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Strengthening the humanity and dignity of people in crisis through knowledge and practice



Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Final Report

## **The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise**

Antonio Donini (team leader), Larissa Fast, Greg Hansen,  
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# Feinstein International Center

The Feinstein International Center develops and promotes operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives and livelihoods of people living in crisis-affected and -marginalized communities. FIC works globally in partnership with national and international organizations to bring about institutional changes that enhance effective policy reform and promote best practice.

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**Cover and interior image: Men carry flour down a mountainside following the Pakistan Earthquake. Photograph by Andrew Wilder.**

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Sri Lanka's Kalutara Beach as water recedes immediately after the 2004 Tsunami. Image courtesy of Digital Globe.



## Humanitarian Agenda 2015: The Core Messages

**T**his report summarizes the findings of a major research project on the constraints, challenges, and compromises affecting humanitarian action in conflict and crisis settings. The building blocks are 12 case studies of local perceptions of humanitarian action, conducted in 2006 and 2007 in Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Liberia, Nepal, northern Uganda, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Sudan.

**The approach** is evidence-based. Findings have been distilled through an inductive process involving interviews and focus group discussions at the community level aimed at eliciting local perceptions on the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise. Additional data was collected through interviews with aid staff and other knowledgeable observers at the country level. All in all, more than 2,000 people provided inputs into the research.

**The findings** are analyzed around four “petals” or issues:

- the *universality* of humanitarianism;
- the impact of *terrorism and counter-terrorism* on humanitarian action;
- the thrust toward *coherence* between humanitarian and political agendas;
- the *security* of humanitarian personnel and the communities benefiting from humanitarian action.

Each of these issues has a bearing on the others.

The findings highlight a crisis of humanitarianism in the post 9/11 world. International action aimed at assisting and protecting the most vulnerable is, for the most part, inextricably linked to a northern security and political agenda. Nevertheless, principled humanitarian action, though battered at times, constitutes an essential safety net for people *in extremis* deserving of nurture and protection. Such action occupies a crucial but increasingly precarious position at the intersection of (a) international political/security agendas and (b) the coping strategies of people affected by crisis and conflict. It is instrumentalized and torn between principle and pragmatism as perhaps never before, particularly in high-profile crises.

Though the traditional values of humanitarianism still resonate among affected communities in all of the settings studied, the humanitarian enterprise is itself divided on the extent to which core principles should be respected, particularly in the more asymmetrical and intractable crises they have to confront. This disquiet affects the quality and coherence of the assistance and protection provided.

To confirm that humanitarians need to be wary of politics even as they ply their trade in highly politicized settings is nothing new. Throughout the Cold War, the pressure to incorporate aid agencies into political designs—a pressure to which some agencies acquiesced—was always present. Such good—or misguided—intentions were present even in earlier days.<sup>1</sup> What is new in the post-Cold

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<sup>1</sup> Reputable NGOs did not hesitate to take sides at the time of the Bolshevik revolution. During World War II some were embedded (and in uniform) within Allied fighting units.

War and post-9/11 eras is that the stakes are much higher because the extent of need has proliferated, the awareness of need has become more instantaneous and more global, and humanitarian action has become a multi-billion dollar enterprise. When it occupied the margins of conflict—as, for example, in refugee camps outside conflict areas—humanitarian action was an activity of generally minor consequence to belligerents. Aid agencies were accepted or tolerated as beneficial, or at least non-threatening. Now humanitarian action is very often at the center of conflicts and of international concern. It influences, as well as reflects, public opinion and the views of governments at the national and global levels.

Moreover, politicization, militarization, and privatization nowadays represent more of a challenge for those parts of a diverse enterprise striving for a modicum of fidelity to principle. Many mainstream agencies have been drawn implicitly or explicitly into the service of political agendas. Only a minority have exhibited the policy determination and financial wherewithal to resist. It thus remains debatable whether the assortment of agencies and individuals that comprise the humanitarian enterprise can—or should—maintain the fiction that they are all part of the same movement, functioning as parts of a common apparatus.

Our data also confirm that the humanitarian enterprise has become much more institutionalized. Standards have gained currency, programs have become more contextualized, and professionalism has improved. Yet despite the rhetoric of downward accountability to beneficiaries, mainstream humanitarians continue to talk principally to the like-minded, shunning different or dissenting voices. Much that is local and non-western in humanitarian action goes unrecognized: the coping mechanisms of communities, the parallel life-saving universe that includes *zakat*, migration and remittances. These constitute the unrecorded assistance flows of groups and countries that are not part of the northern-driven humanitarian system.

**The wider meaning.** Our findings confirm the good news that humanitarian action, which we define to include protection as well as assistance efforts, remains an essential—and sometimes dominant—element in the international response to crisis and conflict. Increasingly, it is a factor in the undertakings and calculations of political and military players. However, the bad news is that humanitarianism’s high-profile status entails a constant risk of misunderstanding, false expectation, and delusions of grandeur. There is a persistent and worrying perception gap between outsiders and insiders—that is, between aid agencies and the communities they aim to help.

Despite examples of creative problem-solving, humanitarians have not acquitted themselves well in protecting the integrity of humanitarian interests and operations from recurrent infiltrations of political and military actors. Absent the cultivation of greater resourcefulness and resilience, therefore, we fear for the future of the humanitarian enterprise.



## Introduction

This final report presents the overall findings of the Feinstein International Center's *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions* (HA2015) research project. Since early 2006, a multi-disciplinary team from the Center has been canvassing perceptions of the work of humanitarian agencies from the bottom up—focusing on the perceptions of communities and individuals who benefit from, or observe the functioning of, the humanitarian enterprise. This report distills the key messages from those most directly concerned at field level. The evidence builds a composite picture, identifying issues likely to prove critical for the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise in the coming years.

Individual country case studies of local perceptions are the building blocks around which the research has been organized.<sup>1</sup> Six case studies were conducted in 2006—Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Liberia, northern Uganda and Sudan—on the basis of which a Preliminary Report was published<sup>2</sup> and extensive briefings undertaken to disseminate the initial findings. Six additional case studies were conducted in 2007—on the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)<sup>3</sup>, Iraq, DRC and Sri Lanka. A case study on the Pakistan earthquake was finalized in early in 2008 and the final case study, on Nepal, will be available in April 2008.

The second set of case studies confirms, strengthens, and broadens the findings of the initial set. In addition, new issues have emerged such as the continuing importance of neutrality in asymmetrical wars, the implications of counter-terrorism legislation for humanitarian agencies, the challenges of humanitarian action in

disasters associated with natural hazards, the role of the military in crises, and the ambivalence of hearts-and-minds operations by the military. A related study on the experiences of US National Guard personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq (published by FIC in September 2007) reinforces the study's findings and highlights a few issues of its own.<sup>4</sup>

The four key issues around which the material from the start was organized remain relevant: the **universality** of the humanitarian endeavor, the implications of **terrorism and counter-terrorism** for humanitarian action, the tensions inherent in the prevailing pressure to ensure **coherence** between humanitarian and political pursuits, and the **security** of humanitarian staff and civilian populations. The most recent studies confirm not only the importance of each of the four issues but also the dynamic interrelationships between and among them.

Even before the publication of this final report, there was considerable interest in our findings and recommendations. Our researchers have conducted more than 30 briefings for donors, UN agencies and NGOs as well as for academics and policy analysts. In the cases of Afghanistan, Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, the findings have been “brought back” to government officials and other sources of input in the crisis areas. These debriefings were particularly well received. Follow-up work will continue with briefings on the key messages in this report as well as with shorter policy papers and international workshops throughout 2008.

As Humanitarian Agenda 2015 has gained visibility over time, FIC has been increasingly called upon by donors, UN humanitarian agencies, and NGOs, individually and collectively, to reflect and advise on “big picture” issues. The Iraq case study, in particular, seems to have struck a sensitive chord. It was circulated widely in the United States and among donors and UN

1 All HA2015 materials are available at <http://fic.tufts.edu/?pid=32>.

2 Donini, Minear et al., *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles Power and Perceptions. Preliminary Report*. Feinstein International Center. Tufts University, Medford MA, 2006. <http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/HA2015PreliminaryReport.pdf>.

3 In this report, we follow United Nations nomenclature and use the terms “occupied Palestinian territory” or “oPt” to refer to Palestine.

4 Larry Minear, *The U.S. Citizen-Soldier and the Global War on Terror: The National Guard Experience*. Feinstein International Center, Medford, September 2007. [http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/NG\\_Study\\_for\\_internet.pdf](http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/NG_Study_for_internet.pdf).

## Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Building Blocks

All reports available at <http://fic.tufts.edu>

### *Afghanistan Country Study*

By Antonio Donini

June 2006

### *Northern Uganda Country Study*

By Elizabeth Stites

June 2006

### *Sudan Country Study*

By Tasneem Mowjee

July 2006

### *Burundi and Liberia Country Studies*

By Xavier Zeebroek

July 2006

### *Colombia Country Study*

By Larry Minear

July 2006

### *Aid in a Pressure Cooker: Humanitarian Action in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*

By Larissa Fast

November 2006

### *Taking Sides or Saving Lives: Existential Choices for the Humanitarian Enterprise in Iraq*

By Greg Hansen

June 2007

### *The US Citizen-Soldier and the Global War on Terror: The National Guard Experience*

By Larry Minear

September 2007

### *Sri Lanka Country Study*

October 2007

### *Democratic Republic of Congo Case Study*

Tasneem Mowjee

October 2007

### *Perceptions of the Pakistan Earthquake Response*

Andrew Wilder

February 2008

### *Nepal Case Study*

By Antonio Donini and Jeevan Raj Sharma

April 2008

agencies, at their headquarters as well as in Amman and in Iraq. It has contributed to debates on the challenges of addressing the humanitarian crisis and has resulted in specific requests for follow-up discussions by UN agencies on the ground. If resources become available, FIC will continue to monitor developments and conduct follow-up activities, workshops, and research in some of the countries studied, notably Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

The interest generated by our work confirms that FIC, a university-based social science research group, is increasingly counted on to identify the political constraints affecting humanitarian action and to formulate practical strategies for practitioners. The HA2015 case studies highlight the complex interrelationships

between humanitarian action and political forces, validating the FIC's time-tested approach of confronting and delineating such complexities in its research and policy work. In our view, sound evidence-based research is critical to policy development.

## Methods and Concepts

We have organized the research around the four “petals” of universality, terrorism/counterterrorism, coherence, and security, each of them examined through the prism of local perceptions. This heuristic device has proven serviceable and worthwhile. The fieldwork has generated a wealth of data—not all of which is conveyed here. The detailed case studies will continue to be “mined”





Map of countries studied

in the coming months for the preparation of additional outputs.

We are satisfied with the quality of the data generated through interviews and focus groups at the local or community level. Working inductively, we have built a composite picture of issues and how they are perceived from the ground up. The result, however, is more about meanings than facts. It constitutes a record of people's judgments and concerns rather than a historical reconstruction of events and outcomes. In this respect, the methodology resonates, in approach and findings, with research endeavors by colleagues in some other agencies.<sup>5</sup> While the methods employed have been generally consistent across the dozen case studies, there were some variations. Constraints and context-specific problems are explained in the methodology sections of individual case studies.<sup>6</sup>

A few of these constraints, however, need to be highlighted at the outset, especially those relating to research in volatile or insecure environments. The Iraq case study, for obvious security reasons, necessitated recruitment of local research teams from their respective communities. Interviewing by the same researcher across different ethnic/sectarian boundaries would have been impossible. Local researchers were also employed in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal because of linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as the absence of security. As in other research situations, the FIC team was often confronted with the problem of filtering by "gatekeepers" (i.e., the individuals and organizations assisting in facilitating access to a particular area or organizing meetings for us). The impact of this filtering, and of a related tendency by locals to focus on what "foreigners

want to hear", was reduced by diversifying the range of respondents and by discouraging gatekeeper presence at focus group sessions.

The insider-outsider dynamic described in our *Preliminary Report*<sup>7</sup> emerges as a key variable from our analysis of the views that participants shared in interviews.<sup>8</sup> The definition of an "outsider" is, naturally, largely in the eye of the beholder. Foreigners in big white vehicles are outsiders *par excellence*. But a national NGO worker arriving in a village on a bedraggled motorbike may also be seen as an outsider. Moreover, being national, or even local, is not a guarantee of acceptability. Often, foreigners are seen as more neutral and impartial, less corrupt, and therefore more acceptable than locals. Our research points to the importance of cultural sensitivity, but also—somewhat contradictorily—to the importance for "outsiders" to explain who they are and what they stand for, including through more vigorous advocacy for fundamental humanitarian principles.<sup>9</sup>

A conceptual difficulty that deserves early mention relates to the way in which humanitarian actors situate themselves in relation to issues of social transformation and institutional change. Where do neutrality and impartiality end and engagement with unresponsive power structures and odious social practices begin? There is a fine line between the provision of life-saving assistance and the promotion of measures to avoid future crises, between emergency response and the tackling of structural inequalities—in short, between humanitarian action and development, or, in a broader sense, politics. Some practitioners and organizations deliberately cross

5 For example, the multi-country "Listening Project", coordinated by Mary B. Anderson at the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects <http://www.cdainc.com>.

6 Information on methodological issues and survey tools utilized is available in more detail in each of the case studies and on the FIC website.

7 pp. 9-10.

8 For a description of how that dynamic was illustrated by humanitarian activities in Iraq, see the discussion in the Iraq case study (p. 33).

9 The DRC case study provides a number of illuminating examples of local capacity. See, for example, Box 2, p. 10.



**A group of women in Kabul examine the HA2015 Preliminary Report (November 2006). The Feinstein International Center team reconvened some of the original focus groups to bring back the preliminary findings to those that provided the information. Photograph by Antonio Donini.**

this line. A few affirm the need to remain squarely on the humanitarian side of it, while many are either unaware of it or choose not to see the line. There are situations in which it is unavoidable or even constructive to have a variety of approaches proceeding in tandem. Yet our findings point to the need, particularly in asymmetrical wars and highly fraught political contexts, for more situational analysis and a clearer definition of agency roles and objectives in such contexts. This is essential for maintaining a protected space for independent and neutral humanitarian action.

We are aware that our dozen country studies, summarized in this final report, contain a mind-boggling array of data. Sorting and analyzing the data by country, by actor, by position on a conflict continuum (from hot war to reconstruction to development) is a major challenge, as is the broader institutional learning process that emerges from the specificities of individual country experience. We encourage our readers to seek out the individual studies, excerpts from which are reprinted in boxes in this final report, in order to test our conclusions and reach their own on the issues we discuss.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to the labors of the authors of the case studies, this endeavor would not have been possible without the conceptual and practical encouragement

of Peter Walker, director of the Feinstein International Center (FIC), and Ian Smillie, a long time FIC associate, who participated in the team's several reviews of the country studies and provided comments on drafts of our reports. Editorial assistance was expertly provided by Tim Morris. Thanks are also due to the local research teams (some of whom cannot be identified for security reasons), to the translators who assisted in individual countries, and to UN and other agencies—in particular, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), CARE, the German development agency GTZ, Save the Children (US), and World Vision International—who provided much valued intellectual input, logistical support, access and advice on do's and don'ts in addition to providing accommodation for our teams on the ground.

Generous funding from the Ford Foundation and the governments of Australia, Denmark, Netherlands, and the United States is also gratefully acknowledged. In addition, we are grateful to the Brookings Bern Project on Internal Displacement, OCHA, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), InterAction, Médecins sans Frontières (the German and Swiss MSF sections) and the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva for collaboration in the organization and underwriting of our briefings.

With an eye to our ongoing work on these issues, we welcome comments, criticisms, and other input from the readers of this report.



## Four Petals of a Wilting Flower

In this section we summarize our core findings. The four “petals” which provided the framework for our 2006 country studies are revisited in the light of the 2007 research. In some instances, our 2007 research confirms and strengthens our 2006 findings, while in others it nuances or modifies them. Both the cross-cultural vibrancy of humanitarian values and the systemic weaknesses of the humanitarian enterprise are again highlighted. Areas in which our most recent case studies venture into new territory include issues around the operational importance of neutrality, the complexities of the humanitarian-development relationship, the role of personalities in humanitarian response, and, in the case of the Pakistan earthquake, the special dynamics of humanitarian response in a non-conflict setting where the military played a key role.

### (a) Universality

The importance of the feature of universality in the framing and conduct of the humanitarian enterprise emerges clearly from all six of the 2007 case studies and from the National Guard review. Humanitarianism is a global good, broadly recognized the world over. A common core of humanitarian values is confirmed in all the country studies, although these values may be interpreted differently from place to place reflecting the particular experiences of conflict and crisis. The occasional naysayer denying the universality of humanitarian action underscores the breadth of the acknowledgement of humanitarian obligations.

In those exceptional cases where the concept of humanitarian action is challenged—for example, early Maoist refusals of aid in Nepal as “imperialistic”—the rejection was more a function of lack of information than of deep-seated or well-considered opposition. Only al-Qaeda, it seems, maintains an outright rejectionist stance. Many belligerent groups, of course, want to manipulate humanitarian action to their advantage or, as with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, to accept the humanitarian undertaking only on their own terms. Even the Taliban, which had often targeted aid workers, has recently developed a

more nuanced position. The Taliban have come to distinguish between the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), with whose principles they have no quarrel, and the “corrupt agencies” that have taken the side of the government and the US-led coalition forces.<sup>10</sup>

In setting after setting, core humanitarian principles are tested by the prevailing agendas of local and external political actors. In fact, our data shows that the higher the international political stakes are for major donors (for example, Iraq, and oPt), the stronger the perceived need—from the perspective of communities themselves—to respect humanitarian principles. Even in Iraq, despite the toxic political and security environment, there remains a strong resonance between the core elements of the “Dunantist” ethos and Islamic and Iraqi understandings of what “good charity” entails. Neutrality and impartiality are not theoretical concepts or pie-in-the-sky constructs; they are essential ingredients for effective humanitarian action. “Neutrality is not an abstract notion in Iraq,” our country study concluded, “but is regarded by communities and most remaining humanitarian organizations as an essential protection against targeted attack.”<sup>11</sup>

Our country data illustrates a number of variations on the basic theme of universality. There is no situation where humanitarian action is totally principled and allowed to operate as such. Nor do all humanitarians strive to insulate their activities from politics, advocacy, or expressions of solidarity. In fact, the differing approaches to their missions and their differing readings of the political-military situations they encounter make for significant and sometimes counterproductive variations.

10 See Reuters, September 27th, 2007 story on kidnapping of four ICRC staff: “Our mujahideen detained the Red Cross workers in Wardak province without knowing they were ICRC staff,” said a Taliban spokesman who declined to be named. “We have nothing against the Red Cross and we are going to release them soon.” <http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKISL23909020070927>.

11 Iraq Study, p. 16.

## TALIBAN LOGIC

*The UN was established to ensure the rights of nations, but now this organization supports one side in Afghanistan and wants to eliminate the other side. Therefore the new UN representative, Kai Eide, will not achieve success. . . . The Taliban view [him] as NATO's general and not as the UN secretary general's representative because he has also worked with NATO.*

—Statement attributed to Taliban spokesman Zabihollah Mojahed, Afghan Islamic Press, March 8th, 2008, [www.afghanislamicpress.com](http://www.afghanislamicpress.com)

“Iraq,” we conclude, “has been a seismic event for virtually all humanitarian organizations in the theatre, and the tectonic plates underpinning their various philosophical leanings seem to have shifted for the duration. Discussions with UN agencies and NGOs regarding the implications of terrorism and counter-terrorism continue to elicit strong emotions and substantial resentment. Dunantist-leaning organizations remain bitter over successive compromises, in their view, of principle to pragmatism . . . and argue that the choices made and the paths followed by the UN system and many NGO colleagues have had severe consequences for the entire humanitarian apparatus.”<sup>12</sup> Not only in Iraq but also elsewhere, “humanitarian ideals have the potential to unite, but humanitarian practice divides.”<sup>13</sup>

The alignment of major international NGOs, whether by institutional conviction or as a by-product of their funding sources, with the foreign policy objectives of donor governments is a fact of life in high-stakes political crises such as the oPt and Iraq. Such alignments had forerunners from Vietnam to Afghanistan. National NGOs also struggle with the challenge of positioning themselves in relation to the political objectives of governments, whether host or donor. In oPt, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Colombia, where vibrant civil societies exist, many agencies openly engage in advocacy and human rights as an explicit extension of their humanitarian portfolios.

From the perspective of the affected communities, affiliations to the political agendas of donor governments do not appear to be a cause of major concern, except to the extent that political baggage directly affects

the quality of the assistance and protection provided. This is most evident in Iraq—where the animosity vis-à-vis agencies seen as linked to “the occupier” was palpable—as well as Palestine and Afghanistan, where the UN aid agencies and NGOs are widely seen as “guilty by association” with donor-promoted political frameworks and where the anti-terrorist legislation of donor countries directly affects the conduct of humanitarian action. Our Iraq study found that some Iraqis expressed a preference for assistance provided by local relief charities and mosques, reflecting the reality that it was “virtually impossible to distinguish between the roles and activities of local and international actors, including military forces, political actors and other authorities, for-profit contractors, international NGOs, local NGOs, and UN agencies.”<sup>14</sup>

Protracted crises, as in Sri Lanka and the oPt, present another variant on the theme of challenges to the universality of humanitarian action. In these countries, some local actors see western humanitarian activities as a suspect tool for “normalization”—a placebo for making an intolerable political situation a little less intolerable. This leads to an erosion of acceptability and of security for aid agency staff. In Nepal and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the element of politicization is largely absent, although in the latter instance, some Congolese “did not understand why humanitarian organizations worked on all sides of the conflict,” thereby endangering the security of aid staff.<sup>15</sup>

The experience related to the Pakistan earthquake is instructive. The first organizations to respond in the immediate aftermath of the 2005 earthquake were

12 Iraq study, p. 29.

13 Iraq study, p. 15.

14 Iraq study, p. 44.

15 DRC study, p. 11.



## VARIATIONS ON A THEME: A TYPOLOGY OF HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

**Principled.** Some aid agencies and personnel affirm the continued relevance, indispensability, and centrality of principles. This is particularly true of those with a long history of operating in conflict settings and with roots in the “Dunantist” tradition—i.e. based on the basic tenets of humanitarianism developed by Henri Dunant, the founder of the ICRC. In general, the proponents of principle-centered action argue for a narrower definition of humanitarianism limited to life-saving assistance and protection of civilians, based on core principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Many are wary of accepting funds contributed by governments and eschew engagement in reconstruction activities or more ostensibly political endeavors such as advocacy for human rights.

**Pragmatist.** Other agencies recognize the importance of principles but place a higher premium on action, even when this means putting core principles in jeopardy. Prominent among those of the pragmatist persuasion are “Wilsonian” agencies: those that identify broadly with the foreign policy objectives of their home government, whose funds they often utilize. Many US NGOs fall into this category. Others, particularly European NGOs, tend to position themselves more independently and rely less on earmarked government funding than their US counterparts.

**Solidarist.** A third path, embraced by some NGOs on both sides of the Atlantic, goes beyond the provision of assistance and protection to address the root causes of conflict, which are political at the core. Wider than the traditional humanitarian brief, their anti-poverty thrust and social transformation agenda mixes elements from humanitarian, human rights, and developmental world views, with heavy emphasis on advocacy.

**Faith-based.** The world’s major religious traditions, western and non-western alike, embody humanitarian affirmations and obligations. The Christian tradition, expressed for example in missionary work, affirms the core values of compassion and charitable service. Islam embraces similar core values and has created organizations to express them that are in some respects similar to western religion-rooted NGOs. In addition to international faith-based agencies that do not usually engage in proselytising, there is a wide variety of religious organizations at the local level. Faith-based entities may themselves embody principled, pragmatist, and/or solidarist features. They also vary in the extent to which they are linked to established churches or other religious entities. (For a grid showing which positions these various agencies have in relation to each other, see the Iraq case study, p. 68.)

mostly national groups. These included Islamic organizations (some of which were militant *jihadi* entities proscribed by US terrorist lists), local NGOs, and the Pakistan Army—joined by the few international NGOs already working in the area at the time of the earthquake. Even following the arrival of numerous international civilian and military relief teams and mainstream international agencies, our case study notes, “the image of thousands of Pakistani citizens volunteering alongside organizations as diverse as the US military, Islamic organizations branded by the UN and US as “terrorist,” and Cuban medical teams, was a very powerful symbol of the universality of humanitarian action.”<sup>16</sup>

Our 2007 case studies reconfirm the tension between insiders and outsiders arising from the cultural and political “baggage” that aid agencies bring to the com-

munities they serve. The nuances are different, but the message is the same: the provision of aid is a top-down, externally driven, and relatively rigid process that allows little space for local participation beyond formalistic consultation. Much of what happens escapes local scrutiny and control. The system is viewed as inflexible, arrogant, and culturally insensitive. This is sometimes exacerbated by inappropriate personal behavior, conspicuous consumption, and other manifestations of the “white car syndrome”. Never far from the surface are perceptions that the aid system does not deliver on expectations, is expat-heavy and “corrupted” by the long chain of intermediaries between distant capitals and would-be beneficiaries. In other words, seen from below, the enterprise reflects the expectation that humanitarian theatres should adapt to it, rather than the reverse.

<sup>16</sup> Pakistan case study, p. 25.

*I got the reputation for being the NGOs' [cleric]. In my Friday sermons I say that the allegations that NGOs are trying to change your religion is a stupid issue. I tell them, "Are the wildlife NGOs trying to change the religion of the birds and the monkeys? Is our Islam so weak that someone can easily change our religion?" We've seen billions of rupees of aid distributed but we've not met anyone who's changed their religion.*

—Interview quoted in Pakistan study, p. 26

This last finding clashes with an implicit self-confidence among outsiders—based on assumed “universal values”—and with the contradictory, yet oft-expressed greater trust that local communities have in international groups over national agencies. “Foreigners know best,” people sometimes say, meaning that foreigners are more unbiased and better able to resist the corruption to which local agencies are more prone. But if nothing changes in the lives of those in need of assistance and protection as time goes by, trust may well turn into animosity, or worse. The mood swing can be brutally quick, as with the fall from grace of the UN mission to Nepal after the second postponement, in late 2007, of the Constituent Assembly polls. In Sri Lanka as well, the acceptance of foreign agencies has frequently been hostage to political fortune. Humanitarian organizations need to be constantly aware that however welcome they feel during the emergency phase of a crisis, their efforts are ultimately living on borrowed time.

The case study of the Pakistan earthquake raises a host of new issues pertaining to the role of foreign and domestic militaries in responding to non-conflict-related disasters, as well as to universality issues in such contexts. By and large, the Pakistani military played a very positive role in leading and coordinating the relief phase. The US military, too, were widely seen as effective. The welcome of Pakistan's military nevertheless waned as the crisis stabilized, highlighting the need for a clearly delimited definition of the role of the military in humanitarian response, especially with regard to exit strategies. As time passed, the acceptability of other actors also became problematic. Cuban female medical personnel, although sometimes inappropriately dressed in western garb, were more acceptable to conservative mountain communities than the modestly-dressed female staff of Pakistani NGOs. In a sense, the latter were perceived as more foreign than the foreigners.

Again, as efforts in Pakistan turned to reconstruction, cultural sensitivity became a larger issue. Communities

and their leaders were no longer united in their acceptance of outsiders; political and religious tensions re-emerged and were accompanied by a deterioration of security for aid workers. This points to another finding: the humanitarian “literacy” of affected populations is context- and time-specific. Their embrace of humanitarian action and actors will vary depending on whether the assistance received corresponds to expectations and the level of information available. Perceptions and communication gaps plague the insider-outsider relationship. They should be anticipated and prevented.

Respondents' views regarding the cultural insensitivity of aid workers raise an important issue. While international aid workers commonly accuse each other of being culturally insensitive, most Pakistani respondents blamed non-local national staff for the majority of problems caused by cultural insensitivity. Many local communities viewed the behavior of foreigners as simply “foreign”, while all Pakistani staff—especially female staff—were expected to behave as “locals”. This issue of “locals within locals” highlights the need in culturally diverse contexts to be aware of the potential pitfalls of making overly simplistic distinctions between “national and internationals”, “locals and foreigners” or “insiders and outsiders”.<sup>17</sup>

There are two final universality issues. Our data points to a recurrent need to democratize the humanitarian mission. At the global level, this means reaching out to other traditions of helping, such as those that infuse Islam, for example, and exploring questions about how the northern/western oligopoly in humanitarianism might be opened up and restructured. Much humanitarian action nowadays escapes scrutiny despite its mantras of participation and beneficiary accountability. Power, money, political leverage, and the ability to make wide-reaching and long-lasting decisions lie essentially in northern hands. Many organizations and

<sup>17</sup> Pakistan case study, p. 3.

## NEUTRALITY AND ADVOCACY

The long-term nature of the occupation of the oPt, the lack of a political settlement, and the human rights situation have prompted some agencies to adopt an advocacy agenda or solidarity stance with the Palestinian situation and others to rely more firmly on International Humanitarian Law as a mechanism for maintaining neutrality. Palestinians generally accept and are thankful for humanitarian assistance, but are skeptical of those who attempt to “normalize” relations with Israelis.

*Occupied Palestinian Territory study, p. 3.*

individuals are self-mandated and self-referencing, accountable only to themselves and their immediate peers. Contractors and militarized “relief” operations are even more opaque. At the field level, outsiders tend to speak only, or first, to the like-minded, missing critical, or dissenting, or simply absent voices.

Nepal provides perhaps the most flagrant example. There, the aid enterprise has reproduced Nepal’s caste system within its own structures: most if not all the key positions in the aid system are the preserve of upper castes. In Nepal, as elsewhere, aid often tends to reinforce the status quo. Indeed many development agencies were caught wrong-footed by the insurgency, something difficult for them to understand or admit at the time. But to one degree or another, elites dominate local aid structures in all crisis countries. As such, the humanitarian enterprise can stifle innovation and encourage the reproduction of values, management styles, standards and operational approaches developed by the dominant northern/western humanitarian enterprise. The hold of the like-minded acts as a distorting lens. It reinforces the top-down nature of assistance, often serving institutions more than beneficiaries. It also acts as a filter: outsiders are guided by the perspectives, if not the interests, of their gatekeepers. Voices from below, or from where the tarmac ends, are more difficult to hear. We shall return to this issue of diversity and democracy in the humanitarian system in our conclusions.

A final universality issue relates to the humanitarian-human rights relationship. The two approaches have the same roots, but practice differs. While many practitioners consider human rights as universal as humanitarian action itself, human rights often seem more constrained by cultural specificities. In Pakistan, where there was little debate about the proposition that emergency assistance should be provided to all who needed it, human rights were “perceived by many to be a tool to promote western political and cultural agendas. ... The issue of respecting human rights was a particularly challenging one confronting relief agencies responding to the earthquake, especially with regard to the employment of national female staff.”<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, some agencies chose to adopt less loaded terminology like “protection” or the “Law of Armed Conflict.” In Palestine, Sri Lanka, and Colombia as well as in Pakistan, there was tension between aid agencies which needed to negotiate access and space and human rights groups which sought to document rights abuses.

There is no easy solution to the humanitarian-human rights conundrum in crisis situations. The principles of neutrality and impartiality as classically understood are not intended to serve as an entry point for changing iniquitous power structures or discriminatory social practices. Though it may not be their role to address such ills, humanitarians rightly feel uncomfortable about condoning them. A firewall between humanitarian action and human rights is probably not a good idea—the two communities need to talk and share analyses—but a clearer division of labor is. More openness and transparency in terms of the objectives pursued by different types of organizations would also help.

In sum, humanitarianism emerges from the data as a universal value that resonates in all cultures and societies. The specificities may differ from place to place, but the universal substratum is solid—perhaps surprisingly so. The differences between the western and non-western traditions are not insurmountable. However, the different approaches to humanitarian action among the various sets of established actors within the broad humanitarian enterprise are cause for concern, as are the deficits in cultural sensitivity that continue to plague the relations between outsiders and insiders.

The essential humanitarian message comes in many forms, not all of them mutually reinforcing. The fact that in the same crisis setting, principled, pragmatist, and solidarist actors are engaged can be problematical. The heterogeneity is more of an issue for the actors striving

<sup>18</sup> Pakistan study, p. 33.



## PAKISTAN: UNIVERSALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The area where the universality of humanitarian principles was most in doubt was over issues of human rights, particularly women's rights and the protection rights of IDPs [internally displaced persons]. The chasm between most aid agencies and local communities regarding gender issues—especially in the most conservative areas of Northwest Frontier Province—raises the dilemma of how to uphold “universal principles” in areas where they were not universally accepted. Many aid workers saw human rights in general, and women's rights and IDP protection issues in particular, as one of the “weakest links” in the earthquake response.

**Pakistan study, pp. 43-44**

to maintain adherence to principles than for the others because the latter, with their wider and sometimes more overtly political agenda, can make life more difficult and more dangerous for the former. Yet tighter orchestration of the multiple varieties of humanitarian expression—for example, by allowing only “certified humanitarians” to operate in particularly fraught and volatile contexts—is unlikely. We advocate, as second best, more clarity and transparency in the objectives and approaches of all actors on the ground. This would at least help to minimize confusion among belligerents and communities.

### (b) Terrorism/Counter-Terrorism

Earlier Tufts work analyzed humanitarian action during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, our studies highlighted the dynamic interactions between human need and humanitarian response on the one hand, and terrorism and anti-terrorist agendas on the other. “While humanitarianism in an age of terrorism may enjoy a higher profile” than in earlier eras, we

found, “its new-found visibility is a mixed blessing.” Although augmented attention to the human condition in unstable areas was a welcome development, we noted a “fundamental contradiction between an anti-terrorism that divides the world into good guys and bad guys and a humanitarianism that refuses to draw invidious distinctions among people whose governments espouse hostile political or military philosophies.”<sup>19</sup> The observation in the Iraq study resonates to one degree or another with the other studies: terrorism and counter-terrorism “serve to increase the scale of human needs and to decrease the capacity and willingness of humanitarians to respond.”<sup>20</sup>

Our 2007 case studies confirm the finding of our 2006 studies that the so-called global war on terror (GWOT) distorts humanitarian principles and undercuts humanitarian effectiveness. GWOT terminology creates a toxic climate, we found, although the severity and dysfunctionality of the impact of the nomenclature varies from setting to setting. In our initial set of cases we distinguished between “Capital T” terrorism—acts of violence with global reach—and “small t” terrorism—that is, homegrown violence experienced as a daily reality by individuals and communities affected by conflict.<sup>21</sup>

Our case study on Colombia, where the government has attached its struggle against the FARC to the US-led GWOT, illustrates the distortion and politicization that can arise from the attempted incorporation of an endogenous conflict into a perceived global war. We concluded that “the indiscriminate use of the GWOT label by the Uribe administration and its major patron in Washington is widely viewed as demeaning the terrible conditions under which people have been living for decades.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, we noted in our Uganda study that the government's war against the Lord's Resistance Army, justified on the grounds of subjecting the LRA

19 Larry Minear, “Humanitarian action in an age of terrorism.” *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper No. 63, UNHCR, August 2002, pp. 1 and 19. <http://www.unhcr.org/research/RESEARCH/3d57aba71.pdf>.

20 Iraq study, p. 15.

21 One of the themes of a conference held at Tufts University on February 28-29, 2008 and co-sponsored by the Feinstein International Center, “Countering Terrorism in Africa through Human Security Solutions,” was that most Africans resonate not to the terrorism of 9/11 but to the terrorism of regimes such as those of Mugabe and el-Bashir, and, more broadly, to the environments of fear, deprivation, rape, and plunder in which they seek to survive.

22 Colombia Case Study, p. 14.

to the same tactics as were being used on the frontlines of the GWOT, has itself created havoc for civilian populations.

Sri Lanka, the oPt, and Nepal present varying degrees of similarity with the situations in Colombia and Uganda with respect to how the terrorism narrative has been used as a political tool to frame the conflict and demonize various population groups. The GWOT, we found, gave the Sri Lankan authorities a triple blessing. It provided a rubric for applying military pressure on the LTTE; offered a moral and a strategic argument for deflecting international criticism of its own war on terror; and provided a humanitarian rationale for seeking to defeat the insurgents by force.<sup>23</sup>

In the oPt and Nepal as well as Sri Lanka, the increased wariness among donors to provide funding to groups accused of terrorism by the authorities contributed to aid agency timidity to attempt to mount programs. The case study of Palestine explores how elements of the humanitarian community sought to interact with groups such as Hamas (or with Hezbollah in Lebanon), organizations blacklisted as terrorist yet enjoying popular and electoral support and providing essential social services. Across a range of country settings, the US anti-terrorism certification—a declaration required of aid agencies that their programs do not support or promote terrorism—raised a variety of complex programmatic, administrative, and legal issues.<sup>24</sup>

Looming larger still, the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate the dramatic shrinkage of humanitarian space resulting from the overriding concern of states (who are also donors) to press aid activities into the larger battle against terrorism. The inhibiting experience in these two high-profile settings raises the question of whether the subordination of humanitarian action to pursuit of an anti-terrorist agenda is something of a one-off, or two-off affair, or whether the instrumentalization of humanitarian work there represents a harbinger of things to come more routinely. In one sense, the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq present nothing new, although extreme situations such as these may offer richer learning potential than more run-of-the-mill settings. In a broader context, however, these two GWOT flashpoints share with predecessor conflicts—such as Biafra, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Chechnya—similar manipulation of humanitarian action by antagonists in the service of political causes.

<sup>23</sup> Sri Lanka study, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> oPt study, pp. 17-18.

## GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR UPSTAGES THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN IRAQ

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq is now dire and is worsening at an alarming rate but remains largely overlooked or ignored in political circles. Threats to the safety and well-being of the population are eclipsed by media coverage of the political situation, preoccupation with the changing fortunes and disposition of American military forces, and rancorous political divisions in the US over exit strategies and funding for the war, which in US policy circles continues to be cloaked in the phraseology of the Global War on Terror.

**Iraq study, p. 10**

Historical continuities aside, what is new in the post-9/11 landscape is the labeling of all “bad guys” as terrorists and the more blatant efforts of governments to draw humanitarian actors into a patriotic *jihad* against them. This Manichean calculus affects every level and perhaps even every aspect of the enterprise. It divides potential recipients of humanitarian assistance and protection, as well as the resources available to them. One NGO interviewee in the Pakistan study reported hearing a laborer who passed him on the street say, “I’m not a terrorist.” “He thought we were there to catch terrorists,” the NGO worker remarked. The “for us or against us” duality also undercuts the bona fides of aid institutions and officials. The senior humanitarian official in the UN system, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs John Holmes, was called a “terrorist” by a government representative in Colombo, distressed with his description of Sri Lanka as the second most dangerous country in the world for aid workers.<sup>25</sup>

In larger compass, the impact of GWOT and its accompanying securitization agenda are likely to continue to affect the humanitarian enterprise root and branch for years to come. Unless the threat of terrorism is kept in perspective, the integrity of the international humanitarian regime may fall into even greater doubt

<sup>25</sup> Sri Lanka study, p. 26.

in high-profile countries, and may even infiltrate the needs-based selection of priority countries themselves. The clear and present danger is that urgent human need may lose its compelling claim on international humanitarian action absent a demonstrable connection to a global anti-terrorism effort. In this respect, the Pakistan review sounds a warning about winners and losers in future GWOT-related crises. “While in this case Pakistani earthquake survivors (and many aid agencies) were beneficiaries of the instrumentalization of aid, it could well prove fatal for victims of humanitarian crises in countries that are not perceived to be of similar strategic importance.”<sup>26</sup> Thus “while the Global War on Terror was tangential to the DRC experience,” its aid levels were arguably affected. “If bin Laden was situated in Eastern DRC,” speculated one NGO, “it would receive a lot more resources.”<sup>27</sup>

If the idea of global terrorism is not a serviceable concept for many of the local communities and aid agencies examined in our studies, it also creates problems for some who served with the US National Guard in Afghanistan and Iraq. “The concept of a Global War on Terror,” we concluded, “does not resonate with the experience of many of the soldiers interviewed. There is widespread confusion within the ranks and beyond regarding the extent to which the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are indeed part of such a [global] war. The terminology is perceived as more appropriate to the mission in Afghanistan—which was launched with an al-Qaeda -specific objective—than in Iraq, where the US occupation over time has come to be viewed as creating more terrorists than it eliminates.”<sup>28</sup> While many Guard personnel experienced first-hand both random and calculated violence on a daily basis, they nevertheless did not see themselves operating on the front lines of a Global War.

Although Capital T terrorism does not emerge from the country cases as a particularly compelling concept, the impact of small t terrorism is indisputable. “The practice of terrorism by armed groups on the left and right and by the Colombian state,” we found, “has created a crisis of world-class humanitarian and human rights proportions.”<sup>29</sup> In Colombia, as in oPt, agencies receiving US funds have had to curtail programs for fear of violating the strictures of the Patriot Act, which require assurances that assistance is not being provided to terrorists. In Sri Lanka similar problems arise from government proscriptions and definitions.

In other settings, agencies are less constrained, either by terrorism or by the resulting strictures imposed by donors. In Nepal, the US continues to use the terrorism label in reference to the Maoists and tells the international NGOs that it funds not to “engage” with them. While the label remains, however, the practice is more of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” variety and has not significantly affected the work of these agencies. The selectivity with which the United States applies its terrorism strictures from country to country confirms the difficulties in making the global rubric fit local circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

As with our other petals, individual country experience offers variations on a common theme. The DRC, we found, is not concerned with, or a player in, the GWOT. Our study of the Pakistan earthquake concluded, by contrast, that the country’s frontline status in the GWOT influenced the scale of the US and other western donor response and the deployment of NATO assets. Jihadi groups were present on the ground and played an important role in the immediate relief phase, in relation to which the US also adopted a pragmatic “don’t ask, don’t tell” attitude. Following the team’s Pakistan fieldwork, the situation there deteriorated considerably in the federally administered tribal areas, but these were not the focus of our case study.

The oPt case study identifies three separate but related impacts of the GWOT on humanitarian action: the repercussions of rising anti-western sentiment based on the GWOT’s anti-Muslim animus; the heightening of security measures by the Israeli authorities linked to the perceived need for protection against terrorism by suicide bombers; and the increased difficulties experienced by humanitarian organizations in providing assistance and protection within the tightened security framework. Of these three, we found the third to have been the most constraining to humanitarian work.<sup>31</sup>

The impact of the terrorist attacks on the United States, Western Europe, and elsewhere have been cataclysmic. They have been deeply unsettling for public opinion and have led to the suspension of hard-won civil liberties. Small wonder, then, that the fear of terrorism should find its way into humanitarian interactions internationally. US legislation and regulations, for example, are sweeping, prohibiting all transactions with individuals and organizations deemed by the Executive Branch to

26 Pakistan study, p. 88.

27 DRC study, p. 2 and p. 14.

28 National Guard study, p. 66.

29 Colombia study, p. 19.

30 The Colombia study found that US anti-terrorism legislation and policy had “constrained the US government’s ability to pursue its own interests in Colombia.” p. 31.

31 oPt study, pp. 15-17.



be associated with terrorism.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the United States in 2002 began ramping up aid allocations to 28 “frontline” states in the Global War.<sup>33</sup>

The country studies point to the need for more nuance and differentiation in dealing with different situations and different armed actors. Hamas and Hezbollah may well be on US and EU terrorist lists, but they are nonetheless elected entities that provide essential services. The Nepali Maoists are also deemed terrorists but have been legitimized by the peace accords and their participation in government. Sectarian ethno-nationalistic groups who wreak havoc in the Terai, the Nepali lowlands bordering India, are given no such label. In Sri Lanka the government is under international pressure to negotiate with the LTTE, widely regarded outside their own territory as terrorists.

How to deal with such groups is a difficult issue for agencies that value their humanitarian credentials. In simpler times such as the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, the credibility of the UN and other humanitarian agencies hinged on their ability to negotiate access with all belligerents, even at the risk of indirectly legitimizing them. In the context of the Global War, with its pressure to be “for” or “against”, the negotiation of such space has become much more problematic. In integrated UN missions linked to the west’s world-ordering agenda—the subject of the following section—such negotiation has, in fact, become next to impossible. As a donor representative in Afghanistan put it: “The argument for humanitarian space has been lost. It has been trampled by the political imperative.”<sup>34</sup> The GWOT template inevitably narrows the scope for even a modicum of acceptance of the presence of humanitarian actors by the demonized belligerent. “Between terrorism and counter-terrorism,” analyst Mark Duffield has written, “a curious complicity exists in which each needs the other for its own existence, whether as a legitimation of its own violence or a justification for the draconian methods it requires for defending society.”<sup>35</sup>

The indiscriminate application of capital T terrorism to any and all violence trivializes the day-to-day reality

that many people experience through fundamental abuses of their basic human rights, including the right to receive humanitarian assistance. The applicability of the GWOT narrative itself is necessarily situational, varying from context to context. At the moment, however, the notion is both amorphous and opportunistic: in part a conceptual construct for understanding international relations post-9/11, in part a tool for rationalizing re-insertion into contexts such as Somalia where the superpower has lost its footing, and in part a device for mobilizing public concern and support on the home front for the “war on terrorism.”

Greater precision in the use of the term by political actors would allow humanitarian initiatives to proceed less deterred by the reality of terrorism and un-harnessed from the international counter-terrorist agenda. Classical humanitarian principles—that assistance and protection represent a response to urgent need rather than a vehicle for expressing a political agenda—need reaffirmation. The data also suggest that more respect for humanitarian principles—both in terms of belligerent behavior and the negotiation of humanitarian access and space—may yield better results in terms of effective humanitarian action, including acceptability and security. Our data from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine seem to indicate that non-respect for humanitarian principles impedes access, compromises the perception of neutrality, puts staff at risk, and thus in the end saves fewer lives. We shall return to this issue at the end of the report.

### (c) Coherence

The humanitarian community now broadly acknowledges that its activities take place in contexts defined in relation to the work of political and military actors and that some form of engagement with such actors is necessary. However, the relationships with those actors take different forms in different settings, with little clear consensus emerging about what configurations work best. Our case studies present a kind of smorgasbord of “coherence” situations, with few discernible clues as to what works and what doesn’t.

The concept of coherence itself has various definitional permutations. Broadly speaking, “coherence” can encompass all the myriad interactions between humanitarian institutions, including but not limited to those of the UN system, on the one hand, and a wide range of political/military, peace-making and development players on the other. The term can also be used more narrowly to describe relationships within the UN family: that is, between the UN’s humanitarian agencies

32 Executive Order 13224, issued by President Bush immediately after 9/11 and followed up with guidelines by the Treasury Department. See Colombia study, p. 30.

33 See Colombia study, p. 14. The individual countries are listed in footnote 40.

34 Afghanistan case study, p. 19.

35 Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Polity Press, Cambridge:UK, 2007, p. 232.

and other components of UN peace-making and peace-keeping missions.

Reflecting various conceptual models, coherence also results in a variety of institutional configurations. UN humanitarian activities may be fully “integrated” into UN political and peacekeeping frameworks, partially integrated, or largely independent of such frameworks. Thus in Afghanistan and Liberia, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) was incorporated into the mission management structure and lost its separate identity. In the DRC, the approach was one of “semi-integration”. There, an OCHA structure remains but is headed by a deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) who also wears the hat of UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator.

Building on our earlier reviews, the 2007 case studies reveal a host of new coherence issues. These include the role of the military in non-conflict contexts (e.g., Pakistan); the humanitarian-development-conflict relationship (Nepal); the implications of long-term crises on the humanitarian-political dynamics (oPt, Sri Lanka); and the importance of personalities as a factor in effective humanitarian action. Despite the new data, however, it remains unclear whether greater coherence makes a difference in terms of how aid agencies are able to do their work and/or are perceived by local communities.

The pitfalls of a coherence agenda for the work of aid agencies are most obvious in Iraq. There, UN Security Council Resolution 1546 “effectively shackled and subordinated the UN’s humanitarian role to the fortunes or misfortunes of the Multinational Force and to the political role of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in facilitating the transition of Iraq away from occupation.”<sup>36</sup> Pitfalls are less debilitating in oPt, where the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and other humanitarian players, which have kept their distance from the UN political mission, the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator (UNSCO), still have a good reputation. In Sri Lanka, attempts at linking the peace process to assistance activities and humanitarian access have backfired for all concerned.

That the quest for coherence undermines neutrality is a key lesson from Iraq. There, the applicable Security Council resolution<sup>37</sup> places UN agencies under the security umbrella of the Coalition and requires them to

#### POSITIVE EXPERIENCE IN THE DRC

The preliminary HA 2015 report concluded that there were good reasons for humanitarian actors to be suspicious of the integrated mission [viz. coherence] agenda. The findings from the DRC do not necessarily change this. What they demonstrate, though, is that with sufficient commitment from country-level actors, integrated missions can be made to work in favor of humanitarian action. However, the steps taken in the DRC are more a function of personalities than of doctrine, so there is no guarantee that lessons learned will be replicated in other missions.

**Democratic Republic of the Congo study, p. 30-31**

work and reside in the heavily militarized Green Zone and to travel only with Coalition escorts. Similarly in Sri Lanka, although without the military dimension, aid agencies face pressure from donors to work “on” rather than simply “in” conflict, thereby linking assistance to a political or peace agenda. These findings resonate with those of our earlier case studies in Afghanistan and Liberia, where the establishment of UN integrated missions subordinated humanitarian and human rights concerns to a political agenda and seriously undermined the ability of UN agencies and associated NGOs to address emerging humanitarian needs. To one degree or another in each instance, the positioning of assistance and protection activities makes for a loss of neutrality and contributes to perceptions of the aid effort as partisan, if not “corrupt”.

The message from other 2007 case studies is more ambivalent and points in different directions. Pakistan provides an instructive example of coordination by command,<sup>38</sup> with the coherence agenda effectively managed by the Pakistani military and aid agencies

36 Iraq study, p. 33.

37 UN Security Council resolution 1770 of August 10th, 2007.

38 In earlier work of the Humanitarianism and War Project we have distinguished between coordination by default, by consensus and by command. See A. Donini, *The Policies of Mercy: UN Coordination in Afghanistan*,



**IDP camp on outskirts of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. The IDPs are with a representative of the local authority, discussing security needs. Photograph by Tasneem Mowjee.**

functioning within the rubric provided. The very effective military role in the earthquake relief phase, especially the helicopter air operation, logistical support, and overall coordination, are examples of the important contributions that military forces can provide in large-scale natural disasters. At the same time, reflecting the perceived slowness of reconstruction following the earthquake, our study found that the benefits of coherence “seem to obey a law of diminishing returns.”<sup>39</sup>

In Pakistan and elsewhere, the military’s highly visible and active role raises a host of issues related to hearts and minds activities in the context of GWOT and the military interventionism of the West. While ceding action to address urgent human needs to the military has various advantages, particularly in natural disaster settings, recurrent structural problems call into question the assumption of many western governments that military forces should have a permanent role to play

in the humanitarian arena. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)—introduced by Coalition forces first in Afghanistan and later in Iraq—are military-civilian hybrids that provide both security and assistance. There are now some 25 in each country. The subject of debate around PRTs, and the involvement of the military in assistance more generally, is the assumption that their involvement in quick impact projects (QIPs), poverty alleviation, and small-scale infrastructure activities leads to improved security for communities. This assumption, which is yet unproven, will be addressed in a forthcoming FIC study on Afghanistan, the tribal areas of Pakistan, and the Horn of Africa.

The DRC provides the most convincing example of the rationale for coherence between political/peace-keeping agendas and humanitarian/human rights agendas. The approach chosen has resulted in positive results on the ground, specifically in terms of forces of the UN Mission in the Congo (MONUC) addressing protection issues. Several factors played a role in the positive outcomes. First, the UN mission is semi-integrated (OCHA remains a separate entity reporting to the HC/DSRSG). Second, there are no basic disagreements

*Mozambique, and Rwanda*. Providence: RI, 1996: [hwproject.tufts.edu/publications/abstracts/op22.html](http://hwproject.tufts.edu/publications/abstracts/op22.html).

39 Pakistan study, pp. 8-9.





**Blockade of the main East-West highway near Nepalgunj (Central Nepal) by Madheshi militants, October 2007.**  
**Photograph by Antonio Donini.**

between external actors on the nature of the peace to be pursued. Perhaps most importantly, the personality of the Deputy SRS, who also combines the functions of UN Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator and who comes from a humanitarian background, is a key factor in the relative success of integration.

Constraints, however, remain in ensuring that the humanitarian perspective receives equal billing within MONUC. In the absence of such assurance, international NGOs are reluctant to accept the UN “cluster lead” on protection, a process from which local NGOs are excluded. As in other missions managed by the UN Department of Peace-keeping Operations (DPKO), managers have a propensity to give precedence to their own need for assets—for example, access to mission aircraft and other logistics—over the needs of humanitarian agencies, including NGOs.

Despite the positive findings of our research in mid-2007, reports from the DRC in early 2008 indicate that there has been significant change neither in the structural instability nor in the security over 2004, notwithstanding commitment of massive resources to activities

located within an integrated mission framework.<sup>40</sup> There is no evidence, however, to substantiate a claim that a non-integrated approach would have been more successful in addressing humanitarian need in the DRC. This claim is easier to make in Afghanistan and Iraq, of course, where our case studies document the negative results of integration in terms of reduced humanitarian access, subordination of humanitarian priorities, perceived loss of neutrality, and increased insecurity. “Integration” and “coherence” are not particularly controversial from the perspectives of communities in DRC, while they are in Afghanistan and Iraq

In Nepal there is no UN integrated mission there but a relatively small political mission—the UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN)—a large, separate UN human rights monitoring unit, a large pre-existing and well-established UN development community, and a small UN humanitarian presence. In donor and NGO communities as well, long-established development players dwarf

40 Dr. B. Coghlan et al. *Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo, International Rescue Committee Study*. January 2008. [www.theirc.org/news/irc-study-shows-congos0122.html](http://www.theirc.org/news/irc-study-shows-congos0122.html).

## INSECURITY AND OPERATIONALITY IN IRAQ

Insecurity and uncertainty have engendered a culture of secrecy among many actors in the humanitarian community. This impairs effective coordination, stifles discussion of common strategies, and inhibits the ethos of transparency associated with humanitarian work.

**Iraq study, p. 13**

the humanitarian presence. Coherence issues arise in the realm of humanitarian-development relationships and are only secondarily centered around UNMIN's presence and role.

After an initial period during which the development actors in Nepal downplayed the reality of the conflict and attempted to continue "development as usual", the issue of how to relate to the insurgent Maoists and operate in a volatile environment became the preserve of the UN development agencies and the relatively tight-knit donor community, rather than of the humanitarian players. This resulted in a joint donor initiative to elaborate a set of Basic Operational Guidelines (BOGs), which were adopted by all donors except the USA, and subsequently, in very similar form, by the UN and NGO communities.<sup>41</sup> These became the main tool for negotiating access and space with the belligerents—i.e. essentially the Maoists, as the government's presence was limited mostly to district headquarters, larger towns, and the Kathmandu valley. The BOGs allowed the aid community to adopt reasonably principled standards for operating in a conflict environment, as well as a mechanism for compliance verification. This was key in maintaining the credibility of the assistance effort, a credibility now partly undermined by the "white car syndrome" following the deployment of the UN political mission.<sup>42</sup>

The creation of PRTs offers yet another approach to the challenge of coherence. PRTs are military structures devised originally by the US which also include donor representatives and civilian specialists with responsibilities for relief, reconstruction, development, and

security. In addition to providing protection for PRTs, US troops are also engaged in the direct provision of assistance and hearts-and-minds activities. European PRTs in Afghanistan have a clearer delineation between military/security functions and civilian assistance. While co-location of functions may have advantages on the security side, the results of having all of the actors under the same roof do not confirm clear benefits to aid activities, especially when agencies opt to co-locate with combatant forces that are perceived by communities as hostile or at least unpopular.

A similar politicization of assistance was evident in the hearts-and-minds programs carried out by members of the National Guard and active duty military personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many of the National Guard personnel interviewed regarded their involvement with local villages and villagers as positive: "the highlight of my deployment," said one. However, we found that "many soldiers seem largely unaware of the downsides of military civic action, including the extent to which such activities complicate the work of humanitarian organizations and draw local communities more deeply into the conflict."<sup>43</sup> In one particular instance, a successful health clinic established in Afghanistan's Paktia province as part of a US military "hugs and drugs" program was destroyed by American troops after the village elders were suspected of collaboration with the insurgents. The selection of villages for assistance according to "where they stand on the insurgency" draws local populations into the wider conflict.<sup>44</sup>

Our overall conclusions on coherence contextualize and refine the findings in our 2006 preliminary report in the following respects:

- "Integrated missions" under political leadership remain UN orthodoxy: that is, when in doubt, international presence in its various aspects should be integrated. While some humanitarian actors have difficulty with this approach, the frictions between humanitarian

41 As this would have implied some level of recognition of the Maoists who were, and remain, on the US State Department's Terrorist Exclusion List ([www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/2004/32678.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/2004/32678.htm))—one of several designated terrorist lists maintained by the US government.

42 A similar approach has been recently adopted in Sri Lanka where donors have adopted Guiding Principles for Humanitarian and Development Assistance in Sri Lanka which are directly inspired by the BOGs.

43 National Guard study, p. 67.

44 National Guard study, pp. 43-46.



activities and the broader political frameworks have been eased somewhat in some circumstances with more recognition by the UN's political department of OCHA's need to operate in a semi-independent mode.

- Successful integration seems to be more a function of personalities than of structures. Leadership in humanitarian situations is key. Strong leadership without proper reinforcing institutional arrangements can surmount some of the inevitable problems. Weak leadership with good systems is more likely to fail.

- In high-profile crises the odds remain stacked against principled humanitarian approaches. Integration in highly political and violent conflict situations presents the greatest risks to humanitarians associated with the prevailing political-military framework.

- Unlike OCHA and other UN humanitarian actors who continue to express misgivings about integration, the UN human rights officials seem prepared to function within an integrated framework. While that approach has clear benefits, it may also jeopardize the integrity of international protection activities.

- Once integration has been introduced, identifying and addressing emerging humanitarian needs that do not fit within the declared peace plan become more difficult, as the situation in Afghanistan shows.

There is an additional problem. The international humanitarian community has agreed on a number of measures aimed at increasing the automaticity and effectiveness of crisis responses. These include the "cluster system" which allows improved division of labor and accountabilities, the expanded Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), and the Global Humanitarian Partnership. But such limited measures do not address the fundamental issues. The UN humanitarian reform process is not willing—or perhaps not even able—to tackle the basic contradiction in the coherence agenda. That contradiction involves having a humanitarian coordination body, mandated to energize the entire humanitarian community and work according to international humanitarian principles, embedded within a political organization that takes its cues from the UN Security Council, the world's highest political body.



**An "ambulance" in the Rolpa district of Nepal.**

**Photograph by Antonio Donini.**

This contradiction is both theoretical and practical. Humanitarian action derives its legitimacy from universal principles embedded in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration, and international humanitarian law. Such principles often do not sit well with Security Council political compromises; politics, the "art of the possible," does not always seek, nor is it informed by, guidance from principle. Moreover, the divergent approaches often clash in fundamental ways on the ground, as evident in Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, and Palestine. "Placing a function that draws legitimacy from the UN Charter (or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) within a management structure born of political compromise in the Security Council," we had observed in our preliminary report, "is questionable and possibly self-defeating."<sup>45</sup>

One of the most problematic features of UN engagement in Iraq, for example, is that UN agencies were forced to operate under the umbrella of the Multi-National Force, as prescribed by UNSC resolutions 1546 and 1770. This was seen by many as a failure UN agency leadership to safeguard their mandates, the provisions of the UN Charter and of General Assembly resolution 46/182 which created OCHA and established its humanitarian credentials.

The issue of better insulation for humanitarian action, if not complete separation from politics, is likely to remain an unresolved issue on the humanitarian agenda. The ICRC and other Dunantist humanitarians remain wary of, if not hostile to, integration. Some (for

<sup>45</sup> Preliminary Report, p. 33.



example, MSF) have now officially seceded from UN and NGO humanitarian coordination bodies though they continue to liaise and collaborate in the field to the extent that they are comfortable doing so.

Coherence, whether wide or narrow, should remain on the humanitarian research agenda. Our studies have documented the risks involved in going the integration route. These are greater in high-profile crises linked to global western strategic objectives than in crises with lesser visibility and in natural disasters. Overall, we stand by our earlier finding that the constraints upon humanitarian action as a result of being “inside the tent” outweigh the advantages of integration or coherence, even if in recent years there has been broader acknowledgement that the specificities of humanitarian coordination need greater protection from political agendas.

## **(d) Security**

The key finding emerging from our case studies in this area is that security issues, for communities and for aid agencies, are becoming more complicated. Key assumptions of the past no longer seem to hold.

As noted in our 2006 report, an important distinction needs to be made at the outset between some security situations defined mainly by local features and others where the variables are more global in nature. Security issues in the DRC and northern Uganda, for example, are a function of the local context and the behavior of belligerents, while in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq, security is influenced more heavily by external events.

At the time of our fieldwork, aid workers in Pakistan and Nepal had experienced only minor and occasional security issues, mostly context-specific in nature. Moreover, the security environment for communities and aid agencies was not significantly different. In Pakistan, by contrast with other countries studied, international aid agencies generally perceived the security situation to be worse than did local communities, because of concerns about the threat posed by the presence of militant Islamic groups. In Nepal, aid agencies—local and foreign—were generally welcomed throughout the conflict period by communities—and, after some initial hesitation vis-à-vis western agencies, by the Maoists. There were numerous instances of intimidation, especially difficult to resist by local agencies and local staff of international agencies (for example, extortion of contributions to Maoist structures of governance). But there were no major attacks against aid workers. The degree of pressure on local communities varied and was viewed differently by various socioeconomic groups. Most Nepalis interviewed considered

the presence of outside agencies a positive factor in their own security.

In both Pakistan and Nepal, however, security risks increased with the perceived failure of the international community to meet local expectations, as well as to cultivate an understanding of local political dynamics and the political economy of aid. This resulted in threats and incidents of violence against agency compounds and staff in Pakistan once the earthquake relief phase was over. The 180-degree mood change in Nepal was rapid and troubling from a security perspective, although violence was initially very limited. The situation is similar to that noted in our Afghanistan case study, where the lack of a tangible peace dividend resulted in a widespread perception that the aid enterprise was ineffective and corrupt, contributing to the growing sense of disquiet.

Security incidents targeting aid workers in the DRC have been rare, although violence against civilians has been rife. MONUC military presence has played a positive, if patchy, role, given the size of the country and widespread insecurity. The link between assistance and the security of communities has been positive in some cases where access and presence have increased protection (sometimes only temporarily). It has been negative in others where the modalities of aid distribution and their visibility have attracted armed elements, resulting in violence against civilians. Security issues in the DRC tend to remain in the “context-specific” category.

The situations in Palestine, Iraq and to some extent Sri Lanka are very different. In these three settings, as in Afghanistan, global vectors cast a pall on the security situation of both local communities and aid agencies. In conflicts that are linked to the GWOT (Iraq, Afghanistan), that are seemingly intractable (Sri Lanka), or that share both features (oPt), there is generally no guarantee of safety for civilians. Similarly, for humanitarian actors, “playing by the rules” no longer protects. While engagement and acceptance strategies are no guarantee of security, lack of sustained engagement probably undermines security. Interviews both in Iraq and oPt confirm that many communities are able to discriminate between principled humanitarian players and others who have more political agendas or are functionally linked to western agendas.

In Palestine, for example, as noted earlier, local interviewees were able to distinguish between the political arm of the UN (UNSCO) and its humanitarian agencies (in particular, UNRWA), just as they were able to distinguish the policies of western governments from public opinion in those same countries. “These distinctions, however, are beginning to disappear,” we conclude,

“as Palestinian anger and frustration grows,” with obvious implications for the security of staff.<sup>46</sup> In other words, while security for expatriates had been generally good throughout their long-term engagement, the approach taken by the USA Patriot Act, the criminalization of Hamas, and the suspension of most international assistance to Gaza are directly implicated in the growing insecurity of humanitarian workers, especially after the summer 2006 Lebanon war.

In Iraq, much of the international humanitarian action has been caught in political firestorms. As in Afghanistan, the perception—sometimes accurate—of a direct link between the aid effort and the occupation forces has created an environment of unprecedented danger for aid workers. This was compounded by the legacy of hostility towards the UN from the Saddam Hussein years. Attacks against the UN, the ICRC, and NGOs have resulted in a dramatic reduction in operations and a risk-averse aid posture. However, our data shows that donors and agencies have overreacted to the situation and not taken full advantage of localized channels for assistance that continue to exist, even in situations of increased insecurity. The differential response to the danger, however, is also telling. After a period of reflection, the ICRC re-engaged: its activities in Iraq constitute the ICRC’s largest country program. In contrast, the United Nations aid apparatus remains conspicuous by its relative absence.

In Sri Lanka, many local respondents commented that the presence of international agencies afforded a greater degree of security: “We feel safer when they are around.”<sup>47</sup> Yet security for aid workers has deteriorated very significantly in conflict-affected areas, where for the first time aid workers were specifically targeted in 2006.<sup>48</sup> In the safer tsunami-response areas, familiar complaints about corruption and ineffectiveness in the aid community have put a strain on the acceptability of

46 oPt study, p. 29.

47 Sri Lanka study, p. 36.

48 Seventeen local aid workers from Action Contre la Faim (ACF) were murdered in August and 44 killed over the January 2006-May 2007 period, thus making Sri Lanka the second most dangerous place for aid workers according to the UN. See Sri Lanka case study, p. 35.



**An NGO worker conducting an interview in Afghanistan.**

foreign aid agencies. However, as donors have shifted to working more “on” conflict than simply “in” conflict, by supporting NGO and civil society initiatives with a peace-building component, often linking aid to improvements in human rights, “humanitarian space has become consequently more politicized and therefore, more dangerous.”<sup>49</sup> Wittingly or not, the pursuit of coherence has meant that humanitarian players are often caught up in political undercurrents.

In sum, our case studies highlight the fact that coherence/integration agendas increase the risk that humanitarians will be seen as “guilty by association” with political and securitization agendas and, more broadly, with the failings of internationally supported peace and reconstruction processes. The security of humanitarian personnel may be compromised by donor-driven pressure for coherence, by their linkage to agendas that are not strictly humanitarian, and by the use of humanitarian action as a tool to achieve political objectives. Humanitarians need to focus on their core assistance and protection mission, which often provides the best security. Straying from the core mission and engaging in human rights and peace-building activities can prove hazardous to their health and their access. Advocacy, an essential ingredient of the work of many humanitarian agencies, can also sometimes be divisive.

In many cases, then, insecurity is heightened by the instrumentalization and coherence agendas. The shift from traditional humanitarian functions—for example, negotiating access and space—to more complex

49 Sri Lanka study, p. 36.

coherence related functions of working “on” conflict seems to correlate with increased insecurity of aid workers. This is worrying in terms of basic principle and also because of its practical implications—i.e. how institutions operate in insecure environments. By and large, the high profile attacks against aid workers in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Sri Lanka have made the humanitarian enterprise more risk-averse and more likely to prioritize protection of international over national staff.

The UN and NGO communities are reviewing their security postures. With the possible exception of the ICRC and a few NGOs, that review is resulting in more institutional controls and less flexibility or delegation to the field, which in turn results in reduced ability to address emerging humanitarian needs. The observation of our Iraq study that “security trumps humanity” also applies in Afghanistan and in Sri Lanka. The costs to life and limb of security in volatile environments, as well as the costs of insurance, are limiting the ability of the humanitarian enterprise to function according to need. Agencies and donors are forced to consider the trade-offs between the costs of “being there” or simply not responding at all.

There is no easy solution to the security conundrum. Much of the violence to which aid agencies and communities are subjected is random or opportunistic. Only sometimes is it politically motivated. While humanitarians would like to think that more rigorous respect of humanitarian principles acts as their best protective shield, this remains true more in the negative than in the positive in the sense that non-respect of principles increases staff insecurity. The same applies to engagement with communities and their political or military representatives. While such engagement is not a guarantee of security for aid workers, the lack of it is often a source of misperceptions and potential problems.

Two points are, nevertheless, worth stressing. The first is the importance of contextual analysis, an area to which UN agencies and NGOs could well devote more resources. Many security incidents have an underlying story or logic that needs to be understood. Collecting information on security incidents without analyzing it or relating it to social, economic and political trends is not particularly useful. For example, local agency staff may have multiple identities and are not just “aid workers” or perceived as such. They also have ethnic, linguistic, family, historic, political, spatial and social identities that inform how others perceive them. In a context of crisis these identities need to be understood as they may carry more meaning and more risk than the “aid worker” label. Many studies, including our

own, have flagged this issue: if you don’t understand the context, the quality of work will suffer and the risks for staff will increase. The fact that donors and agencies continue to underfund conflict and context analysis is cause for serious concern.

The second relates to re-engagement. Negotiation with belligerents, however unpleasant, on issues of access and principle used to be a hallmark of effective humanitarian agencies. The attacks against aid workers in Iraq and Afghanistan seem to have led the UN and most NGOs to the conclusion that such negotiations are impossible. The fact that agencies might be compromised by association with a hostile politico-military enterprise is a strong argument in favor of insulating or separating humanitarian action from politics. For those who believe that alignment with political agendas and institutions is not an option, principled engagement, even when it seems a tall order, is, or should be, high on the agenda.

Traditionally, engagement is the route followed by the ICRC. Recent events in Afghanistan—where, as we have seen, the Taliban are beginning to show a modicum of respect for the ICRC—would seem to confirm that the road less traveled may be worthy of cautious exploration. At the same time, there may be extreme situations where the only way of providing life-saving assistance and protection to populations in danger is through relief provided by or accompanied by military forces. Current UN doctrine acknowledges this as a “last resort”. We would add that, while necessary—humanity trumps neutrality, if not impartiality—such action should not be construed as “humanitarian” in the proper sense of the word.





**An Iraqi woman watches from her doorway as soldiers from a U.S. Civil Affairs Battalion talk with residents of an Internally Displaced Persons site in Kirkuk. Photograph by Russel Lee Klika: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/russell\\_lee\\_klika/408779748/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/russell_lee_klika/408779748/)**

## HA2015 and Beyond: Emerging Issues

Our case studies demonstrate the reassuring currency of principles and their relevance to communities and individuals, as well as the idiosyncrasies of context and the vitality of humanitarian action, both international and local. We also identify four major areas of threats to effective humanitarian action:

- the openness of people and countries on the receiving end of humanitarian action is undermined by the baggage that outsiders carry;
- a preoccupation with terrorism and security undermines the essence of humanitarianism;
- the incorporation of humanitarian action into the political and world-ordering agendas of key donors and the UN Security Council entails growing costs, both in terms of principle and practice;
- the combination of the above factors affects the security of civilians and humanitarian workers in new and pernicious ways.

Moreover, the top-down nature of the humanitarian enterprise constrains its ability to address need flexibly, impartially and proportionally, and marginalizes non-western forms of humanitarianism. Implicit in much of the behavior of the humanitarian apparatus is that stricken contexts should adapt to it, rather than the reverse.

In our 2006 preliminary report, we found a humanitarian enterprise under duress, but with modest adaptation being made to address problems. As a result of our six additional 2007 case studies, we are on balance less hopeful regarding the health of the enterprise.

Our more negative reading has several causes. Some of the countries face issues that are more difficult than in the past (Iraq, Palestine). Others demonstrate challenges, unresolved over time, that seem more intractable (Sri Lanka, DRC). Still others find the international community more preoccupied with issues that ignore humanitarian need (Nepal). Our latest case

studies also show more starkly the limits of humanitarian action, both in terms of the quality and the quantity of services delivered. To be sure, the situation is not unrelievedly bleak: the Pakistan earthquake response highlights more positive findings both in terms of the effectiveness of a nationally-directed response and the role of the military. However, on balance the problems outweigh the solutions.

The studies underscore the constraints on structural change in the humanitarian enterprise itself. Critical issues are being addressed in damage-control fashion, and only then to keep problems from spinning out of control. Structural issues requiring deep thought and institutional change receive little attention, and issues of leadership and professional accountability are often ignored. If past is prologue, however, we may look for incremental change rather than the fundamental reform needed to address the four issues listed above.

One of the recurrent themes of the findings has been that while the humanitarian enterprise is vulnerable to buffeting by outside forces which it has little power to control, it has often failed to take steps necessary to address more controllable elements. The conclusion of the Sri Lanka study makes the essential point: that “international actors working in Sri Lanka have exacerbated the propensity for their deployment in the role of scapegoat through poor external communications which have been reinforced by perceived inherent ambiguities and contradictions in their positioning on peace, conflict and human rights, insufficient investment in local consultation, participation and ownership of assistance initiatives and an overcrowding of the humanitarian terrain.”<sup>50</sup>

### The Petals and Beyond

Reflecting on the data from our country studies and the issues it raises, we see a number of major questions requiring attention. They include the following:

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<sup>50</sup> Sri Lanka study, pp. 37-38.

*“We [the ICRC] are neither allies of or dependent on Coalition Forces or the United Nations. We try to conduct our humanitarian work in an impartial and independent manner. ... While there are some who would like to be perceived to be doing humanitarian work so as to further their political aims, the ICRC is apolitical and humanitarian—or perhaps I should say that it takes part in “politics” in the original, noble sense—so as to further humanitarian aims. We are neither with you nor against you.”*

—Harald Schmid de Gruneck, ICRC Maghreb regional delegate, December 6th, 2003, six weeks after the targeting of the ICRC in Baghdad, quoted in Iraq study, p. 35.

- Should humanitarians push for a stronger commitment by donors and the international community at large to fundamental principles, or acknowledge that more can be achieved by a combination of principled and pragmatic approaches?

- If we accept the reality that the international community is unlikely to become more principled in its response to conflict and crisis, how can Dunantists and non-Dunantists work together more effectively in contexts of high instrumentalization? Should there be a clearer separation, both formal and in terms of emblems and activities, of these two approaches?

- Can agreement be reached on a clearer division of labor among aid agencies regarding their respective comparative advantages in relief, reconstruction, development, conflict resolution, and advocacy? Since many agencies span the humanitarian-development spectrum and therefore work with fledgling governments, what safeguards would protect their humanitarian credentials in areas where the legitimacy of government is challenged?

- Can relations between humanitarians and the military be clarified and managed in ways that are not detrimental to humanitarianism, both in conflict and non-conflict situations? Should humanitarians agree to a division of labor that accepts the utility of assistance by the military in certain circumstances (e.g. where no other assistance is available or in natural disaster settings) and for certain periods (e.g. until civilian humanitarian organizations can assume their responsibilities)?

- Since humanitarian action as it has evolved is a concomitant of, if not a conveyor belt for, globalization,

to what extent could and should humanitarian work be insulated from western/northern values and models of globalization?

- Should humanitarian actors broaden their focus, attempting to inject greater humanity into international structures and transactions, rather than simply binding up wounds? To what extent should the mainstream humanitarian community engage more systematically on issues such as human rights, trade, and conflict prevention?

- Do changes in the nature of vulnerability to crises and non-conflict related-disasters warrant a re-thinking of the shape and functions of the humanitarian enterprise? To what extent are climate change and major environmental catastrophes, for example, likely to outrun the capacity of the international humanitarian regime to respond?

## Growth and Bias

The unprecedented growth of the humanitarian enterprise in the last several decades, along with the development of standards, procedures, and techniques, has been a positive development. There is now more predictability and standardization in disaster response, and quite possibly more effectiveness. This evolution has come, however, at the cost of flexibility, spontaneity, proportionality, and mutuality. If “you” must join “us” and on our terms in order to become a part of the enterprise, does this not undermine the very universality of humanitarian discourse? The future viability of the humanitarian project may depend on its becoming more inclusive, open, and accessible to the “other humanitarianisms”, as yet unrecognized, that play a crucial role



in the welfare and survival of people affected by crisis. Our Iraq, oPt, and Pakistan case studies document the important role of Islamic charities that function mainly outside mainstream humanitarianism.

In its present form, the enterprise is quintessentially unbalanced and biased in how it addresses vulnerability. This comes about in part because “loud” and highly visible or strategic emergencies attract more funds and attention than “silent” ones, in clear violation of the principle of proportionality. It also reflects the way in which vulnerability is defined, dictating what particular events will be addressed by the international system. In defining humanitarian crises, donors and agencies choose to address only a small proportion of global vulnerability.

They choose to respond to some crises because of their strategic containment value (Palestine, for example, or Pakistan because of its “frontline” status in the GWOT), while others, like the DRC, that are larger or more inchoate are consigned to irrelevancy.<sup>51</sup> Vulnerability is largely in the eye of the beholder. Thus, “When Hurricane Stan hit Guatemala roughly a month after Hurricane Katrina, it resulted in a similar number of fatalities but generated only a fraction of the media coverage and subsequent aid response.”<sup>52</sup> Many small-scale disasters are never reported, particularly in countries where inhabitants are too poor to afford

insurance and where their plight does not generate media attention.<sup>53</sup>

## Humanitarianism and Globalization

For better or worse, the humanitarian enterprise functions within the framework of global governance.<sup>54</sup> It reflects and shapes the functioning of civil society. As our case studies show, regardless of whether it is being instrumentalized, humanitarianism remains a dominant discourse. It lives in parallel with, and is sometimes subordinated to, processes of economic governance, political containment strategies, and military action that are functional to the interests of the “Global North.” This is the case despite the fact that the vast majority of aid workers and the recipients of humanitarian action are not of the north.

Of course, there are important variations in the alignment of humanitarian actors with global political designs. Some agencies are mainstream players, others see themselves at the margins of, or in opposition to, such designs—the system also exports its antibodies. But in reality, power, money, and the ability to make strategic choices affecting the lives of others lie essentially in northern hands—not a monopoly perhaps, but an oligopoly of the north.

Unlike the United Nations where each country has a vote, there is no such “democracy” in the humanitarian realm. Countries that do not belong to the established donor club have little opportunity to influence the humanitarian enterprise and even less to scrutinize its workings. At the UN, all countries have a stake in peace-building operations and must contribute to them, but the purse-strings and reins of UN humanitarian activities are by and large held exclusively by the north. The world body has a Peace-Building Commission<sup>55</sup> and a Human Rights Council<sup>56</sup> but no Humanitarian Council. A global body to give direction to, and review the effectiveness of, the UN system’s involvement in humanitarian action is long overdue. It would help allay widespread fears among Third World countries

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51 According to recent studies by the Center for the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the incidence of disasters has doubled in the past 20 years. The data is patchy but it seems that nine out of ten disasters are related to climate change/global warming. Disasters are more frequent and more intense and affect more people. While, overall, fewer lives may be being lost—because of better disaster management in affected countries and improved early warning technology in such countries as Bangladesh and Mozambique—the economic costs of disasters are rising substantially. In the last 50 years, reported costs of natural disasters increased fifteen-fold. This does not take into account the broader macro-economic effects, including the accumulated consequences of the recurrent nature of many such disasters (see Charlotte Brown and Edward J. Clay, *Understanding the Economic and Financial Impacts of Natural Disasters*. The World Bank, 2004. [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSCContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/04/20/000012009\\_20040420135752/Rendered/PDF/284060PAPER0Disaster0Risk0no.04.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSCContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/04/20/000012009_20040420135752/Rendered/PDF/284060PAPER0Disaster0Risk0no.04.pdf)).

52 Michael Renner and Zoë Chafe: *Beyond Disasters: Creating Opportunities for Peace*, Worldwatch Institute, Washington DC, June 2007, pp. 11-12.

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53 According to OCHA, in 2002-2006 there were as many deaths as a result of “invisible” disasters as in the Asian Tsunami.

54 David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue. Reassessing International Humanitarianism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004, p. xviii; also Mark Duffield, op.cit.

55 <http://www.un.org/peace/peacebuilding>.

56 <http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil>.

that humanitarian action is a stalking horse for political designs.

Meanwhile, the northern public has an opportunity to influence government aid policy through elections, public hearings and the like, but the aid provided by governments is seldom a major political issue. There is even less opportunity for public input, beyond the immediate stakeholders, into the work of private non-profit organizations. Most humanitarian organizations are self-mandated, if not self-referential. The workings of militarized “relief” and of private firms contracting with the western defense establishment are even more obscure.<sup>57</sup>

## Reform?

Is it possible to construct a humanitarian system that is more balanced, more universal in intent, more acceptable across cultures and within all segments of the international political system? Could such a system also be more effective in addressing the assistance and protection needs of people who are powerless, disenfranchised, and living *in extremis*? So far, the proponents of reform seem to be content to tinker with organigrams. However, waiting in the wings may be forces that could overturn the current deceptively stable humanitarian appletart: climate change, mass migration, pandemics, a technological disaster, an escalation of terrorist attacks, new forms of conflict around energy and resources, another Iraq, and so on.

From its once relatively marginal position, humanitarian action is now at center stage in terms of its links to politics, governance, and the media. What would happen, however, if the internal parameters under which it functions—cozy relationships among a handful of northern donors and a *de facto* oligopoly of organizations—were to change because of major international political shocks or cataclysms in the external environment? The enterprise might find itself all dressed up for yesterday’s crises but with nowhere to go today.

Consider the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, an organization built around the premise that principles of humanity entail an obligation to provide asylum for civilians fleeing persecution across an international border. In the post-Cold War years, refugees surged to over 22 million and the activities of the organization burgeoned. By 2007, refugee numbers had shrunk to less than ten million (conflict-related

IDPs, for which UNHCR has somewhat reluctantly assumed responsibility, number an additional 24.5 million).<sup>58</sup> Does the concomitant reduction of activity for refugees, and the increase in IDPs, mean the world has become a safer place for civilians caught up in crisis and conflict? Perhaps there are fewer refugee-producing conflicts or traditional countries of asylum have drastically tightened their admissions policies. Suffering has certainly not disappeared. It has changed. It now bears the less visible face of the internally trapped individual, too poor or frightened to move, or of migrants entrusting their lives to leaky rafts. It includes people-traffickers, pastoralists, and the urban poor, marginalized by conflict or by the economic shocks of globalization and governance failure. The shrinkage of UNHCR’s caseload bears no relationship to the universe of need.

## The Changing Nature of Vulnerability

The Global War on Terror, the securitization agenda of western states, the processes of globalization, environmental degradation and global warming are all changing the nature and the geography of human suffering. The crises of tomorrow—those that will require some form of succor for the most vulnerable—are likely to be more urban than rural, more related to lawlessness and collapsing structures of governance than to traditional forms of armed conflict. They are more likely to be the result of ethno-religious-cultural grievances than ideology, more about access to and distribution of dwindling resources. Will institutions be equipped to address the humanitarian dimension of such crises or are their tools outdated?

We do not believe that a humanitarian enterprise evolving by the accretion of new tasks or the sloughing off of old ones, and operating with a substantive time-lag behind what is happening in the real world, is the best that donors, agencies, and governments can do. There is no reason why the humanitarian enterprise should stay as it is, nor, more fundamentally, why human suffering should be addressed through a loose constellation of well-meaning actors with differing, overlapping and sometimes contradicting mandates. Traditional humanitarian functions are already being taken on by other players: private, military, non-western, militant and the like. In the grand scheme of things, humanitar-

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of the role of private contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq, see the National Guard study, pp. 46-47.

<sup>58</sup> Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2006, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/\(httpInfoFiles\)/9251510E3E5B6FC3C12572BF0029C267/\\$file/Global\\_Overview\\_2006.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/9251510E3E5B6FC3C12572BF0029C267/$file/Global_Overview_2006.pdf).

ian action is, in fact, a relatively recent addition to the panoply of approaches to social change. It has really come into its own only in the last 20 to 30 years, and is already in jeopardy. The world is changing faster than its institutions.

If response to conflict-related vulnerability is increasingly subsumed under the agenda of securitization, if conflict itself continues to decline and non-conflict disasters and vulnerability continue to surge, there will be increasing pressure to overhaul the existing humanitarian system, or perhaps even to discard current arrangements entirely.

The perceived interests of the north and of emerging powers such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China already clash. So will the developmental aspirations of the south clash as it tries to match untenable standards of living in the north. The “humanitarian” system that emerges from this shake-up could be benevolent and benign, an improvement on what we have now. Or it could be tough-minded and calculating, focused on the containment—or even the suppression—of the restive borderlands, those areas of the world where globalization encounters hostility. Will the institutions that emerge be more just and principled, but still tailored mainly to northern and western security interests? Or will they be more universal and acceptable across diverse cultures and contexts? It is not unthinkable, extrapolating from the evidence of our case studies, that a weakened and already fragile humanitarian system could be further weakened, marginalized, and co-opted because of its own irreconcilable differences and interests.

## Two Essentials

The aspiration for a more just and secure world in which individuals can lead meaningful lives in freedom from fear and want is one that humanitarians affirm, whatever they see as their role in bringing about such changes. Even if the loftier agenda of changing the world is not within their purview, humanitarians are deeply concerned by its state. During the past quarter century, humanitarianism, in addition to the assistance and protection that it has provided to the vulnerable, has functioned as an important mobilizing framework that gives direction and meaning to the lives of hundreds of thousands of dedicated individuals.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, it has replaced earlier banners—or “isms”—whose trajec-

tory proved unsatisfactory. Will humanitarianism go the way of its earlier counterparts? Will it be saved or resurrected in a different incarnation?

We offer two conclusions. First, there remains a need and an opportunity *to build safety nets for the most vulnerable in conflicts and disasters*, nets that cut across cultures, are principle-based and independent from politics. More can and should be done to promote and protect the universality of humanitarian action and enlarge its global reach and character.

Second, political and structural changes in the wider world are proceeding faster and running deeper than most humanitarians realize. Securitization and climate change, among other global forces, may trigger events of a magnitude that could sweep away the humanitarian system as we know it. Serious reform is not yet in the air, but it is unavoidable. There must be *a more forthright engagement with change*, building on the bedrock of time-tested principles and creating a humanitarian enterprise that is inclusive, participatory, transparent and accountable and, above all, that is “of the world” rather than “of the north”.

Reform, inevitably, will take time. More research, analysis and debate will be required to better grasp what lies ahead. In the meantime, we envision a humanitarian enterprise that is more focused and self-contained in what it attempts. A more modest enterprise, closer in ambition and intent to traditional humanitarian principles, stands a better chance of saving and protecting larger numbers of lives than today’s increasingly politically-driven, semi-militarized forms of relief.

<sup>59</sup> According to one study, there were 250,000 humanitarian aid workers in 2005, the vast majority nationals of affected countries. See Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Katherine Haver, Providing aid in insecure environments: trends in policy and operations, HPG Report 23 •

September 2006. [www.odi.org.uk/hpg/aid\\_insecure\\_environments.html](http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/aid_insecure_environments.html).



BOGs	Basic Operational Guidelines (Nepal)
CDA	Collaborative for Development Action
CERF	Central Emergency Response Fund
DPKO	UN Department of Peace-keeping Operations
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DSRSG	Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General
EU	European Union
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Area (Pakistan)
FIC	Feinstein International Center
GTZ	German Technical Cooperation
GWOT	Global War on Terror
HA2015	Humanitarian Agenda 2015
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières
MNF	Multi-National Force (Iraq)
MONUC	UN Mission in the Congo
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
oPt	occupied Palestinian territory
SRSG	Special Representative of the Secretary-General
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
QIP	Quick impact project
UN	United Nations
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNHCR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMIN	UN Mission in Nepal
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCO	Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator
US	United States

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## About the Contributors

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Donini is a Senior Researcher at the Feinstein International Center where he works on issues relating to the future of humanitarian action. From 2002 to 2004 he was a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. He has worked for 26 years in the United Nations in research, evaluation, and humanitarian capacities. His last post was as Director of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (1999-2002). Before going to Afghanistan he was chief of the Lessons Learned Unit at OCHA, where he managed a program of independent studies on the effectiveness of relief efforts in complex emergencies. He has published widely on evaluation, humanitarian, and UN reform issues. In 2004 he co-edited the volume *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace, and Justice in Afghanistan* (Kumarian Press) as well as several articles exploring the implications of the crises in Afghanistan and Iraq for the future of humanitarian action. Most recently, he has written a chapter on the hidden functions of humanitarian action, "Through a Glass Darkly: Humanitarianism and Empire" in N. Gunewardena and M. Shuller (eds.) *Capitalizing on Catastrophe: Neoliberal Strategies in Disaster Reconstruction* (AltaMira Press, Lanham, MD, 2008).

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Hansen is an aid worker and independent researcher based in Amman, Jordan. He has worked since 1994 with a wide variety of humanitarian organizations in the Caucasus, south Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Hansen has tracked humanitarian policy and operations in and around Iraq since early 2004. Hansen has recently completed a series of briefing papers on current issues and lessons learned in humanitarian action in Iraq through the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI).

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