

Drive-by-development: the role of the SUV in humanitarian assistance

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Introduction

The white SUV (Sports Utility Vehicle) bearing the logo of an aid organisation has become ubiquitous with humanitarian assistance yet little is known about the history of this and their role. This research project has attempted to uncover the history of the SUV in humanitarian assistance and its contemporary usage. Historically this project has examined when these vehicles were first used in humanitarian assistance, what vehicles, where, by which aid organisations and why. The contemporary research has focused upon revealing the current aid market for SUV vehicles, relevant issues and actors. What follows is a summary of findings so far.

Methodology: Research has been conducted from books, online sources, archives and interviews. A complete reference list is available on request.

History

The first SUVs were built in the 1940s and used for humanitarian assistance almost immediately. They were assimilated into the same role other forms of transportation previously occupied. The wider success of the SUV as a commercial vehicle sustained their continued usage by aid organisations. Over the following decades their usage in aid expanded and car manufacturers appear to have sought to create demand. This section highlights certain key aspects of the role and developments.

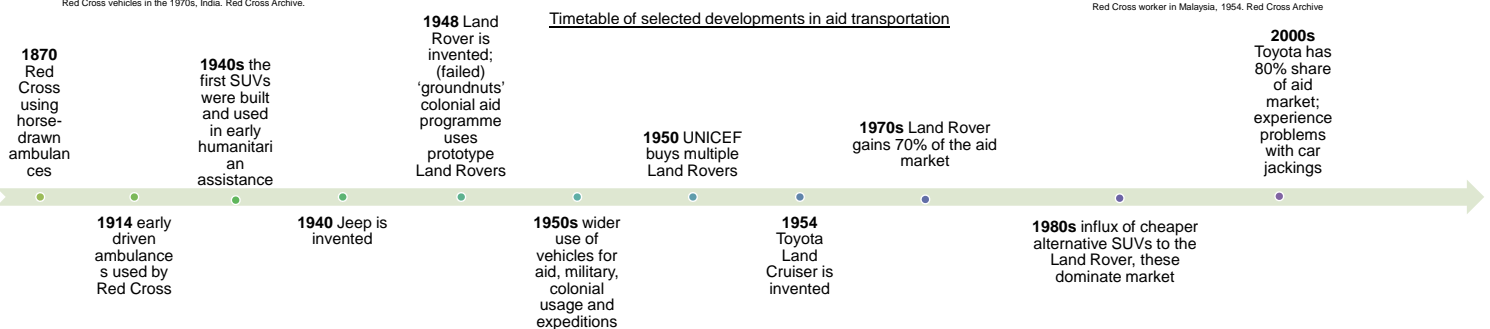


Red Cross vehicles in the 1970s, India. Red Cross Archive.



Red Cross worker in Malaysia, 1954. Red Cross Archive

Timeline of selected developments in aid transportation



Creation of a role

The origins of the role of the SUV in humanitarian assistance arguably began with earlier forms of aid transportation. From the nineteenth century aid agencies were using various modes of transport, including horse-drawn ambulances, ships, trains and forms of driven ambulances (Moorehead, 1998). The usage was often in the form of relief to troops in war but they were also used for instance in disaster relief (Ibid. p.157). These vehicles shared similar aesthetics with the SUV; they were often white and branded with the logo of the organisation. Aid agencies seem to have pursued new modes of transport that improved upon previous performances. The SUV became a standardised mode of transport that has endured for decades.

The early role of the SUV

The first SUVs were used for various forms of humanitarian assistance including colonial projects (Cranthorne, 2010; Birchall, 2010), by the military (Jeep History, 2010) and more familiar aid organisations. The vehicles were valued for their practical purpose of covering difficult terrain (Iskander, 1987, p.19) despite the challenges of driving them. SUVs also began to assume their iconic association with safety and security; during the 1950s war in Malaysia a deal was struck with the local guerrillas that an aid logo on a vehicle was sufficient to protect it from attack, all the Red Cross vehicles came through the war unscathed (Hodgson, 1995, pp.100-1). The variety of reports on SUV usage suggest that in the 1950s SUVs were already being used for humanitarian assistance in many parts of the world.

Political economy

The aid market for SUVs has always been dominated by one manufacturer, with others operating on a smaller scale. Land Rover controlled the market up until the early 1980s when an influx of Japanese manufacturers took over, predominantly Toyota who still commands the market today. These progressions were in part due to wider political economic factors and also reliability problems (Taylor, 2007, p.145; Cranthorne, 2010). Manufacturers had started building vehicles for a leisure market, (Taylor, 2009, p.6) meaning that newer vehicles were far easier to drive and more comfortable, therefore altering the experience of the vehicle for aid workers.

Contemporary

Transportation is generally the second highest cost for aid organisations (Tomasini *et al.*, 2006). Fleet Forum, where over forty aid actors come together to discuss fleet management, estimates US\$800 million is spent annually procuring vehicles. In the past ten years new actors such as Fleet Forum have raised awareness of humanitarian logistics (Fleet Forum, 2010). Suggestions of increased attacks on aid workers and their vehicles has led to a shift away from using SUVs by some aid actors and called into question the extent of their use. The following sections highlight selected contemporary issues.

The brand

Arguably it was in the 1980s that aid became symbolic, particularly since Band Aid (Moeller, 1999, p.118). The SUV became a visible icon of aid (George, 2004). Consequently the aid market has great value to car manufacturers both in terms of direct revenue and brand association for northern (leisure) markets. They promote their vehicles to aid organisations, have partnerships and each year gift vehicles to specific organisations and causes (GM Global Aid, 2010; Sustainability, 2010). With such promotion and newer models of vehicles, it is perhaps unsurprising that aid organisations are using vehicles in locations where their off-road capabilities are not utilised.

New emphasis upon logistics

In the last ten years there has been an increased emphasis upon the importance of humanitarian logistics by aid organisations. Often logistics has not been adequately incorporated into humanitarian thinking. As such the logistics record is patchy with good practice by some aid organisations and distributors, and exceedingly flawed by others (Supply and Demand, 2010; Slavin, 2010). Some distributors likewise had for decades noted bad practice by some humanitarian organisations where vehicles (despite their cost) were treated as disposable (Slavin, 2010). Organisations like Fleet Forum have been part of attempts to rectify flaws.

Current issues

Safety and security is a potent issue of the time. Targeting of SUVs has become a great problem. Research has indicated an increase in attacks on aid workers and aid vehicles. For aid workers, the road has been identified as the most dangerous location (Stoddard *et al.*, 2009). Impacts of violence include: after a spate of carjackings the UN withdrew Toyotas from Darfur (UNAMID, 2009) and organisations removing identification from their vehicles (Dolmetsch, 2008). The majority of literature on safety refers to other problems of dangerous driving, road accidents, environmental degradation and theft (Fleet Forum, 2010).

Conclusion

In conclusion, so far it has been found that the SUV has a long and complex role in humanitarian assistance and that this extends further than being a useful mode of transport. Arguably this role predates the invention of the SUV and much that is associated in usage and aesthetics is found in earlier transportation. But the SUV has achieved a long lasting impact. In part this can be seen as a response to the usefulness and utility of the vehicle, however there are wider implications. The booming market for SUVs that later moved into leisure vehicles leaves a legacy of powerful manufacturers. These manufacturers continued to supply the aid market and later on generated demand for their vehicles. Today brand association with aid is a powerful incentive for manufacturers whilst aid organisations are grappling with issues of logistics and security. New scrutiny on logistics by aid organisations is helping to throw light on the problems of harnessing the SUV effectively whilst minimising harmful impacts.

Future of the research: I will help Lisa Smirl write a research paper based upon this work to be presented in December at the Imperial War Museum. It is anticipated that it will become a part of a wider research proposal on materialities of aid. This work will both continue the empirical investigations and begin to theorise the significance of the inclusion of material and logistical concerns into wider thinking on aid and development.

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