

HUMANITARIAN AID AND INTERVENTION:
THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION

Understanding Integration from Rwanda to Iraq

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The past decade has seen profound changes in the relationship between humanitarian and political action. The political determinants of humanitarian crises are now acknowledged, so too is their chronicity, and the limits of relief aid as a form of intervention are thus more fully understood. In 1994, in the refugee camps of Goma, Zaire, there was widespread manipulation of aid resources by armed groups implicated in the genocide in Rwanda. This experience highlighted a wider concern that, rather than doing good, emergency aid can fuel violence. The apparent consensus that humanitarian assistance can somehow stand outside politics gave way to calls for tighter linkage between aid and political responses to crises.

While the arguments in favor of coherent, or integrated, approaches that seek to link operationally humanitarian and political responses to conflict-related emergencies appear self-evident, they frequently fail to distinguish between the different types of politics that are being applied by different international actors over time, and how these undermine the core principles that define humanitarian aid as such. They also risk mid-learning the real lessons of Goma—that those events occurred primarily as a failure of political action, not of relief aid.

POLITICS AND HUMANITARIANISM

Humanitarian action is a highly political activity. The provision of humanitarian assistance and efforts to enhance the protection of civilians and other noncombatants require engagement with the political authorities in conflict-affected countries. International humanitarian law is designed to guide the ways in which wars are fought. In this sense, the provision of resources will have political and economic impacts. While necessarily political, in that it requires a process of analysis, negotiation, advocacy, and perhaps coercion, humanitarian politics is distinct from the partisan politics and geopolitics that underpin war because of its particular, if narrow, goals—the alleviation of suffering and the maintenance of human dignity.¹

* This article draws extensively on 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; and Joanna Macrae and Adele Harmer, eds., “Humanitarian Action and the ‘Global War on Terror’: A Review of Trends and Issues,” Humanitarian Policy Group Report 14, Overseas Development Institute, July 2003.

¹ David Forsythe, *Humanitarian Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

The definition of rules that guide humanitarian actors in their interaction with actors who are involved in the partisan and geopolitical agendas of warfare reflects just such recognition of the inherently political character of humanitarian action. Humanitarian rules and principles represent a deal between humanitarian organizations and the warring parties.² This deal is based on the premise that humanitarian organizations will attempt only to mitigate the impact of a conflict—not to influence its course. The principle of impartiality—which requires that assistance be provided proportionate to need and not according to political efficacy, religious, racial, or other criteria—is designed to ensure that the provision of aid does not offer one side undue military or political advantage. The principle of neutrality—not taking a political position with regard to the justness or otherwise of a particular actor’s cause—is the practical expression of impartiality and is widely understood to be a requirement of achieving secure access to conflict-affected communities.

THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF AN ORTHODOXY

At least three broad trends have provided the momentum for efforts to promote integrated approaches to humanitarian crises.

First, the aftermath of the Cold War saw a redefinition of international security to embrace not only traditional military threats but large movements of people, trade in illicit goods, and environmental change. The paradigm of human security, first tabled in the United Nations’ report “An Agenda for Peace,” implied a broadening of the definition of security and thus of those responsible for its achievement. Specifically, the report implied the need to move beyond

the domains of diplomacy and defense to those of development, trade, and environmental policy.³

The 1990s saw unparalleled in numbers interventions in the domestic policy of sovereign states, from economic sanctions to military interventions, which occurred from Somalia, to the Persian Gulf, to the Balkans, to Haiti. Many of these interventions were presented as part of an effort to uphold the principles outlined in the human security approach, including the protection of human rights.⁴ The 1999 war in Kosovo was the apex of this newly interventionist approach and was labeled as the world’s first “humanitarian war.”

Despite the radical ways in which the events of September 11 reshaped the security agenda, there is much continuity with the general post-Cold War trends regarding the positioning of humanitarian aid in international politics. After September 11, humanitarian assistance has been seen by many governments as an instrument of soft security, crucial for addressing the perceived root, social causes of terrorism. In justifying its wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration used humanitarian

² Nicholas Leader, “The Politics of Principle: The Principles of Humanitarian Action in Practice,” Humanitarian Policy Group Report 2, Overseas Development Institute, March 2000.

³ See, e.g., Boutros Boutros-Ghali, “An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping,” Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit meeting of the Security Council, United Nations, New York, January 31, 1992; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Aid in Progress: Development Cooperation and the Review of Dutch Foreign Policy,” The Hague, 1995; and United Kingdom Department for International Development, “The White Paper on International Development,” Briefing Paper, London, 1997.

⁴ Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

reasons to explain the benefits of regime change. This practice continues the trend of using the provision of humanitarian assistance to legitimize international military intervention to publics in Western countries, as well as in the affected countries themselves.⁵ In Kosovo in 1999, the deployment of military assets in the humanitarian operation reinforced an image of an ostensibly benign use of force. The importance of humanitarian assistance in winning hearts and minds, and thus buttressing security, has been institutionalized in military doctrine and in the emerging security apparatus of the European Union.⁶

Second, the often-neglected driver of the coherence agenda is a much broader trend among Western democracies toward “joined up” government. The attainment of complex public policy goals is increasingly seen to rely on breaking down conventional demarcations of departmental responsibility and promoting cross-departmental cooperation toward a common objective. This requires new mechanisms of coordination that effectively bring together different mandates under a single managerial structure.

In the United Kingdom, for example, since 1997, there has been a number of initiatives to promote cross-ministerial working procedures to address complex public policy issues ranging from crime to international conflict. In the case of international conflict, common pools of funds have been managed to promote a general policy of cross-departmental working in support of conflict prevention, which has particularly been applied in Africa. These pools of funds are managed by staff drawn from the departments responsible for international aid, trade, defense, and foreign policy. The 1997 reforms by the UN secretary-general introduced similar modalities within the

United Nations. The UN Executive Committees on Humanitarian Affairs and on Peace and Security, respectively, were created. Chaired variously by aid, diplomatic, and peacekeeping/military actors, these forums provide opportunities for information exchange and to varying degrees inform resource allocation and operational decision-making.

Third, throughout the 1990s, official development assistance came to be seen as a policy instrument at first for peace building and eventually for conflict prevention and resolution. This “securitization” of aid came about as a result of the need within the aid community to find a new rationale for development cooperation after the end of the Cold War and of the increasing inability to use conventional diplomatic tools in dealing with the “new” wars.⁷ In contrast, in the Cold War conflicts, because they held the purse strings the superpowers could wield considerable influence over the way in which they were fought, and in shaping the terms under which they might be resolved. The gradual withdrawal of the United States and the Soviet Union beginning in the mid-1980s from many of the world’s conflicts meant that armed groups steadily increased the range of activities from which they could finance their activities. These activities

⁵ Macrae and Harmer, eds., “Humanitarian Action and the ‘Global War on Terror.’”

⁶ See, e.g., Emery Brusset and Christine Tiberghien, “Trends and Risks in EU Humanitarian Action,” in Joanna Macrae, ed., “The New Humanitarianisms: A Review of Trends in Global Humanitarian Action,” Humanitarian Policy Group Report 11, Overseas Development Institute, April 2002, for an analysis of the evolution of the role of the military under the Petersberg Tasks of the European Union; see also Javier Solana, “A Secure Europe in a Better World” (speech to the European Council, Thessaloniki, June 20, 2003).

⁷ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

extended from predation on civilians to highly organized extraction of minerals and timber and, importantly, humanitarian aid. Increased understanding of the political economy of conflict led some within the development community to examine whether and how aid might be used as an incentive for peace, by providing alternative sources of income for civilians and to buy off spoilers in peace processes.⁸ More broadly, poverty or underdevelopment was seen to be a cause of major grievance and therefore a contributing factor to the conditions because of which people resorted to armed violence.

While initially centered largely on the role of development cooperation, humanitarian aid increasingly came into attention since it was the type of aid most commonly available in war-affected countries. Within many official donors, including the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and many Scandinavian countries, it was the humanitarian aid departments that assumed responsibility also for developing strategies for conflict management.

Increasingly, humanitarian aid was seen as a resource that could be used to address and influence the root causes of conflict. This approach was based on the idea of a “relief-development continuum,” which proposed that “good” relief would provide the basis for development and that well-planned development aid would reduce populations’ vulnerability to future disasters. In the mid-1990s, this idea was taken even further to imply that by making relief more developmental, aid could serve a role in conflict prevention, mitigation, and resolution by addressing the root, political causes of wars. This formulation suggests that the coherence agenda involves not just the redefinition of the balance between the respective humanitarian and developmental

institutions but the redefinition of the meaning of a humanitarian mandate.

INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE

The challenge of the coherence agenda is that, by redefining the humanitarian mandate and associating humanitarian action with the very partisan and geopolitical agendas from which it has historically sought to distance itself, it threatens the deal between humanitarian organizations and the warring parties. Even the apparently benign political agendas of conflict resolution or development imply taking a position with regard to the relative legitimacy of those in political or military power. The negative effects of the coherence agenda on humanitarian action are evident from the ways in which integration has been implemented in practice.

In the more common but less visible crises, rather than being subsumed by politics, humanitarian action has become a replacement for international political action, and there are attempts to use aid to promote peace building and state building.⁹ In those cases, promises of peace through development made under the umbrella of “humanitarian” assistance represent a significant broadening of the humanitarian agenda and imply redefinition of the principles according to which aid is provided, in particular the abandonment of the principle of neutrality.

⁸ See, e.g., Peter Uvin, *The Influence of Aid in Situations of Violent Conflict: A Synthesis and a Commentary on the Lessons Learned from Case Studies on the Limits and Scope for the Use of Development Assistance Incentives and Disincentives for Influencing Conflict Situations* (Paris: OECD, 1999); available at www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/57/1919902.pdf.

⁹ Macrae and Leader, “Shifting Sands.”

In Afghanistan prior to 2001, in the Congo prior to the international intervention in the northeast city of Bunia, Ituri province, in 2003, and Somalia probably since the mid-1990s, aid actors have been virtually alone, and have increasingly sought to deploy the scarce assets at their disposal not only to provide a palliative against the worst excesses of war, but also as the basis for longer-term developmental initiatives, cast as crucial and instrumental in a wider process of peace building and conflict resolution.

Similarly, the 1998–2001 strategic framework process in Afghanistan, while initially premised on intense engagement from the diplomatic and security arenas, in practice became an aid-led approach to conflict resolution. Within this framework, it was assumed that addressing the problems of underemployment, declining livelihoods, and rural-urban inequalities would provide means of addressing the root causes of conflict.¹⁰ In the Congo, revitalizing markets through reestablishing transport links was seen as promoting economic growth that would create demand for private health care—thus enabling communities to access health services. Such an approach to allocating humanitarian aid privileges a long chain of uncertain causation leading to potential future benefits that takes away the resources for the protection of the health and safety of populations in the short term.¹¹ With this in mind, barges were seen to act as a vanguard for development and peace, not simply a logistical device for food aid delivery.

The potential costs and benefits of such practical policies have been the subject of only limited independent research and evaluation, despite the fact that they represent the most common form of integrated action. Advocates point out that such policies are a natural and pragmatic response to

the demands of responding to chronic crises and the need to address secondary, as well as proximate, causes of mortality and morbidity.¹² Critics argue, however, that humanitarian aid can exert only limited leverage over the complex dynamics of conflict. By assuming responsibility for “root causes,” aid actors necessarily associate themselves with a particular side in the conflict. This position risks compromising short-term humanitarian gain in return for *potential* medium- and long-term improvements in the political and economic environment. The problem is, of course, that such gains are inherently difficult to predict because of the multiple variables that determine whether and how a particular conflict is sustained or ended. More fundamentally, it implies that the means justify the ends—that loss of life is acceptable in the short term because it will result in the promised peace.

Since the high-profile crises of Iraq, most recently, Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, and Kosovo in 1999, humanitarian aid has also become seen as a means of securing “hearts and minds,” legitimizing intervention to domestic and international audiences, and providing incentives for peace. It is in these contexts where the risks and realities of instrumentalization of humanitarian

¹⁰ Hugh Cholmondeley, “The Role of the UN System in Response to Crisis and Recovery,” Report to the UN Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions, 10th session, Geneva, 1997.

¹¹ David Bryer, “Politics and Humanitarianism: Coherence in Crisis?” Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, February 2003; available at www.hdcentre.org/datastore/files/pandh.pdf.

¹² Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: Supporting Local Capacities for Peace Through Aid* (Cambridge: The Collaborative for Development Action, 1996); and Robert Miller, *Aid As Peacemaker: Canadian Development Assistance and Third World Conflict* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1992).

aid are most obvious, and where the conventional boundaries between civilian and military actors, and between state and non-state actors, have been most sharply eroded.

For some, the costs of integration are demonstrated by the attacks on the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) compounds in Baghdad in the late summer of 2003, and the increasing attacks on aid workers in Afghanistan, including the assassination of an ICRC international staff member in April 2003 and of five Médecins Sans Frontières members, two of them Afghani, in May 2004.¹³ Others counter that, rather than constituting a response to shifts in the international response to conflicts, such attacks only reflect the politics of Islamic extremism, in which just being Western, or being seen with Westerners, is sufficient to invite attack. In the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the motivations of individual belligerents and the groups for which they purport to fight, it is, of course, difficult to reach definitive conclusions on the merits of the respective arguments. However, there are two points that can be made.

First, where the project of state building remains deeply contentious, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, humanitarian agencies cannot retain the benefits of the security, autonomy, and access to areas that independent and neutral humanitarian action is seen to carry if they also act, or are perceived as acting, in support of longer-term rehabilitation and peace-building goals. Second, it is notable that while many senior Western politicians are quick to deny any politicization of humanitarian action under the integrated approach that could be attributed to their own states' behavior, they are much more circumspect when other states similarly claim that certain activities have solely humanitarian purpose. For example, it is

striking that many radical Islamic movements also combine their military and political activities with extensive welfare programs—which, in the “war on terrorism,” are presumed to be of a political nature.¹⁴ It may not be the integrated character of humanitarian operations per se that attracts attack from radical movements. However, it could be used as legitimizing evidence to claims by radical movements that humanitarian actors are merely the instrument of a wider security agenda, and therefore legitimate targets.

TOWARD A HUMANE COHERENCE?

There is a small but growing number of cases where the coherence approach has been implemented as the authors of the Rwanda evaluation envisaged—potentially the interventions in Liberia and in Bunia, DRC, in 2003, and in Sierra Leone after 1998.¹⁵ In these cases, military and political assets have been deployed to protect civilians, enhance humanitarian access, *and* to support processes of political dialogue and demobilization. However, there has been insufficient independent analysis to reach a definitive view regarding the humanitarian outcomes of these various experiences.

One analysis that provides a positive account of the case of Sierra Leone after 1998 rests in part on the assumption that the Kabbah government and its strategy for postcon-

¹³ Bryer, “Politics and Humanitarianism”; and “Doctors Without Borders Shocked by Killing of 5 Staff in Afghanistan: Aid Activities Suspended Nationwide,” press release, June 3, 2004; available at www.doctorswithoutborders.org/pr/2004/06-03-2004.shtml.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Jonathan Benthall, “Humanitarianism and Islam after 11 September,” in Macrae and Harmer, eds., “Humanitarian Action and the ‘Global War on Terror.’”

¹⁵ Paul Smith Lomas (personal communication, November 2003).

flict peace building enjoy a high level of legitimacy and that therefore it is appropriate for the international community to work with it in partnership.¹⁶ But under such an assumption, the Sierra Leone case can be understood as one of genuine postconflict transition, in which there is a shift in engagement from a humanitarian modality (which relies on neutral and impartial engagement) to a developmental one, premised on partnership with the state.

The cases of Liberia and Bunia are too recent to have been the subject of definitive investigation, but it would be important to examine them.

Yet, it should be understood that coherence between humanitarian action and intervention is not a good of itself: after all, a particular policy approach can be consistent but also *wrong* when it leads to deleterious outcomes. The events of September 11 have shattered the apparent consensus that there was a shared conception of human security and that its determinants and the path to its achievement are known and understood. The liberal values underpinning the model of human security, as interpreted by many Western governments, should now be better understood as deriving from a particular culture—their presumed universality has been challenged not only by radical Islamic movements, but also by the often violent and “criminal” means through which political and economic movements are responding to the pressures and opportunities of globalization.

There are serious questions that the humanitarian “community” itself needs to address regarding how its members collectively and individually seek to position themselves in relation to peace-building, developmental, and geopolitical agendas. But it is important to recognize the limited degree to which humanitarian actors as such are likely to be able to determine the shape of humani-

tarian action. Part of the challenge of “integrated” approaches to humanitarian action lies precisely in the fact that multiple actors in the for-profit private sector, military, and even diplomatic corps would claim to be informed and driven by humanitarian concerns. While these actors have clearly established humanitarian obligations in their actions, they are also driven by partisan and geopolitical concerns. As long as there is little scrutiny of the extent to which their (in)actions contribute to *humanitarian* outcomes, understood in terms of protecting human life and dignity and preventing suffering, these actors’ claims cannot be verified and evaluated in relation to a humanitarian agenda.

The Rwanda evaluation called for coherent approaches to humanitarian crises in the context of a new international “humanitarian order.” In many ways, the prospect of such an order seems to have diminished in the decade since the genocide in Rwanda. The glimmers of optimism that might emerge from actions in Liberia, Bunia, and even Sierra Leone are quickly obscured by a wider sense of crisis in agreement on values. Even within the humanitarian community, the purpose of humanitarian action is often disputed. It is therefore unsurprising that as a concept it remains poorly understood within the wider development, security, and diplomatic arena.

Without a widely shared consensus on the objectives of humanitarian action, it would be impossible to reach agreement on the principles that should guide a “coherent” intervention that would be shared by the defense, developmental, and diplomatic communities. In the absence of such consensus, it is the narrow but vital function of humanitarian action and the principles upon which it still relies for its functioning that will remain critically compromised.

¹⁶ Bryer, “Politics and Humanitarianism.”