HUMANITARIAN AID AND INTERVENTION:
THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION

Informing the Integration Debate with Recent Experience

Larry Minear

The overriding challenge faced by policy-makers in the post–Cold War era is not, as many would have us believe, the achievement of integration of humanitarian action into the prevailing politico-military context. It is rather the protection of its independence. The debate, rather than focusing on fitting humanitarian action more snugly into the given political framework, should explore how to ensure the indispensable independence of humanitarian actors from that framework.

The experience of the Humanitarianism and War Project, an action-oriented research and publications initiative studying humanitarian activities in post–Cold War conflicts, suggests the essential elements of such independence. They include structural protection for humanitarian action against political conditionality; more sensitivity to local perceptions regarding humanitarian actors and action; tighter discipline within the humanitarian sector by those providing assistance and protection; increased attention to the origins of aid resources and of the personnel administering them; greater participation and ownership by local institutions and leaders in crisis countries; and an agreed overarching political framework that gives higher priority to human security.

An agenda for action along these lines will require structural changes in three areas: the political project, the humanitarian sector, and the interplay between the two. In order to change the prevailing view that humanitarian activities are fundamentally an extension of Western foreign and security policies, governments will need to examine those policies. In order to alter the perception that international humanitarian action is predominantly a Western, Judeo-Christian construct with little participation by local institutions and little serious building of local capacity, the humanitarian sector itself will need reconstruction and greater universalism. This essay reviews a number of structural remedies that have emerged from case studies carried out since the Humanitarianism and War Project's inception in 1991.[1]

INTEGRATION, INSULATION, AND INDEPENDENCE

Broadly speaking, there are three models that describe the relationship between humanitarian action and the political framework that is applied to complex emergencies. The first is the integration of assistance and protection activities firmly within

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[1] Most of the Humanitarianism and War Project's publications are available at hwproject.tufts.edu.

the given political framework, which may include military or peacekeeping/peace-making elements along with political and diplomatic objectives. The second is the insulation of humanitarian action from that framework, at the same time affirming the complementarity of aid work with the broader set of policies in the spheres of politico-military activities, development, trade, and conflict resolution. The third is the independence, structural and adminis-trative, of humanitarian activities from the political agenda that guides other forms of international involvement in a given crisis.[2]

High-profile international interventions have demonstrated at one and the same time the major political importance and the prominent, if often cosmetic, role of humanitarian action. At the same time, they have intensified the ongoing debate about the appropriate positioning of humanitar-ian action. During the Kosovo crisis, the use of military forces from belligerent nations such as Italy and the United States for human needs assistance in Albania and Macedonia blurred aid work with politico-military agendas. The same tarmac in Tirana housed military aircraft poised for eventual strikes in Kosovo and for logistic support of civic-action activities by the military on behalf of vulnerable civilian populations.

In Afghanistan, the Afghan authorities as well as the UN assistance mission have made human rights monitoring, protection, and enforcement subservient to the achievement of political stability, security, and peace. The vaunted Provincial Reconstruction Teams, comprised of U.S. civilian and military per-sonnel and mandated to perform security, humanitarian, and reconstruction duties, are a case in point. Moreover, coalition leaflets encouraging local communities to provide information on the Taliban in order to keep humanitarian aid coming posi-tioned such aid as an explicit element in the coalition's politico-military strategy. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) surely has a point in implicating instrumentalization of aid in the killing of five of its workers in June 2004; the deaths and the impunity for them led to the agency's withdrawal from Afghanistan.[3]

Since efforts at insulating humanitarian activities within a preestablished political framework have proved generally unsuccess-ful, instead ensnaring and vitiating aid work, the independence model has become more attractive—though its effectiveness is by no means a foregone conclusion. It is not suffi-cient that there be operational insulation and that a humanitarian organization proclaim adherence to impartiality, as the bombing of the Baghdad compound of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the institutional exemplar of independent action, indicates. So long as there are other factors that associate the humanitarian proj-ect as a whole with a political agenda—the predominantly Western provenance and character of humanitarian institutions and personnel is one—humanitarian action will be jeopardized.

Given the high cost of integration to the humanitarian project and the difficulties of providing effective insulation, the case for taking an independent approach to human-itarian action has become more compelling. Embracing the independence option has wide-ranging ramifications in the areas of humanitarian coordination, the manage-

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[2] For a more extended discussion, see Larry Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise: Dilemmas and Discoveries* (Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian, 2002), pp. 132–34, 75ff.

[3] Médecins Sans Frontièrs, "MSF Pulls Out of Afghanistan," July 28, 2004; available at www.msf.org/countries/page.cfm?articleid=8851DF09-F62D-47D4-A8D3EB1E876A1E0D.

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ment of political response, and attentiveness to the views of humanitarian field staff.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COORDINATION

UN aid officials have sought to defend the integrity of humanitarian assistance by saying, in effect, We are UN humanitarian agencies and not the UN Security Council; we are here suffering with you and are prepared to help. However, the United Nations as an institution has never seriously addressed the schizophrenia between the "good," or humanitarian, United Nations and the "bad," or political, United Nations. Humanitarian activities by UN agencies such as UNICEF and the World Food Programme are inseparable from the activities of the world body itself, which has multiple functions (including peace operations and political affairs) and multiple constituencies (first and foremost member states).

As a UNICEF official based in the former Yugoslavia noted in the early 1990s, "We [who manage the UN's aid effort] are a part of the UN system and will always be seen as that. . . . For people here in Serbia, the U.N. is the U.N., and the U.N. is UNPROFOR."[4] Such tensions not only make life difficult for UN personnel, whichever part of the institution they report to. They also create confusion among governments and publics in the areas to which international personnel are deployed. It is time to acknowledge and take serious steps to resolve such recurring contradictions. After all, an institution cannot function effectively if it allows its staff to group themselves into good and bad contingents.

Membership in the UN system calls into question the most earnest protestations of principled action by UN humanitarian personnel. Recently, Under-Secretary-General Jan Egeland, the ranking UN humanitarian official, lamented the deaths of more than thirty aid workers in Afghanistan in a sixteen-month period, along with scores more in other hot spots. "In principle as well as practice," he wrote, "humanitarianism is independent of the policies of any government or rebel group. Our loyalty belongs to no nation, religion or ethnicity—but only to the principle of humanity: providing aid to people in need."[5] In calling for a humanitarianism that is "neutral and impartial—in name, deed, and perception," however, Egeland basically finessed the reality that, well-meaning and energetic UN aid officials and UN aid agencies to the contrary notwithstanding, the United Nations' humanitarian apparatus is structurally unable to function according to those cardinal principles of humanitarianism.

Protecting the integrity of humanitarian action from politicization is complicated by the reality that there is an apparent convergence between the humanitarian objectives of aid agencies and the political goals of Western governments. "[Aid] agency visions of the good society and what it might look like in Afghanistan and Iraq," writes Hugo Slim provocatively, "have much in common with the Coalition's."[6] As he points out, the perceived convergence is greater for aid agencies involved in reconstruction, development, and human rights work than for those providing only humanitarian assistance and protection. The latter, while predominantly Western in origin, take care not to embrace coalition objectives, as indeed humanitarian principles require.

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[4] Ibid., pp. 101–102.

[5] Jan Egeland, "Humanitarianism under Fire," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 5, 2004; available at www.csmonitor.com/2004/0805/p09s01-coop.html.

[6] Hugo Slim, "With or Against? Humanitarian Agencies and Coalition Counter-Insurgency" (Geneva: Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, July 2004), p. 4.

Given such structural difficulties, a non-UN-centered approach to humanitarian coordination in emergencies merits consideration. Reflecting on his own experience as former executive director of the UN World Food Programme, James Ingram concluded that "there is no reason why a coordinated international humanitarian response should be built around the UN."[7]

What alternatives are available? The ICRC is one, given the mandate it enjoys under international humanitarian law for involvement in situations of internal armed conflict. However, the ICRC has made clear its reluctance to take on the orchestration of humanitarian sector-wide activities. Its soul mate on independence issues, MSF, would be equally reluctant and, even if willing, would not be accepted by the wider NGO community in that role. However, a strong and knowledgeable NGO that embraces humanitarian principles, is not heavily involved in reconstruction and development, and has the necessary political support offers an alternative to a UN-centric response.

At the United Nations, the authority of the body that is tasked with coordination of humanitarian activities needs to be strengthened. Here some signal successes may help to chart the future course. The value of assertive coordination was demonstrated in Tanzania in 1994, when host government authorities gave UNHCR the power to choose which NGOs would be allowed to work in the refugee camps for Rwandan refugees in Ngara.[8] Another success story involved Operation Salam in Afghanistan under Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, whose leadership was reinforced by his access to a pot of resources for funding UN agency activities. A third positive experience was the Office of Emergency Operations in Africa, which functioned, it should

be noted, in quasi-independence from the UN's institutional aid bureaucracy.

STRENGTHENING THE UN'S POLITICAL RESPONSE

There is also much that can be done within the UN system to infuse the institution with a more commanding sense of humanity. The impartiality of the international humanitarian enterprise is compromised by the unevenness with which crises around the world are monitored and resourced. Humanitarian organizations that depend on government funding can operate only in places where such funding is made available—for example, in Iraq but not in Chechnya. Because of this, they cannot escape fueling the perception that they serve the interests of powerful governments rather than those of suffering humanity.

During the post–Cold War years, the UN Security Council has become more attentive to conflict-related survival needs and human rights abuses as threats to "international peace and security." However, the Security Council still applies that criterion with considerable unevenness. An automatic trigger could be devised and put into place that would ensure that when certain thresholds are reached (for example, when a percentage of a country's population is in extremis, when an ongoing pattern of gross violations of human rights is established, and so on), the Security Council would be required to review the situation. An alternative would be to have an independent

[7] James Ingram, "The Future Architecture for International Humanitarian Assistance," in Thomas G. Weiss and Larry Minear, eds., *Humanitarianism Across Borders: Sustaining Civilians in Times of War* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1993), p. 183.

[8] Marc Sommers, *The Dynamics of Coordination* (Providence: Watson Institute, 2000), p. 41.

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monitoring body perform this function and make recommendations to the Security Council through the secretary-general, who under Article 99 of the UN Charter may bring forward "any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security."

In situations when the Security Council has imposed economic or military sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, a specially created and trained cadre of military professionals could be deployed to assist and protect affected civilian populations. This would obviate the perceived need for the civilian humanitarian organizations of the United Nations to operate in volatile or insecure environments. Traditional aid personnel could be reintroduced when sanctions are lifted and/or the particular conflict subsides. Such a cadre would help to protect the credibility of humanitarian work and reduce the tension that comes when humanitarian activities and personnel are associated with political agendas.

In order to address the recurrent blurring of military and humanitarian operations in high-profile political settings, a proposal made initially by Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in 1958 may merit revisiting. He suggested that the United Nations reject military support to an intervention from belligerents, from the Permanent Five, or "from any country which, because of its geographical position or other reasons, might be considered as possibly having a special interest in the situation."[9] While this proposal would presumably reduce the roles played by the United States, it might still allow for the use of U.S. military logistic support for deploying UN peacekeeping troops.[10] In a broader sense, however, military assets more disinterested in character might represent an investment in the greater integrity of humanitarian work in such settings.

Similarly, the practice of posting nationals from belligerent countries on the ground in conflict settings needs to be reviewed. Paying more attention to the nationalities of UN staff may be viewed by some as politicizing the international civil service. However, recent examples abound of member states using "their" nationals within the United Nations to advance their own purposes (as in the case of UNSCOM's monitoring of nuclear non-proliferation in Iraq). Conversely, in the case of Afghanistan under the Taliban, the United States and United Kingdom insisted that their nationals, for their own safety, not be posted on the ground.

Finally, the recurring inability of the UN humanitarian organizations to deal with nonstate actors needs attention. In crisis after crisis, the bias of UN aid agencies toward member governments engaged in civil wars undermines their perceived neutrality vis-à-vis humanitarian work in areas controlled by insurgent forces. At a minimum, it should be possible to clarify in core documents of aid agencies throughout the UN system that negotiation of humanitarian space with belligerents does not convey political recognition of their cause. In fact, humanitarian actors should be *expected* to find interlocutors among all warring parties and to gain and maintain access to civilian populations under their jurisdiction.

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[9] Report of the Secretary-General, UN General Assembly, 13th session, document A/3934, October 9, 1958, para. 158ff.
[10] Larry Minear, Ted van Baarda, and Marc Sommers, *NATO and Humanitarian Action in the Kosovo Crisis* (Providence: Watson Institute, 2000), pp. 67–68.

PRIVILEGING FIELD PERSPECTIVES

Given their firsthand view of humanitarian imperatives and impacts, the field staffs of relief and rights agencies have an indispensable "ground-truthing" function in the formulation and monitoring of political policies. Yet more often than not, program managers in emergency settings are denied an "eyes-and-ears" role for their organizations. In the Gulf War, UN humanitarian staff in the region in late 1990 noticed that the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq were beginning to put pressure on the authorities, as had been hoped. Yet humanitarians were not consulted as the Security Council proceeded from economic to military action. Nor did staff in Baghdad and Amman, sensing a process driven by political rather than humanitarian concerns, come forward and convey their perceptions.

The fact that views from the field are generally more reflective of the hardships being experienced by the civilian population may account for their easy dismissal by hard-nosed officials with high-level political portfolios. There is little evidence to suggest, however, that integrated UN aid officials are taken more seriously these days by the political side of the house than are independent observers such as the ICRC or NGOs.

The dynamics of the process also reflect another casualty of integration: humanitarian officials tend to become second-echelon players, if players at all, whose inputs into broader political frameworks more often rationalize already determined policies than assist in their formulation. A telling example of officials' unwillingness to be used to validate such policies is the refusal of a senior UN aid official to meet with U.S. ambassador Richard Holbrooke in Kosovo when the Rambouillet peace process was floundering. Suspecting that such a conversation would be used by Holbrooke to justify an eventual NATO decision to bomb, the bar-the-door UN official sought to protect the humanitarian effort from political abuse by refusing to be drawn into the debate.[11] Whatever the counsel, however, those who frame the context for humanitarian action should solicit and give due consideration to the views of aid officials. They have a clear self-interest in doing so. Political policies that wreak humanitarian havoc can also prove politically counterproductive or even self-defeating.

At present, officials in the headquarters of aid agencies vary in their willingness to take views from the front lines seriously. Still fewer aid agencies are willing to delegate to field staff the orchestration of the interface with politico-military actors or, for that matter, decisions about whether to remain in their postings amid conditions of deteriorating security. Some agencies—the ICRC is a prime example—vest most decision-making in their field delegations. Others—the UN system is one—reserve key decisions for headquarters. ICRC decisions to withdraw international staff and suspend operations are generally made by the head of the delegation in the field. In the UN system, they are the task of the New York–based UN security coordinator, although some individual UN organizations have edged into the UN security coordinator's turf by having their own security units at headquarters.

Each approach to the geography of decision-making has its own costs and benefits. Headquarters' involvement ostensibly helps to ensure consistency and coherence in aid agency responses to a range of crises. However, global consistency is not guaranteed by centralized security decision-making, as UN aid organizations and the UN staff association pointed out in decrying the failure to

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[11] Ibid.

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withdraw UN staff from Iraq before the August 2003 bombing of its Baghdad headquarters. Moreover, centralized decision-making also injects political and broader institutional concerns into the decision-making process, straitjacketing humanitarian activities accordingly. This is only natural, given that people in the offices of the UN's political and peacekeeping apparatus—and, for that matter, of its aid agencies as well—in New York, Geneva, and Rome have different portfolios and different responsibilities. Clearly, distance from the front lines of humanitarian action also affects perceptions of the challenges, the dangers, the proportionality, and the effectiveness of humanitarian work.

At the UN headquarters level, officials with political portfolios such as those in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations generally favor integration. One DPA official observed, "Every time there is a major crisis, the UN secretariat reaches for the integration model and then modifies it around the edges to accommodate the individual circumstances."[12] At the political level there is also a tendency to discount negative effects on the United Nations that arise from the perception of it as an agent with a political agenda. The cumulative experience marshaled above notwithstanding, one DPA official has observed that the fact that in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo the United Nations had been associated simultaneously with bombing and feeding was "not a significant problem." In contrast, aid officials viewed confusion of humanitarian with politico-military objectives as seriously compromising the neutrality and acceptability of their work.[13]

While decisions taken in the field are generally more geared to humanitarian considerations than those that emerge from headquarters' consultations, perspectives from the front lines are nevertheless often far from unanimous. In Somalia, in late 1992, as the famine worsened and security deteriorated, a number of U.S. NGOs joined in a letter to U.S. national security advisor Brent Scowcroft. The letter, urging deployment of "appropriately armed UN security forces tasked with protecting emergency supplies and staff," was signed by executives of a number of NGOs whose field staff had encouraged the initiative—but also by several whose Mogadishu-based staff strenuously opposed the recommendation.[14] However diverse the viewpoints of field staff may be, it is time that they receive greater attention in the decision-making councils of political and headquarters' bodies.

EXPERIENCE FROM THE POST–COLD WAR period provides ample justification for taking a far more critical look at the significant damage to humanitarian—and, for that matter, political—interests often associated with integration. Insulating humanitarian action from the UN political framework within which UN aid agencies are situated has also had its shortcomings. Hence, it is imperative to ensure that the delivery of aid in settings of armed conflict enjoys greater independence, even though doing so raises major problems for the presumed coordinating role of the UN system. In addition, there are some available options for reform that could be instituted to advance the effectiveness of humanitarian and political activities alike.

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[12] Telephone conversation between DPA headquarters official and the author.

[13] Comments made at the roundtable, "Humanitarian Aid and Intervention: The Challenges of Integration," Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, New York, N.Y., October 30, 2003.

[14] Minear, *The Humanitarian Enterprise*, pp. 102–103.