Book reviews


This structured collection of twelve essays covers a wealth of experiences gained in Africa over the past decade, in the relationships between conflict, humanitarian assistance and political action.

The book started life as an SCF (UK) project in 1991, as a literature survey on famine and war, and grew from there. The essays are grouped into three sections. Section one provides a framework for analyzing the relations between war and famine in Africa, looking at international and local attempts at conflict resolution, the changing framework of international law and the effect conflict has today upon economies and the civilian population.

Section two is essentially a series of country specific case histories, with chapters discussing conflict in Somalia, Sudan, Angola, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Section three takes the raw material from the first two sections and looks at cross cutting issues from gender to UN reform, by way of reassessing the role of humanitarian assistance. The concluding chapter tries to look to the future, focusing largely on how the international response system needs to reform in order to address the complex emergencies of today.

For me the strength of this book lies in the first two sections. The nature of humanitarian assistance is changing so fast today. Most of that change is being played out in the complex emergencies of Africa and Europe and in the grey zone between conflict and non-conflict, humanitarian action and political action. This book provides an excellent set of factual accounts of the critical humanitarian theatres of operation which are shaping our thinking. If you haven’t worked in Somalia or Sudan, Eritrea or Angola, then read this book to get up to speed.

That’s the big plus side of War and Hunger, the downside is that its conclusions are very time dependent. The debate on how the international community should act and indeed the way it is acting, is changing fast. The experiences described in this book are part of the input that has shaped the Dayton peace accords being implemented in the Former Yugoslavia. They were reflected in the major evaluation of the Rwanda crisis. So the debate moves on.

That said, in what is often an emotive and politically charged debate, this book provides solid fact and well-argued analysis. Two years after its publication it is still worth buying and should be in the travelling library of all who seek to report on, provide solution for, or deliver assistance to, the victims of today’s complex emergencies.

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