

Humanitarian Space in Insecure Environments: A Shifting Paradigm

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Introduction

...when the profession can no longer evade anomalies that subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice—then begin the extraordinary investigations that lead the profession at last to a new set of commitments, a new basis for the practice of science.

Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

A paradigm shift is taking place in the world of humanitarians. It is evident in the numerous discussions taking place over a very basic concept of humanitarian space. As defined by the European Commission's Directorate for Humanitarian Aid, "humanitarian space" means "the access and freedom for humanitarian organizations to assess and meet humanitarian needs." International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) are examples of the many humanitarian organizations that operate in conflict zones today.

Humanitarian actors are guided by a common set of principles.

- *Humanity*: The principle of *humanity* requires the preservation of the humanitarian nature of operations—i.e., to protect life and ease suffering.
- *Independence*: The principle of *independence* implies independence from political as well as military actors.
- *Impartiality*: *Impartiality* in principle requires that humanitarian action respond according to need, and *without discrimination*.
- *Neutrality*: The principle of *neutrality* requires outside actors to avoid giving military or political advantage to any side over another.

However, at least since agents of violence in African refugee camps exploited humanitarian impulses in the 1990s, challenges to these principles have increasingly arisen in humanitarian practice. Compromises to neutrality occur regardless of humanitarian intentions. The simple

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status of being an “outsider” generates a political signature. External military forces often play vital, but politically charged roles in peace implementation. Military forces can provide order in the streets and, in some cases, in refugee camps. Militaries directly deliver humanitarian assistance and protect humanitarian workers. When militaries step into an environment previously dominated by relief organizations, as in Somalia in the 1990s and Afghanistan after September 11th—the humanitarian relationships with communities, and also with political and military actors shifts.

The loss of neutrality for humanitarian actors can also degrade physical security for them. A humanitarian paradigm shift, as with changes in the practice of science described by Kuhn, first involves recognition of anomalies and second, new investigations upon which to build a new basis for practice. This is the point of departure for discussion at a workshop convened in January 2005.^[1]

It is clear today that the theoretical space that insulates aid workers is physically increasingly unsafe. In 2003, there were more fatal attacks on humanitarian workers than previously recorded.^[2] Terrorist attacks in recent years increasingly deliberately targeted United Nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The destruction in Iraq of the UN Headquarters in August 2003, including the death of Special Representative Sergio de Mello, shocked the world. Gil Loscher was in de Mello’s office at the time of the explosion and lost two legs as well as friends in the blast. He wrote later of the difficult position of the UN, and called for a clear separation of military and humanitarian activity.^[3]

In Afghanistan in June 2004, the murder of five of its personnel caused MSF to withdraw after more than 24 years of service there. MSF departed with a closing salvo against the military for blurring the boundaries of humanitarian space by directly delivering aid. The brutal kidnapping in October 2004 and eventual murder of Margaret Hassan, Director of CARE International Iraq, was particularly astonishing because she had long lived among and aided the Iraqi people.

Reinventing Humanitarianism

In response, Peter Walker of the Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University called for a reinvention of humanitarianism. Walker called for a *global* movement that articulates “a value set and doctrine that resonates across all cultures.”^[4] And yet at the same time, he urged a more *localized* approach that puts local agencies out front. A shared understanding among the members of the international community is more than a coincidence of great power interest: It is a mosaic of human expressions of neighborly care set in a global framework.

The paradigm of security that protects humanitarian actors is not surprisingly the focus of rethinking. NGOs operate from a paradigm of security that differs from that of military and corporate approaches. If the military approach to force protection is primarily deterrence, and the corporate approach is protection (for example, hiring bodyguards), the NGO approach has been characterized by acceptance. This model, writes one participant in the workshop, may not be holding as “NGOs have become prime targets due to their proximity to the conflict.” These organizations have customarily accepted the risk associated with their work, but now question whether the security provided to them by governments is sufficient. There is debate today about what is an acceptable level of risk, with different organizations setting different thresholds.^[5] Meanwhile, humanitarian agencies have conducted research and developed programs to address the problem of safety for their personnel.^[6]

Interaction between humanitarians and militaries had deepened over the last decade to include formalized exchanges, coordination, and institutional development of centers and institutes. Indeed, an emergent consensus on *coherence*—coordination of intervention and humanitarian actions—was emerging by the turn of the millennium. The United Nations became a fulcrum for external assistance in its many forms, in an implicit division of labor among military peacekeepers

and civilian government and non-government agencies. However, the cohesiveness of the relationship and possibility for advancement appear doubtful in the wake of interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.^[7] Although civil-military relations are vital to effective post-conflict and post-disaster transitions, these relations have been strained by more aggressive and contested interventions.

Mapping Relationships

In preparation for a working session on humanitarian roles in dangerous environments, Professor Miguel Tirado and I conducted an informal survey of NGO, government, military, international and academic professionals with experience in peace and relief operations in advance of the session. This survey seeks to identify and map the relationships among various stakeholders in relief and reconstruction scenarios, account for effects of recent experience on these relationships, and better understand the organizational approaches of humanitarian agencies to the challenges of security. This small survey was not intended as a scientific instrument, but as a point of departure for discussion among an elite group of experienced practitioners. Of the 22 surveys distributed, we received 20 responses.

We asked “what are the most urgent points of concern with other organizations in post-conflict and relief settings?” Three challenges were in the top of nearly every list:

1. Security for personnel,
2. Information sharing, and
3. Local public awareness.

Staff recruiting and training, donor issues—in particular U.S. Government expectations, program monitoring and evaluation, and logistical and communication barriers to cooperation were also prominently mentioned.

When we asked about new or different challenges in the field, the threat of indiscriminate attack, including abduction and assassination, was frequently identified. Information sharing is a prominent concern, if simply to indicate who is doing what and why. One participant remarked that “better clarity and more systematic and focused effort to communicate purpose by all organizations operating in an emergency can help improve collaboration without abrogating the organization’s key principles or protocols.”

Is there a linkage between interoperability and improved security? It appears from the responses that NGO workers are encountering the military more intimately than desired, while the military finds itself expected to do things it is unprepared for. Many respondents noted the involvement of more types of actors in “nation building” as new or different. Finally, there was much concern about a new or different challenge of “blurring lines” between humanitarian actors on the one hand and the political and military on the other. The emphasis on local public awareness, when asked about prominent concerns, speaks to the problem of differentiation, but may also indicate increasing cultural challenges in the field.

In seeking to understand the relationships, we asked about current level of interaction with other types of actors and desired level of interaction. These appear as a hierarchical range of interaction as follows:

Type of Interaction	Description
Conflictive	unproductive disputes
Dismissive	the other party or actor discounts your role
Awareness	cognizant of each other's presence in field
Familiarity	knowledgeable of the others' activities and methods
Boundary setting	mutually clarify parameters of operation to avoid disruption of one another's mission
Cooperative	mutual accommodation for separate missions including information exchange
Collaborative	distinct operating teams / work toward common outcome based on shared situational understanding
Partnering	mix operational units / work toward a common goal

We coded nine of our respondents as non-governmental. Separately, we asked about the quality of interaction. Those responses appear as follows:

NGO Interactions

With Whom	Interaction [desired]	Quality
IO	Collaborative-partnering	High
Local NGO	Cooperative	High
Int'l NGO	Cooperative [seek collaborative]	Medium
Local Authorities	Boundary setting [often seek cooperation]	Medium
Military	Boundary setting	Low-Medium
Contractors	Familiar [seek cooperation]	Low

In contrast, ratings by U.S. Government and Military participants were more sanguine, as follows:

U.S. Government and Military Relationships

With Whom	Interaction [desired]	Quality
IO	Cooperative-partnering	Medium-High
Local NGO	Cooperative	Medium
Int'l NGO	Cooperative	Medium-Low
Local Authorities	Cooperative	Medium
Contractors	Familiar-cooperative	Medium

Many NGO responses discussed how very critical host country perceptions are in their work. "Without strong local bonds and buy-in from the community our work is not tenable," wrote one participant. "Security is a major concern when perception is incorrect," wrote another.

Host nation perceptions are also critical for the U.S. Department of Defense as it only participates in humanitarian operations “with the approval of host nation authorities.” During so-called humanitarian interventions, military forces are sometimes used in a coercive capacity to impose order on an environment so that aid can be delivered and recovery can proceed; sometimes there is no coercion, and the military is employed simply to facilitate such aid. Civilian government agencies likewise seek to “work closely with and empower if possible local communities.”

Emerging competition among humanitarian and military actors is evident in the comment that “[t]he military is dismissive of NGOs and delving ever deeper into humanitarian programming.” Meanwhile, the relationship with government—an important source of funding for non-governmental organizations—presents its own problems: “The U.S. Government is obsessed with owning the NGOs through rhetoric (‘force multipliers’), actions (contracts vs. grants...), and sanctions (prohibiting even emergency humanitarian assistance through OFAC licensing).”

International humanitarian law imposes obligations on military forces in conflict zones. Comments from the U.S. Department of Defense commonly refer to that organization’s desire to transition as quickly as possible from humanitarian operations. In order to do so, the military must sustain good relations with humanitarian organizations.

Pieces of the New Paradigm

Those seeking to aid people affected by natural and manmade disasters are also obliged to care for their own. The United Nations undertook a major investigation of its security paradigm in the wake of the bombing of its Iraq headquarters. Deputy Secretary-General Louise Frechette outlined a series of steps in June 2004 that includes more security personnel, better security standards, stronger structures, and improved intelligence and risk assessment.^[8] Importantly, Frechette also described a lightened “footprint” in UN missions. By organizing into smaller teams, pooling administrative staff among agencies, and working with partner organizations, the UN in Iraq created a lighter profile.

Humanitarian agencies have been increasingly present in active conflict zones, but are rethinking the nature of their engagement. In order to operate in war zones, humanitarian agencies commonly negotiate access to their clients, the civilian population, with warring parties. However, internal conflicts or civil wars complicate the distinctions among civilians and armed groups. Although aid agencies commonly perceive civilian populations as victims needing and deserving aid, warring parties may rely on civilians for support; they may deliberately target portions of the civilian population as the enemy. These differences affect the possibility and perils of negotiated access. A recent study by the Humanitarian Practice Network therefore differentiates among types of armed groups: “If engaging with a highly centralised armed group, you would engage at a senior level. With loose armed groups you have to engage all of the time and at all levels.”^[9] There are, of course, those with whom negotiation is simply not possible.

Operational guidelines, including security guidelines, are now widely shared among humanitarian agencies. The military-civilian interface, as indicated by the January workshop, is a work in progress. Developments in recent years include military consultation with humanitarians on guidelines and civil-military participation in peacekeeping games. The current rethinking of humanitarian space involves both sets of actors. Basic terminology such as “security,” “humanitarian assistance,” and “humanitarian relief,” is still in need of consensual definition. One clear point of agreement is the need to manage tension among external agents of humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping: “When we begin to perceive our work as a competition for precious resources,” wrote one participant in the January workshop, “we become more like the ruthless demagogues that promote these conflicts.”

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References

1. The "Humanitarian Roles in Insecure Environments" workshop was sponsored by California State University Monterey Bay, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, and the Naval Postgraduate School, and hosted by the United States Institute of Peace.
2. According to World Vision data derived from various reports (Dennis Klug, UN Security coordinator), most attack fatalities between 1997-2003 resulted from ambush (127) and murder (72). Car/truck bombing (26), landmines (25), anti-aircraft attack (24) and aerial bombardment (14) were also significant. There were more than 70 violent deaths in 2003, doubling the number in 2002. More than half of the victims are local (not expatriate) staff. Angola (58), Afghanistan (36) and Iraq (32) led the list of the highest number of aid workers killed in this period. This data needs some more investigation: does it include UN workers? Is it important to control for the level of crime and if so, how does one account for it? If humanitarian aid is a growth industry, how does one control for the number of violent deaths in relation to a growing number of aid workers?
3. Gil Loscher, ["An Idea Lost in the Rubble,"](#) *The New York Times*, August 20, 2004.
4. Peter Walker, ["Hassan Murder Engenders Soul-searching,"](#) Reuters AlertNet, December 13, 2004. Tanja Hohe and Jarat Chopra similarly argue for giving local voices more influence in the development of the state, even allowing for indigenous paradigms to linger alongside modern forms, in ["Participatory Intervention,"](#) *Global Governance* 10, no. 3 (2004).
5. World Vision has developed *The World Vision Reporter* to gather information from field security officers in order to assign risk scores to areas of operation. This system rates countries as red, yellow or green. When Colombia was reported as green, in contrast to what the head office knows to be true, it became obvious that some field workers had become acclimated to danger. Another challenge to objective reporting is donor refusal to fund dangerous environments, making staff reluctant to admit dangers or to pull out. Alternatively, in some cases local workers have felt the need to move even when head office does not declare a need to move, as happened in Sierra Leone.
6. Some examples from a large and growing literature include the following: European Commission Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) [Report on Security of Humanitarian Personnel: Standards and Practices for the Security of Humanitarian Personnel and Advocacy for Humanitarian Space](#), 2004; "Workshop on Common Operational Guidelines Institute for Defense Analysis," *Generic Security Guide and Security Training Directory*; October 25, 2001.
7. Andjela Jurisic, ["Is the Humanitarian-Military Relationship Moving in Reverse? An Analysis Based on Two Snapshots: Iraq and Afghanistan,"](#) Center for Excellence DMHA - Hawaii, *The Liaison* 3, No. 2, 2004.
8. ["UN: Deputy Secretary-General Describes Fundamental Changes in Thinking, Approach to UN Security, in New York Address,"](#) *M2 Presswire*, July 6, 2004.

9. "[Humanitarian Engagement with Non-State Armed Actors: The Parameters for Negotiated Access](#)," *HPN Humanitarian Practice Network*, 2005.

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