, of course, press relations must be handled in a professional manner if NGOs are to generate the coverage that is central to fulfilling their missions.
