

1.13. A perspective from NGOs

1.13.1. Médecins Sans Frontières

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Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, the world of humanitarian work entered a new phase. At the dawn of the 1990s, changes in the international geo-political, social and economic scene led to a considerable restriction on space wherever independent and neutral aid operations were helping conflict victims. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which pioneers health intervention in war zones, has repeatedly felt the effects of this restriction.

The humanitarian imperative entails providing aid to civilians caught up in armed conflicts or hit by natural catastrophes; the work of MSF is inspired by the founding principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality. These principles require us to abstain from the military and political dynamics of a conflict and to intervene without discrimination, seeing to the real needs of the civilian population. Today these principles are coming under growing pressure. Bullied and constrained by the military, economic interference and political mandates, humanitarian action finds itself operating within increasingly restricted space and its aims are becoming ever more difficult to pursue when humanitarianism is invoked in order to legitimate political agendas.

The end of attrition between East and West, which had characterised the Cold War, marked a radical change in United Nations policies. Between 1948 and 1988, the United Nations Security Council launched 14 peacekeeping missions; in the 1990s, 35 missions were launched in response to the rise in conflicts, with another 6 launched from 2000. Italy's international involvement has also grown, in particular in operations following the Persian Gulf crisis and in the Balkans. Italian contingents have been involved in 108 missions, 77 of which have been led by international organizations of which Italy is a member¹.

Today the UN needs to respond to a series of complex emergencies while juggling political, military and humanitarian issues all at the same time. Its range of duties has increased and now includes distributing humanitarian aid, disarmament and demobilization, creating a safe environment for elections, reporting violations of international human rights, as well as monitoring and controlling ceasefires. The Council's new role continued throughout the 1990s, during which time peacekeeping missions turned from limited intervention to stop fighting between warring factions to complex peacekeeping and reconstruction missions in countries plagued by civil war and ethnic conflict².

The majority of these missions, however, had no specific political or military

mandate; instead they were governed by a general humanitarian mandate. Since then a new interventionist doctrine has taken shape, one based on the presumed right to intervene on humanitarian grounds. The first major example was Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, where killing in the name of humanitarianism took place for the first time³; then came the NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999. Since the 1990s, many States have used humanitarian aid as an integral part of their military strategy, causing serious damage to the underlying principle of humanitarian action, i.e. unconditional and impartial care for anyone who needs it. The conflicts in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq can be used to symbolize situations in which reaching and aiding victims independently is becoming increasingly complex⁴.

Analyzing the aid system: proliferation of actors and new trends

The 1990s were marked by a proliferation of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in crisis-hit areas. According to a human development report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2002, almost one-fifth of the 37,000 NGOs operating at that time were set up in the 1990s*. This was an era of “new wars” that resorted to driving out populations with economic, political and psychological intimidation, which led to a reversal in the military-civilian casualty ratio: last century 8 soldiers died for every 1 civilian killed; today it is 8 civilians for every 1 soldier⁵. As a result, both international presence and crisis response have become more sophisticated and visible. This proliferation of new actors is at the root of UN reform, which is geared towards coordinating aid and humanitarian actors in accordance with political integration strategies. This reform was also set in motion by the moral imperative of finding long-term solutions to people’s needs and to the idea that once humanitarian action had achieved its primary purpose of saving human lives, it could pave a wider path towards peace and development. In other words, institutional donors and multilateral organizations are seeking to fit humanitarian action and that of emergency organizations into procedures that in theory will rationalize and improve the international aid system, but in actual fact confirm what has been said since the Brahimi Report in 2000**, i.e. that humanitarian action is subordinate to political objectives.

We have already seen clear evidence of the risks involved in attempting to use the same rationale for both humanitarian and political activity:

In the 1990s in Sierra Leone civilians who lived in areas controlled by Revolutionary United Front (RUF) guerrillas were abandoned in a “tactical” move carried out for political and military purposes;

* http://hdr.undp.org/xmlsearch/reportSearch?y=2002&c=* &t=* &k=&orderby=year

** This report is one of the most important studies on UN peace operations and peacekeeping. Research was conducted by 10 experts appointed by the UN Secretary General and coordinated by Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi. The report aimed to reply to the concerns of many UN members (including the USA) that the UN system was not adequately prepared in financial or management terms to deal with the increase in major peacekeeping activities and missions.

For the full report see http://www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations/

In Angola in 2002 civilians who lived in areas controlled by rebels belonging to the National Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) were isolated in the same way; it was only possible to take aid to these people once a peace agreement had been signed. As a result MSF had to deal with one of the worst food emergencies it had ever seen⁶.

In both cases, aid was only provided for “good” victims⁷, namely the ones whose survival did not jeopardize the plan’s success; thus entire populations were deliberately cut off from aid and sacrificed in the name of political and military strategies in order to bring peace.

The progressive politicization of aid is clear from the definition that the UN gives to these “integrated missions”⁸, which are described as “an instrument with which the UN seeks to help countries in the transition from war to lasting peace, or to address a similarly complex situation that requires a system-wide UN response, through subsuming actors and approaches within an overall political-strategic crisis management framework”⁹.

This involves designing comprehensive responses that combine political, military, civil and humanitarian objectives. In an international scene that teems with private actors, one conditioned by government funding and thus driven by political objectives, the UN’s system appointed itself the director of a new model for organizing aid and support policy. Reiterating the importance of its integrated approach, the UN sought to institutionalize a coordinated emergency response that was consistent with the objectives of international political agendas. The reform was divided into three closely linked parts: the construction of so-called “clusters”, which aimed to strengthen coordination and ability to respond in specific areas where each group was captained by a UN agency; launch the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) as a centralized instrument that would finance crisis response; and strengthen the role of a Humanitarian Coordinator.

The ambiguities of this move, however, became clear immediately. When humanitarian workers operate within a wider, coordinated effort that aims to achieve political objectives such as peace and development, they wind up losing sight of their basic and immediate priorities: saving lives, providing quality care, building shelters, distributing water and basic items, and digging latrines. MSF, however, is convinced that the humanitarian imperative of saving lives and meeting immediate needs must be the only objectives of humanitarian aid, ones that are independent and thus often incompatible with the political solutions to a crisis.

Impact analysis of UN reforms on humanitarian space

An MSF study conducted from July 2006 to July 2007ⁱ revealed that the UN’s humanitarian reforms were an extension of its integrated peacekeeping missions.

ⁱ Research was conducted in Darfur, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Haiti, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Iraq, Somalia and Uganda. See Stobbaerts E, Martin S, Derderian K. Integration and UN Humanitarian Reforms. *Forced Migration Review*, 2007, 29, pp. 18-20.

The reform's aid framework relegates humanitarian action to a role subordinate to economic, military, diplomatic and security issues. The UN Secretary General's Note of Guidance on Integrated Missions in 2006ⁱⁱ reiterates the importance of integrated peace missions in order to ensure "effective coordination between the mission, UN agencies and other external partners" and "a willingness by all actors to contribute toward the achievement of common objectives".

On one hand, although coordinated intervention geared towards reducing waste and abuse is laudable, on the other efforts to coordinate aid often produce duplications and excessive bureaucratization of work. In Liberia, for instance, there are three liaison bodies that perform more or less the same job: the cluster led by the World Health Organization; the Liaison Committee run by the Ministry of Health; and the Forum for Health run by a range of NGOs. These bodies coexist alongside work groups dealing with specific pathologies (such as HIV) and with the usual bi-weekly meeting between NGOs and the UN. It is no coincidence that Monrovia is called "the city of meetings".

The most worrying aspect of the cluster approach, however, is that strategic planning involves different actors with objectives and mandates that are often diametrically opposed.

Some experiences have highlighted the weakness of humanitarian intervention when it is carried out within a coordinated system driven by political needs.

Confusing political objectives (such as peace) with humanitarian objectives often winds up compromising the efficiency of the latter, as happened in Darfur. In May 2006, a peace agreement was signed, but it only involved one group of rebels that opposed the government in Khartoum. After this agreement, all of the indicators showed that security in this area deteriorated both for humanitarian workers and the local population because of further splintering among rebel groups. Yet despite this, the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS)ⁱⁱⁱ and the vast majority of donor countries stressed the counter exodus of refugees towards their home villages as a valid indicator of the diplomatic success of the peace agreement. Consequently, although the urgent needs of the local population remained the same, much of the funds for Darfur were funnelled from emergency response to repatriation programmes, which also encouraged refugees to return to their villages despite the fact that their safety could not be guaranteed.

CERF funding, which is supposed to go to the most needy, is often used to promote the general (political) objectives of UN missions and thus is put towards stabilization programmes that are oriented towards structural reform or transition strategies¹⁰. For example, 75% of the first three instalments that the CERF send to Haiti were mainly used to fund infrastructure and rebuilding work in politically visible areas, plus structural and long-term projects geared towards ensuring security rather than humanitarian needs.

Integration and consistency with increasingly politicized operations are undermin-

ⁱⁱ www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/missions/sgnote.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations Mission in Sudan. This UN peacekeeping mission was set up to ensure the observance of the Nairobi peace agreements, signed on 9 January 2005, which sought to end the conflict in Sudan.

ing the already fragile image of neutrality and independence that humanitarian actors have in the eyes of local populations. The security of international humanitarian workers and their room for manoeuvre is increasingly associated with the credibility of the flag under which they operate and with their declaration of absolute neutrality. The only protection that humanitarian actors have is their clear image, which must reflect their position as external to a conflict and the transparency of their intentions. Their sole objective is to bring aid to victims. This objective must be even clearer in countries such as Iraq, Somalia and Darfur, where the local populations regard humanitarian workers as intent on pursuing political or partisan objectives rather than as impartial, neutral actors who are working to help those most in need.

Conclusions

In the light of these developments, it is even more urgent to emphasize the need for an independent, impartial and neutral approach. The politicization of aid has led to a transformation in the concept of humanitarian assistance and poses a threat to the independence of humanitarian action. Consequently the aim of this action stops being to relieve the suffering of crisis-hit populations and takes on a more programmatic meaning, which always entails making political choices. It not only aims to treat the “symptoms”, but also sets out to find a cure to the “disease”.

There is a natural tension between short-term interventions to save lives and long-term objectives geared towards peace and State building. This tension is the essence of humanitarian action and the efforts to integrate these two opposites end up thwarting it.

Consequently, although MSF communicates with UN coordinators in order to share information and operational choices, it does not intend to participate in the collective effort to coordinate humanitarian response. A need for independence should not be confused with a desire for isolation, but emphasizes that the strength of humanitarian action lies in the indiscriminate defence of all victims and in reminding States of their duties and responsibilities.

References

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- ⁵ M. Kaldor, *Le Nuove Guerre. La violenza organizzata nell'età globale*, Carocci, Roma 2007.
- ⁶ See the MSF report; http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2002/angola1_10-2002.pdf
- ⁷ F. Weissman, see above.
- ⁸ Report on Integrated Missions: Practical Perspectives and Recommendations, Independent Study for the Expanded UN ECHA Core Group, May 2005.
- ⁹ See above, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ See M. Duffield, *Relief in War Zones: Towards an Analysis of the New Aid Paradigm*, in *Third World Paradigm*, volume 18, number 3, September 1997, pp. 527-542.