Risk Management and the Bunkering of the Aid Industry

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As an object of study, the defensive bunkering of the aid industry, as reflected in the spread of fortified aid compounds and increasing risk aversion among aid workers, helps make visible something that is usually hidden or occluded; that is, the aid industry as a sovereign actor (Edkins 2003). What is noteworthy about aid’s material assemblages, at least with respect to their power effects, is that aid policy tends to operate as if such effects do not exist. Regarding current approaches to state and societal reconstruction, for example, a seminal text has been Robert Jackson’s (1990) *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Weak states are defined according to their relative degrees of ‘juridical’ and ‘empirical’ sovereignty. The former stems from the international recognition of a state’s legality while the latter denotes the actual capacity of the state to govern a given territory. Although weak states may enjoy juridical sovereignty, they lack empirical content. This distinction has been widely absorbed within aid policy. A consensus now exists that the gap between juridical and empirical sovereignty ‘…is the key obstacle to ensuring global security and prosperity’. Hence, for purposes of societal reconstruction, ‘…partnerships must be created to prepare and then implement strategies to close this sovereignty gap’ (Ghani *et al.* 2005: 4).
From this perspective, the aid industry has no sovereignty or power effects of its own. In closing the gap between juridical and empirical sovereignty, it is given the appearance of operating as a sort of benign ‘hidden hand’. In effect, the industry dematerialises its own very concrete presence. As Lisa Smirl argues, the spatial and material practices of the international community ‘…are almost completely overlooked in any analysis of post-crisis reconstruction or emergency response’ (Smirl 2008: 237). In helping to give material form to the aid industry, this article is a modest contribution to the growing interest in the spatial attributes and effects of international intervention and assistance (Higate and Henry 2009; Smirl 2008; Siddaway 2007; Stepputat 2001). Its point of entry is the recent emphasis on field-security training among aid agencies in response to the perception that aid work is becoming increasingly dangerous (Bruderlein and Gassmann 2006). The aim of field-security training is to produce a new form of subjectivity or agency among aid workers. This subjectivity not only normalises defensive living, it experiences the fortified compound as both necessary and even desirable. Through analysing risk management and its relation to defensive architecture (Sorkin 2008; Lacy 2008), the intention of this article is to give form to at least some of the spatial effects of the aid industry. While aid policy may think itself a hidden hand, it is leaving an increasingly permanent architectural footprint.

Securing aid workers

It is useful to first consider how the fortified aid compound is being normalised. This involves examining how forms of aid worker subjectivity or individual agency are being called forth that accept segregated living as necessary, even desirable. Important here is the concern that aid workers are increasingly finding themselves the deliberate targets of political violence. Between 1997 and 2008, for example, there has been both an absolute and relative increase in the number of serious attacks (injuries, kidnapping and fatalities) on national and international staff worldwide. In absolute terms, such incidents have increased from around 30 to 160 per year (Stoddard et al. 2009). Several explanations have been given for this growth. Since the early 1990s, the UN has tended to focus on the changing nature of conflict, stressing the emergence of violent and, essentially, irrational non-state actors that do not respect the neutrality of humanitarian personnel (Boutros-Ghali 1995: 42; UN 2001: 2). Critical voices, however, have pointed to growing international interventionism and internal changes within the UN system itself. In particular, the effects of the UN integrated mission that brings together in a unified management system the UN’s humanitarian and development work with that of peacekeeping and political affairs (Eide et al. 2005).
UN integrated missions are not only found in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, they range from the Caribbean, through Africa, the Balkans, Middle East and into East Asia. UN specialist agencies and allied NGOs have been drafted into ambitious donor-led post-interventionary programmes of disarmament, demobilisation and reconstruction in support of an internationally recognised state. Besides pursuing a humanitarian agenda, integrated missions are instrumentally involved in attempts to reshape the social, political and economic structures of the countries concerned. Warring parties, especially non-state groups that have done badly in a peace agreement, ‘…may sometimes perceive such agendas as biased and politically motivated. Thus the universality of the values promoted by the UN no longer guarantees the security of its access in conflict situations’ (Brudelein and Gassmann 2006: 65). In places like Afghanistan, this politicisation of aid work has led to its effective paralysis (Donini 2009). However, it is important to emphasise that such problems are not confined to the TV hotspots but, like the integrated mission itself, are more general and widespread, fuelling the spread of the fortified aid compound and field-security training for aid workers.

With the breakdown of the early post-Cold War UN negotiated access programmes in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda, a need for better field-security training first emerged in the mid-1990s. From this time, improving field security for aid workers, especially enhancing risk perception and more recently hardening of physical security, has been an ongoing issue (Van Brabant 1998). A key publication was Koenraad Van Brabant’s *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments* (2000). Largely based upon earlier *ad hoc* NGO programmes and train-
ing initiatives, *Operational Security* brings together in a comprehensive manner what has since become an industry-standard training template. It is in the nature of field-security training to tend towards standardisation; having different people or different organisations doing contrary things is counterproductive. In this way, security underpins a strong centralising tendency within organisations. It has been significant, for example, in transferring important managerial responsibilities from field operatives to headquarters staff. The generic training framework that has emerged typically divides security into a number of scenarios, including movement, work, home and personal components. Training programmes exist in basic or advanced forms, they can last from several hours to several days, and vary in realism from classroom examples to outdoor role-play exercises, including car-jacking and hostage-taking.

While individual UN agencies have developed their own policies, the main trend has been towards a ‘…system-based security approach’ (Bruderlein and Gassmann 2006: 65) involving the increasing centralisation and standardisation of security policy. Importantly, this has occurred at the same time as the global rollout of the UN integrated mission. In this institutional context, a system-based approach to security is argued to offer scalability and replication. This process began with increasing cooperation between the Department of Peace-keeping Operations (DPKO) and the Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator (UNSECOORD) to ensure uniform security standards and procedures, including working towards comprehensive security and stress management training (UN 2001: 3-4). By the beginning of 2002, complementing individual agency initiatives, the UN had begun one-off security training in 111 countries. The August 2003 bombings of the UN and ICRC headquarters in Baghdad added further impetus to the centralisation and standardisation of security policy (Bruderlein and Gassmann 2006). In December 2004, a new UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) was established within the UN Secretariat. This brought together existing security personnel, such as UNSECOORD and the civilian security components of DPKO, under one roof. Headquarters supervision was thus strengthened and, following an improvement in the career prospects of security personnel, standardised security protocols were rolled out through what is now a global network of security officers.

At the same time, Minimum Operational Security Standards (MOSS) have been introduced. MOSS represents the development of an objective set of security standards covering security planning, training, communications and security equipment, for implementation at each UN duty station. These minimum standards spell out ‘...the standard
which must be met in order for the system to operate safely’ (ibid: 6). The adoption of MOSS standards, and more recently Minimum Operational Residential Security Standards (MORSS), is also a requirement of the UN’s insurance underwriters. The question of insurance is returned to below.

**The militarisation of risk management**

As a means of strengthening resilience, field-security training has a number of generic characteristics. The literature on increasing aid worker deaths contains ambiguity, conjecture and competing claims. For example, there are uncertainties over motivation, or whether increases are relative or absolute, or the implications of the different exposures of national and international staff, or the significance of geographical differences (Stoddard et al. 2006; 2009). Field-security training, however, strips out all shades of grey. It adopts an uncompromising view of the external environment; aid workers everywhere and at all times are now facing permanent and pervasive danger. It is not difficult to understand why this sense of certainty should exist. The purpose of professional security training is to encourage behavioural change and so strengthen personal and organisational resilience; it cannot do this if its main message is hedged with doubts and exceptions. At the same time, this purity of message means that training materials lend themselves to the deconstruction of field security as a design of power.

In Sudan, in order to enter the UN’s logistical system it is necessary for visiting headquarters staff or temporary consultants first to pass the UN’s basic and advanced training modules for security in the field (UNBSF 2003; UNASF 2006). Without passing these modules, you
cannot get a UN ID card, and without an ID card you cannot enter UN compounds, board UN flights or travel in UN vehicles; you are condemned to remain outside the international space of flows. These training modules come on two interactive CD-ROMs that combine voice-overs, video clips and role-play exercises with multiple-choice end-of-level tests. The basic and advanced modules both culminate in a final multiple-choice examination. Upon successful completion, the software prints a named pass certificate. Rather than go through field-security training in detail, I will describe a few of the important themes before discussing their implications.

UN field-security training is structured around a prime message from which all the desired behavioural changes can be derived. In its opening section, the ‘Basic Security in the Field’ CD-ROM quotes Mary Robinson, the former High Commissioner for Human Rights, as saying that ‘…some barrier has been broken and anyone can be regarded as a target, even those bringing food to the hungry and medical care to the wounded’ (UNBSF Module 1: 2). In different ways, this prime message is repeated throughout the module. Field-security training reinforces the idea that times have changed and, like it or not, aid workers now face pervasive threats from a calculating and unpredictable enemy. Since this
enemy is faceless, follows no particular pattern and can strike anywhere, constant vigilance and attention to one’s surrounding environment are required. The onus is on the aid worker to make the right choices from the available information and visual cues. As the environment changes, staying safe requires endless risk calculation and adjustment.

In certain countries, the advice will be to stop when your vehicle runs somebody over on the road; in another setting, the advice will be certainly not to stop until the next police post (Van Brabant 1999:9).

In terms of helping achieve such resilience, the aim of field-security training is to embed an interpretive framework and guide to action within the mind of the aid worker. Besides outlining the organisational protocols and local security procedures at the duty station, training covers all aspects of movement; home and office security; health and welfare; and personal safety, including how to respond if under fire or taken hostage. With regard to movement, for example, apart from avoiding travelling at night, the UN’s ‘Basic Security in the Field’ CD-ROMs cover such things as checkpoint etiquette; how to behave with child soldiers; how to react to weapons; anti-highjack techniques; and how to read the road, for example, slowing down before traffic lights so as to avoid stopping. Regarding the home and office, subjects covered include selecting a home neighbourhood. Important here are such things as the level of street lighting, numbers of pedestrians, levels of traffic and parking facilities. The training endorses urban segregation through pointing out that families ‘…with similar income levels tend to share similar lifestyles and security concerns’ (UNBFS Module 2: 6). Inside the home, advice is given on locks, window bars and alarms. With regard to the office, apart from similar neighbourhood concerns, the importance of office design is flagged. For example, having a secure reception area for screening visitors; using the front desk as a defensive structure; barriers in interview rooms; and having a secure bolthole. Besides advice on handling suspicious telephone calls and packages, tips are also given on how to defuse tension and handle hostile crowds.

In working through this training, it is necessary to complete numerous small tests and end-of-section exercises in order to proceed to the subsequent levels. For example, the actions that aid workers should take when first arriving at their duty station are rehearsed in a series of yes-no exercises. Those requiring a ‘yes’ answer include: do you seek a security briefing; meet your local warden; register your family members with the office; and find out how to obtain medical services? In contrast, the questions requiring the answer ‘no’ are: do you ‘…check area around the office and your residential areas on foot’ or ‘…try
food from local food vendors’ (UNBFS Module 2: 16)? By outlawing walking around or engaging with local people, the exercise reinforces dependence on the organisation while emphasising the danger of the streets. Repeated on the CDs in different scenarios, the main response to the pervasive threats faced by aid workers is to encourage isolation and risk aversion. This subjectivity is rapidly becoming the default setting of contemporary aid work.

External risk management, however, is reliant upon a complementary internal psychological practice. Aid workers cannot deal effectively with pervasive external threats unless they acknowledge and respect their own inner vulnerabilities. The importance of protecting the inner self as a necessary adjunct to managing external beneficiary groups has been intrinsic to field-security training since its early days (Van Brabant 1998). Trainees are told, for example, that empathy for victims ‘…does not mean sharing their diseases. To work effectively for others you need to be healthy’ (Dr Gro Harlem, former Director General, WHO, UNBFS Module 5: 2). The need to take care of oneself is central to the UN’s basic and advanced field-security training. Thus, in relation to health and welfare, how to recognise fatigue and stress in oneself and others is explored. Arguably, this is an internalisation of the practice of medicalising distress through the concept of trauma (Summerfield 1999). However, aid work is itself now subject to such medicalisation. The antidote to work-related stress is to maintain a ‘normal’ life within the confines of the aid system, for example, taking regular exercise, following a balanced diet, achieving a good work/life balance including a buddy system, and avoiding excessive alcohol consumption. The key message is that without protecting one’s
vulnerable inner self – including taking time out from traumatised beneficiaries – then the constant vigilance needed to manage pervasive external threats is undermined. Care of oneself involves a psychological distancing that complements, and requires, the physical walls and razor wire of the fortified aid compound.

It should be emphasised, no one is arguing that risks do not exist. It is obvious that they do. Nor is there intent to insinuate that the advice given is somehow flawed or useless. There is something more fundamental under discussion; that is, the institutionalisation and normalisation of risk management. This is new, at least in relation to an earlier approach to danger that made room for the rational subject and allowed him/her to make considered individual decisions on the basis of available information (Pupavac 2001). The institutionalisation of risk management erodes individual and local autonomy in favour of rule through distant security experts and protocols. Risk management within the civilian aid industry has been militarised and with this comes inescapable organisational demands for greater social conformity including social segregation and defensive living as part of everyday life. As with other aid agencies, the UN’s field-security training is not optional; it is a mandatory MOSS/MORSS requirement and, importantly, conditional for personal claims under the UN’s Malicious Acts Insurance policy: if you suffer lose, injury or death while not following security guidelines, you or your family get nothing. When militarisation is coupled with concerns over psychological stability, insurance requirements, including aid agency fears of litigation over lax security procedures (Butler 2003), a powerful governmental technology for changing behaviour and shaping new forms of subjectivity has come into existence.

Even if the surrounding environment does not warrant the averse and isolationist behaviour that the militarisation of risk management encourages, to satisfy organisational requirements, security becomes a mandatory performative act. The training reflected in the UN’s basic and advanced field-security CD-ROMS, much of which is generic, is a good example of what Vanessa Pupavac, in relation to the construction of traumatised populations, has called ‘therapeutic governance’ (Pupavac 2001). In our case, however, since the aid worker is also a potential victim, it is perhaps better to talk of therapeutic self-governance. As a way of avoiding and minimising risk, aid workers are expected to act upon themselves, to change their own behaviour and lifestyles in order to make themselves fit for helping others. This reflects another aspect of resilience, the promise that a life of constant adaptation will produce something new and better (Folke 2006).
Aid and urban pathology

For the new aid subjectivity, with its predilection towards risk aversion, its associated architectural form is the fortified aid compound. The integrated UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), for example, supports the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that covers South Sudan and the border areas of the Transition Zone. The UNMIS headquarters lie immediately to the south of Khartoum International Airport where the UN operates both its own aircraft and those leased to support UNMIS and the African Union/UN Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) operations in the West. Given the volume of air traffic, the UN has its own terminal building to the east of the main runway. The UNMIS headquarters is a large rectangular compound fortified with double walls and razor wire, and complete with watchtowers and armed guards. Inside, besides a several-storey office block, lines of air-conditioned pre-fabs house the administrative staff. Around the extensive perimeter are rows of the UN’s ubiquitous white sports utility vehicles (SUVs). At first glance, the overtly defensive and militarised appearance of the UNMIS headquarters seems out of place. Khartoum is a relatively safe city and crime levels, especially violent crime, have historically been low. While UNMIS is associated with the peace agreement in South Sudan, it has brought the architecture of war into the city. In this context the HQ seems anomalous, a sort of mini-Green Zone but without the obvious dangers and violence of a Baghdad. While the UNMIS HQ remains

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1 In November 2009, working independently of the aid industry, the author spent a month in Khartoum travelling on foot or by local taxi both day and night. The relative safety of the city has been frequently commented upon in the ‘Making Sense of Darfur’ blog (http://blogs.ssrc.org/darfur/).
distinct in terms of its scale and fortifications, in recent years all UN office compounds in Khartoum have upgraded their defensive capabilities, including through the erection of outer chain-link fencing, double entrance gates and crash barriers.

While MOSS/MORSS standards can vary, it is important to realise that they constitute a set of centrally driven *minimum* operational requirements. In practice, this means that all UN operations – regardless of the actual security situation – have to be MOSS/MORSS-compliant. Propagated in the institutional medium of the UN integrated mission, fed by insurance requirements and driven by security experts, the fortified aid compound is now ubiquitous, from the Caribbean, through Africa to the Balkans and the Middle East, the Caucuses and East Asia. This centrally driven architectural dynamic creates a potential for both anomalies and unforeseen alliances. In Khartoum, for example, MORSS requirements have recently been updated. All UN office compounds now have to be at least 30 metres from the nearest road. Despite existing investment in defensive measures, these new regulations mean that existing UN compounds are no longer MORSS-compliant. Driven by security concerns, the UN system finds itself part of the wider southward extension of Khartoum, as agencies begin to plan the rebuilding of MORSS-compliant complexes in the city’s newly designated ‘diplomatic quarter’. In this respect, the aid industry is an important part of the spatial transformation of Khartoum currently underway, including the emergence of elite-gated communities (SOL 2008). Similarly, in Kabul, in order to overcome the fragmenting effects of the aid industry’s *ad hoc* security measures on the city’s urban landscape (Montgomery 2009), the authorities have raised the possibility of constructing a Baghdad-style Green Zone on the edge of Kabul. This would house the entire diplomatic, UN and aid community within one secure location with its own dedicated support infrastructure (Boone 2009).

As an architectural form, the fortified aid compound merges into the global trend towards elite gated communities, social segregation and defensive urban living (Minton 2009; Davis 2006; Graham and Marvin 2001; Blakely and Snyder 1997). How the security concerns of the aid industry are helping transform the urban geography of the global borderlands remains under-researched (Vöckler 2008). In relation to South Sudan it is important to stress that these militarised structures are among the first physical manifestations of the return to peace, albeit 2

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2 I am grateful for audience feedback and anecdotal evidence regarding the geographic spread of the fortified aid compound from seminars given in Rovaniemi (Finland), London, Warwick, Cambridge, Amsterdam, Leeds, Bristol, Bradford and Coimbra (Portugal) during 2008 and 2009.
an uneasy peace. The fortified aid compound is a defining feature of the architectural peace dividend. Instead of a celebratory rebirth, architecturally the aid industry has introduced the signs and visual tropes of international urban pathology. At the same time, there now appears to be more agency security protocols, restrictions and levels of bureaucracy than during the actual war.

In Juba, the capital of South Sudan, the type of aid architecture encountered in Khartoum is replicated. Besides the upgrading of older buildings, however, Juba has many new, purpose-built aid compounds. Not only is their size noticeable but, since 2005, whole districts have been taken over and divided up between different agencies. UNDP, for example, has a large compound that presents itself to the outside world as a high, white-painted exterior wall, topped by razor wire. ‘NO TRESPASSING’ is stencilled in blue all around its extensive perimeter. The main gate to this office complex is complete with the familiar guardhouse, heavy steel gates and crash barriers. In considering these structures, it is legitimate to ask what sort of impression they make on the public and, not least, those aid beneficiaries that agencies claim to empower and better? In their appearance and intent, these buildings are the very opposite of empowering; they are intimidating structures designed to keep the public out. Paradoxically, the industry’s current architectural form stands in contrast to the relatively open, low-walled government buildings, many of which date from the colonial period (Daly and Hogan 2005: 231–252). Rather than the beginnings of peace and reconstruction, aid’s alienating and exclusionary physical structures seem to embody failure, even before its developmental efforts have properly begun (also see Montgomery 2009). The aid industry, moreover, is introducing the same fractured urbanism into the South’s other small towns. Not only are these towns undergoing a process of rapid unplanned urbanisation following the 2005 peace agreement (Duffield
et al. 2008), given the relative paucity of the built environment, the spatial impact is, if anything, even greater than in Juba.

Similar to the self-contained gated neighbourhoods emerging in Khartoum, the fortified aid compound is, ideally, self-reliant in terms of basic requirements; they share the same exclusive and independent logic. Aid compounds have their own boreholes for water and, with their diesel stockpile, run their own electricity generators. This electricity renders the compounds independent of the erratic or absent town supply. It powers their security lights, telecommunications, refrigerators, air conditioning units and computers, thus allowing aid workers to maintain direct HQ contact and granting internet and satellite TV access. A stock of spare parts keeps the vehicles running and, in the event of a medical emergency, a sophisticated drugs cabinet is maintained. Not only does their built form contrast with the low-walled government buildings, the aid compound’s monopoly of resources and expertise heightens the apparent poverty and dependency of the latter. Established by treaty with the Government of Sudan, in most cases during the 1960s, UN aid compounds are sovereign spaces of the international. Agreements, for example, typically confer diplomatic status on international staff and inviolability on the offices, documents and equipment of the agency concerned (UNHCR 1968). Linked by exclusive and secure means of air and road transport, fortified aid compounds interconnect to form a spatial archipelago of international aid. From this perspective, the network of aid compounds that spans the global borderland provides an important material dimension to liberalism’s external sovereign frontier: the fortified aid compound marks the place where the international space of aid flows physically confronts underdevelopment as dangerous.
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