

# The Economics of Peace and Security Journal

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## Book Note

**Marriage, Zoë. 2006. *Not Breaking the Rules, Not Playing the Game. International Assistance to Countries at War*. London: Hurst & Company, xiv + 251 pp. ISBN: 1-85065-813-7 (pb). Price £18.50.**

Reviewed by Bjørn Møller [14 May 2007]

This is an important book, the findings of which will probably not be welcomed by all international actors involved in humanitarian assistance to countries at war or post-conflict peacebuilding.

The book is based, in part, on Leon Festinger's psychological theory of cognitive dissonance according to which actors seek a harmonious view of the world and themselves and therefore seek to avoid situations or pieces of information which might cause dissonance. The author argues that humanitarian agencies and their staffs, as well as the governments funding them, have lofty humanitarian motives and need to believe that they are actually helping those in need. Invariably they are collaborating with both state and local actors in whose benevolence they are strongly inclined to believe. If this belief does not hold, disruptive cognitive dissonance will ensue. Consistency is also maintained by organizing activities according to "standard operating procedures" (sometimes referred to as "best practices") and by talking about them in "newspeak." All of this is what the author calls a game of make-believe, the rules of which are binding not only on service providers, such as humanitarian NGOs, but also on the recipients in war-torn countries.

Apart from general and theoretical parts, the book features case studies based on extensive fieldwork in Sierra Leone, Rwanda, the DR Congo, and southern Sudan. Throughout it focuses on programs and activities funded by the British development agency DFID. The author's critique of almost all involved is harsh but fair as she does not impute incompetence or ill-will to anybody. Instead, the fault lies with the game itself: "the rules confer politically moral benefits on aid providers, whose agenda is protected by the neutralised terminology. The discourse blinds the people who use it, making assistance insensible to reform and potentially provocative ... Denying the game sustains it" (p. 210).

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