

HUMANITARIAN AID AND INTERVENTION:  
THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION

# Upholding Humanitarian Principles in an Effective Integrated Response

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The integration of political, military, and humanitarian action in responding to complex emergencies offers a compelling promise of resolving long-term problems and thereby providing peace and stability to an entire population. Significant changes are needed, however, to realize this promise fully. The most critical improvements relate to strengthening the humanitarian leadership within the UN system and so refocusing the collective effort on the protection of vulnerable civilians. A movement of independent, complementary agencies working together to realize protection will strengthen the humanitarian component of integrated missions and make a difference in people's lives.

## INTEGRATION'S DIFFICULTIES

There are serious challenges to making the integration approach effective in the real world. The concept of integration is underpinned by the idea that only by addressing the root causes of conflict can societies heal and future discord be prevented. But addressing root causes is a vast project: it involves redressing historic grievances, such as those around land rights or discrimination based on ethnicity or class; reforming the justice system and facing the problem of impunity for past violations; creating pro-

fessional armed forces focused on and capable of defending the territorial integrity of the state; managing natural resources in a sustainable manner, while investing the proceeds in development of the country; creating economic opportunity so that demobilized soldiers have no temptation to reclaim their weapons and become bandits. The agenda appears unending.

The most powerful countries in the world—the permanent members of the Security Council, other member states of the European Union, Japan, Australia—have rarely applied their diplomatic and military resources to respond to conflict, state failure, and the resulting human calamities in countries considered peripheral to their political, economic, and security interests. They have written off large parts of the world and have left humanitarian agencies and the assistance they provide as the sole form of international engagement. Rather than giving politics and diplomacy a humanitarian dimension, integration has resulted in the politicization of humanitarian action.<sup>1</sup> Too often humanitarian personnel find themselves alone and

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<sup>1</sup> Joanna Macrae and Nicholas Leader, "Shifting Sands: The Search for 'Coherence' between Political and Humanitarian Responses to Complex Emergencies," Humanitarian Policy Group Report 8, Overseas Development Institute, August 2000, pp. 3–4.

unsupported in the midst of conflict situations, resulting in increased vulnerability for themselves and their programs.

Where powerful countries decide to intervene, integrated action provides them with the ability to further a political agenda—advancing the cause of the righteous, as in the war on terrorism, or providing broader support to UN-brokered peace accords in countries such as Angola or East Timor. As a result, humanitarian agencies are forced to make choices that may be partisan in substance or appearance. Agencies that refuse to be a part of the integration project in a specific country may find themselves unable to attract vital donor funding because the major donors have chosen to line up behind the integrated approach overseen by the UN's special representative of the secretary-general, in close cooperation with the internationally recognized authorities that have emerged from the peace process.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely because suffering in much of the world is considered of no importance, the major donor governments have trampled on an integral principle of humanitarian action: the proportionality of response to need. On a per capita basis, the response to the displacement created by the conflict in Kosovo, for example, exceeded the funding provided to displaced persons in West Africa by a factor of seven. The United States has so far devoted \$18 billion for the reconstruction of Iraq, an amount greater than its entire foreign aid budget. The Bush administration's original Iraq reconstruction program called for rebuilding one children's hospital in Basra for \$775 million, an amount greater than the total annual U.S. allocation to refugees. While poor infrastructure leaves hundreds of thousands of people suffering in total isolation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United States disbursed nearly \$100 million to contractors to expedite the completion of

the Kabul-Kandahar road in Afghanistan to shore up political support for the embattled government of President Hamid Karzai.

## INTEGRATION REAFFIRMED

There have been calls for humanitarian agencies to go “back to basics” and focus on the narrow yet noble task of relieving human suffering, guided by the core principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.<sup>3</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) exemplifies this trend, arguing that it is unethical to trade the saving of lives now for the potential saving of lives in the future, which it sees as the central implication of integrated action that aims to deal with root causes of conflict.

A return to “pure” humanitarianism is neither desirable nor possible. A golden age of pure humanitarianism never existed. The twentieth century is a record of the powerlessness of humanitarianism in the face of political movements committed to expanding their power by whatever means necessary. To save even one life is a powerful and undeniable achievement, but neutral and independent humanitarian action is often impossible to effect without corresponding diplomatic, political, and, if necessary, military action.

There is no inherent contradiction between an integrated approach and independent humanitarian action that may save lives. An effective integrated strategy, ele-

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<sup>2</sup> See Médecins Sans Frontières, “Angolans Left to Die: Abandoning the Humanitarian Imperative,” October 2003; available at [www.doctorswithoutborders.org](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org). This report is sharply critical of the UN response to hunger among civilians emerging from the areas controlled by UNITA after the death of Jonas Savimbi.

<sup>3</sup> See the survey of the humanitarian movement in the aftermath of the wars in the Balkans and Afghanistan in David Rieff, *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

ments of which are outlined below, preserves and expands the space for humanitarian agencies to respond to the needs of vulnerable people. A core premise for an integrated approach is that through it conflicts may be resolved and political reconciliation achieved. In a principled sense, integration is not about creating political winners and losers, with the losers being civilians who are cut off from contact with humanitarian agencies. Integration is about unified international action in support of reconciliation and social inclusion.

Integration of humanitarian action with wide-ranging political, economic, and social action is necessary to allow societies to heal and prevent further conflict. Humanitarian action is, by definition, limited to meeting immediate emergency needs. Humanitarian action cannot break the cycle of repeated conflict, which leads to further vulnerability. An integrated response to the fundamental problems that create discord offers the possibility of creating stability and ending or minimizing the need for humanitarian response. El Salvador, Mozambique, Cambodia, and East Timor are examples of countries that have achieved relative political stability and economic progress in the aftermath of major international interventions to support peace and initiate a process of recovery.

That there is no going back to pure humanitarianism is best articulated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the organization that is considered the guardian of the application of the Geneva Conventions. The ICRC has recognized that humanitarian action must consist of more than adherence to core principles. In the late 1990s, it managed a multiyear collaborative process involving UN agencies and NGOs that resulted in the elaboration of the definition of protection as a concept that “encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full

respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e., human rights law, international humanitarian law, refugee law).” According to the ICRC the activities that enhance protection include environment building, or any activity aimed at creating and/or consolidating a global environment conducive to full respect for the rights of individuals; responsive action, or any activity undertaken in the context of an emerging or established pattern of abuse and aimed at prevention and/or alleviating its immediate effects; and remedial action, or any activity aimed at restoring dignified living conditions through rehabilitation, restitution, and reparation.<sup>4</sup> By including environment building and remedial action within the framework of protection activities, the ICRC has in effect endorsed the philosophical underpinnings of an integrated approach.

The International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship, held in Stockholm in June 2003 and attended by major donor governments, the UN humanitarian agencies, the Red Cross movement, NGO networks, and think tanks, resulted in the affirmation of principles that constitute a further affirmation of the premises of integration. In addition to endorsing core principles such as respect for international humanitarian law and human rights and the allocation of funding in proportion to needs, the group underscored the importance of involving beneficiaries in the implementation of humanitarian response; strengthening the capacity of affected countries and communities to prevent and respond to

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<sup>4</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, “Protection of Internally Displaced Persons,” Inter-Agency Standing Committee Policy Paper, New York, December 1999, pp. 4, 6.

crises; and providing humanitarian assistance in ways that support recovery and long-term development, and the return of sustainable livelihoods—all key components of the integration agenda.<sup>5</sup>

The resulting document, “Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship,” does not, however, include provisions for enforcement of these principles or even special incentives for state actors to comply with them. Hence, it is unlikely that these principles will be observed in the real world of humanitarian policy subservient to national security interests. Nevertheless, their endorsement by major donor governments and implementing agencies provides a normative basis for agencies and individuals committed to these principles to advocate for them to be respected. Because of that, some accountability is possible to obtain through the exercise of moral suasion by the UN secretary-general and his under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs.

#### CHOOSING THE BEST WAY TO RESPOND

The terrain of the war on terrorism is especially forbidding for agencies seeking to be guided by core humanitarian principles. In Iraq, neutral space is virtually unavailable, so all-encompassing is the American project. In retrospect, especially once it became evident that a large-scale humanitarian crisis would not in fact result from the U.S. invasion, agencies would have been better off withdrawing, while publicly insisting that the United States and its allies had specific responsibilities to protect the civilian population under the terms of the Fourth Geneva Convention. In Afghanistan, the entire UN system, which had carefully negotiated humanitarian space under the Taliban, has been expected to support the

overall project of building a liberal, democratic future for the country—which implies that there is huge pressure to provide aid not according to need but according to one’s capacity to contribute to this aim. The NGOs, especially agencies with several decades of experience in the country, have more space for independent action than they do in Iraq, but their relations at the community level are inevitably more problematic than before the intervention in 2001 as their actual links to the occupation forces and their agenda may be unclear to their local partners.

The humanitarian response system has almost no options in cases of active conflict and repressive governments that make access impossible, and outside intervention to bring an immediate halt to the hostilities is neither politically nor militarily feasible. The fighting in Darfur, western Sudan, between government-backed militias and rebel movements, with civilians terrorized by the militias, is a current, vivid example of people being almost completely outside the reach of humanitarian organizations. To date, lifesaving action in Darfur has been virtually impossible outside a few enclaves. The conflict there is a result of the Sudanese government pursuing a policy of ethnic cleansing in western Sudan at the very moment that the north-south conflict is being resolved, as negotiations to end the twenty-one-year civil war have finally been successfully concluded. The member states of the UN Security Council have refused to consider action to stop the atrocities in Darfur for fear of jeopardizing action to consolidate peace in the south.

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<sup>5</sup> International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship, “Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship,” Stockholm, June 17, 2003; available at [www.sida.se/content/1/c6/02/18/82/Meetingconclusions.pdf](http://www.sida.se/content/1/c6/02/18/82/Meetingconclusions.pdf).

With respect to the north-south agreement, a major international peacekeeping effort will be required to oversee it, while also providing security for the massive task of facilitating the return of more than four million refugees and internally displaced persons and rehabilitating vast areas of the war-devastated country. Political and diplomatic pressure may have to include linking a Security Council resolution authorizing an integrated peacekeeping mission in the south to progress on ending atrocities in the west. But in any case, without the resolute pressure of the United States and member states of the European Union and the African Union, the central government in Khartoum will continue its support for the militias and will not allow humanitarian agencies to operate independently in Darfur.

Eastern Burma, where one million internally displaced people receive token amounts of assistance from semi-clandestine cross-border operations from Thailand, is another case. From a protection standpoint, the critical short-term measure in such cases is to ensure that neighboring countries open their borders to refugees from the conflict, while diplomatic efforts by regional powers or by countries with leverage over the parties to the conflict must be made to bring about a cease-fire that would allow personnel of first response agencies such as the ICRC, MSF, the UN World Food Programme, and UNICEF to access populations in need.

Meaningful negotiation for access and respect of humanitarian principles is also impossible when armed movements degenerate into gangs of bandits who are no longer attempting to win the allegiance of the general population. When the bonds between these forces and civilians break completely, the only effective protection strategy is the introduction of outside mili-

tary forces to stabilize the situation, prevent further violence against civilians, and facilitate humanitarian access, as demonstrated by the British in Sierra Leone in 2001 and the French operating on behalf of the European Union in the Ituri province, DRC, in 2003. In Liberia, the refusal of the United States to commit peacekeeping troops after the departure of Charles Taylor in July 2003 and the lack of a ready standing force as an alternative left displaced civilians outside the capital at the mercy of roving bands of rebels who continued to pillage communities, rape women, and terrorize the population.

Surprisingly, the integration debate includes few references to two successful examples of integration that could provide valuable lessons for addressing the current situation in Sudan. The integration of humanitarian intervention and the provision of aid are appropriate when the UN Security Council has mandated a mission to oversee the implementation of a peace agreement between the local warring parties brokered by powerful members of the international community. When the peace holds, monitored by external peacekeepers, the problems of humanitarian access and independence become less acute. After the signing of the peace accords in Mozambique, for example, humanitarian work in areas previously controlled by RENAMO, the guerilla movement that contested the central government during the 1980s, lost its partisan political significance and became at once humanitarian work to meet the needs of vulnerable people and part of an overall process of preparing the country for political unity and reconciliation. A similar process took place in El Salvador. In both cases, international humanitarian organizations were full participants in the response to the immediate needs of the local populations, and their work also became more

effective after peace was brokered and peacekeeping troops were deployed—which assured an environment more conducive to reaching vulnerable groups. In these cases, integration facilitated humanitarian action, while also placing it in a context in which agencies could begin to respond to long-neglected development problems.

#### TOWARD A MORE EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION APPROACH

With donors, the ICRC, the UN humanitarian system, and NGOs in alignment, holistic approaches to the relief of human suffering will remain the order of the day. The challenge is to define precisely how in the real world humanitarian agencies can undertake remedial action while remaining neutral, impartial, and independent, especially when operating within the framework of large-scale external interventions, with or without UN endorsement.

##### *Complementarity*

The starting point for an approach to integration that is effective while embodying humanitarian principles is complementarity, the idea that “a strong humanitarian movement is made up of distinct, independent actors.”<sup>6</sup> The actual roles of these actors in humanitarian response will differ, based on their core competencies and comparative advantages in a particular situation. The United Nations should play the “central and unique role . . . in providing leadership and coordination of international humanitarian action.”<sup>7</sup> However, the United Nations should lead in the direction of maximizing the strengths of individual agencies in contributing to a collective effort, rather than ensuring that all actors, including NGOs, are moving in lockstep toward a particular political outcome.

##### *Operational Independence*

In addition to tolerating diversity, the integration approach should also be able to tolerate a degree of separation of the humanitarian function from that of the political/diplomatic and military. In postconflict peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts authorized by the UN Security Council, the special representative of the secretary-general should continue to play the overall leadership role, but with a primary focus on the political and military aspects of the operation. The humanitarian coordinator should cooperate closely with the special representative of the secretary-general, but should report to the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and the emergency relief coordinator. The humanitarian coordinator requires a degree of operational independence, precisely in order to assess the needs and ensure an effective response to the humanitarian consequences of the overall peace-building process in the respective country or region.

If humanitarian coordinators are to play this analytical and advocacy role effectively, they need to have real experience with humanitarian response. Too often in the UN system resident coordinators, whose expertise is primarily in the area of long-term development in close cooperation with national authorities, double up as humanitarian coordinators. This leads to slow recognition of humanitarian crises as, for example, in Uganda, where the internal displacement crisis caused by the war in the north between the government and the Lord’s Resistance Army was largely ignored by most of the UN system until the last quarter of 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières, “Angolans Left to Die,” p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship, “Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship,” General Principle 10.



### *Protection*

For the integration approach to be effective, at least two other breakthroughs are required, one conceptual, the other operational. Conceptually, agencies need to start with the issue of protection and work from an analysis of the protection needs of the civilian population toward the particulars of the humanitarian assistance to be provided, rather than the other way around. Too often protection is an add-on to standard packages of humanitarian assistance, or agencies assume that the mere provision of food or medical care in and of itself constitutes protection. Starting with protection has the advantage of grounding the analysis from the beginning in international humanitarian law, while forcing agency staff to focus attention on the populations most at risk. Access to these people may be difficult, if not impossible, but recognition of the problem should place the achievement of access at the center of the diplomatic and advocacy efforts of the concerned agencies. The humanitarian coordinator needs to provide the leadership at the country level necessary to assure that assessment and response to protection needs of the civilian population are at the heart of the integrated approach of the UN system.

### *Local Action*

An operational breakthrough would involve focusing far more effort on working locally to build an effective response to protection and assistance needs, in partnership with networks of local government officials, local NGOs, community-based organizations, religious institutions, even informal groups of concerned citizens. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the standard operational response to emergencies still relies heavily on central planning out of the capital city or regional hub, with dependence on expatriate personnel, who have special needs for support and

security. While local institutions may be weak and vulnerable to disruption by armed groups, their personnel often have the critical comparative advantage of being able to move through or negotiate access to conflict areas and to reach populations that would otherwise be completely cut off from assistance. What is often missing is a meaningful commitment on the part of international agencies to identify promising local networks and strengthen them.

The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo is an example of a region where an approach emphasizing support for local institutions would be appropriate and effective. Congolese are superb organizers and church networks and nonsectarian NGOs have a presence throughout the conflict zones. They have borne witness to the needs of populations subject to the predatory violence of armed groups, but have had precious few resources to respond directly to the suffering. Grants of \$15,000–\$20,000 to some of these organizations would have made an immediate practical difference in their ability to travel in conflict areas, document abuses, and respond to local needs. Yet in 2001 and 2002 members of a network of organizations tending to the protection and assistance needs of children found it extremely difficult to access funding from UN agencies and international NGOs based in Bukavu and Goma, the two major towns in the eastern Congo. The realization that support for local groups was critical to the effectiveness of the overall humanitarian response was lacking.

Most international NGO personnel have a deep-seated mistrust of local government officials. And indeed, these officials are often part of the protection problem. But these very same officials are often more flexible and less ideological than their national counterparts because they live closer to the population and are more directly accountable for meeting

people's needs. Local government, however, is at the end of a central government funding pipeline that usually leaks throughout; local officials seldom have enough resources to take action to solve problems. Strengthening local government institutions and placing resources in the hands of local officials through a transparent process can be a critical component of an effective response strategy to improving protection over the long term.

### *Proportionality and Financial Independence*

The participants in the International Meeting on Good Humanitarian Donorship committed themselves to allocating humanitarian funding in proportion to needs and to exploring the possibility of reducing earmarking and introducing longer-term funding arrangements. In the real world, these commitments are unlikely to be realized. While the emergency relief coordinator is providing leadership to bring attention to "forgotten emergencies," as long as emergency response at the country level is funded through ad hoc consolidated appeals, countries that are peripheral to the core political and security interests of the major donors will inevitably continue to be ignored. Further, the financial commitments of the United States and its allies in the war on terrorism make a mockery of the principle of proportionality because they intend to bear any burden to defeat the enemy in a global struggle that may last decades. A possible solution would be to fund the UN humanitarian agencies through assessed contributions or, more radically, to create a single emergency response agency that is funded in this way. However, neither of these proposals seems likely to gain political traction in the current global environment.

In this context, NGOs that really want operational independence are going to have to

achieve greater financial independence. Some of the major operational NGOs, such as Oxfam Great Britain, the MSF federation, and World Vision United States, are able to limit their funding from the government to about 20 percent of total revenue, which, given their overall size, affords them a high degree of flexibility to respond to need where they find it. But some of the major American humanitarian NGOs are less fortunate. For CARE USA, for example, the ratio is reversed: 83 percent of its revenue comes from government sources. For Save the Children USA the figure is 61 percent; for the International Rescue Committee, 76 percent; Catholic Relief Services, 56 percent; for Mercy Corps, 78 percent.<sup>8</sup> This dependence on government funding, most of which is from the U.S. government, has the potential to hinder the operational independence of the agencies, especially in countries that are on the front line of the war on terrorism.

DESPITE ITS PROBLEMS, the integration of political, military, and humanitarian action in responding to complex emergencies is here to stay. Its promise of resolving long-term problems and thereby providing peace and stability to an entire population is compelling. Significant changes are needed, however, to realize this promise fully. The most critical improvements relate to strengthening the humanitarian leadership within the UN system, resulting in re-focusing the collective effort on the protection of vulnerable civilians. A humanitarian movement of independent, complementary agencies working together to realize protection will strengthen the humanitarian component of integrated missions and make a difference in people's lives.

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<sup>8</sup> These figures are all for the fiscal 2002 year, calculated by the author from tables in InterAction, *Member Profiles 2002-2003* (Washington, D.C.: InterAction, 2003).