



Humanitarian Action and Peace Operations

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Humanitarian actors and peace operations struggle to keep pace with the growing demands of larger and protracted humanitarian crises, necessitating greater coherence and engagement. Necessary gains in protection, prevention, resilience building and risk reduction will not be met without comprehensive, flexible and coordinated approaches. Yet, humanitarian actors and peace operations co-exist in an uneasy relationship – working toward shared objectives with at times conflicting approaches. This brief looks at challenges and opportunities for cooperation between United Nations peace operations and humanitarian actors and provides suggestions on how to maximize collective efforts for consolidating peace and security.

Humanitarian action is exclusively based on need and driven by a strict adherence to the principle of neutrality. Peace operations, however, are political at heart and may at times have to take action against groups that threaten a peace process. As a result, the greatest obstacle to closer cooperation is the concern of humanitarians that their perceived association with the political objectives of a peace operation would undermine their neutrality, thus jeopardizing access to those in need.

Never since the end of the Second World War have there been more people in need of assistance – 125 million, according to UN estimates. Involuntary displacement is a major factor. Last year, the number of forcibly displaced worldwide surpassed

65 million.¹ Though natural disasters caused twice as many new displacements as war in 2015, violent conflict remains the main driver of forced migration.² Today's conflicts are increasingly complex and intractable, presenting new, long-term challenges to humanitarian and peace and security actors alike. Especially worrying is the fact that both state and non-state actors commonly disregard international humanitarian law, as witnessed by the blocking of aid convoys, the bombing of medical facilities, or the killing and kidnapping of aid workers.

Against this background, the UN system has attempted to adapt its toolbox. Last year, the UN undertook two major reviews on the state of peace operations and the peacebuilding architecture. In

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Global Trends, Forced Displacement in 2015," June 2016.

² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Global Report on Internal Displacement 2016," p. 14, May 2016.



May 2016, the UN convened the first World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) on how to effectively respond to major humanitarian challenges. One unifying theme of these initiatives is the call for a coherent and comprehensive approach through closer cooperation of peace and security, development and humanitarian actors.

1. Key areas of cooperation

1.1 Protection of civilians (POC) | POC is a key priority for both peace operations and humanitarian actors. Both actors have often taken a narrow view of their protection activities, focusing on physical protection on the one hand and on the respect of rights and remedial actions on the other, despite growing recognition that only a comprehensive approach can be effective.

The majority of peacekeeping operations are mandated to use force to protect civilians under imminent threat. They are tasked to create a safe environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in and around IDP camps and for the safe return of internally displaced persons and refugees. Peace operations, including civilian-led political missions also promote protection through political processes and establishing protective environments, including through humanitarian mine action, human rights monitoring and advocacy and support for the rule of law.

Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs)

PKOs led by the *Department of Peacekeeping Operations* (DPKO) provide security and political support to countries transitioning from conflict to peace. The majority of today's operations are multidimensional, with a mix of military, police and civilian capabilities. With regard to humanitarian aid, the primary role for PKOs is to provide an "environment within which humanitarian actors may carry out their activities."³

Humanitarian protection activities focus on upholding full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. Humanitarian

actors seek to reduce the risk to affected populations through mitigating the immediate threats and preventing recurrence, *inter alia* by advocating with conflict parties to refrain from abuse; ensuring the provision of basic needs and the restoration of dignity, well-being and recovery through, for example, ensuring adequate living conditions in camp sites; and building an enabling environment conducive to the respect for rights.

Special Political Missions (SPMs)

Field-based SPMs are civilian presences under the leadership of the *Department of Political Affairs* (DPA) with the core tasks of good offices, facilitation and mediation. SPMs with a specific peacebuilding mandate are commonly tasked with coordinating strategy and programs of UN development and humanitarian actors on the ground. SPMs may also be mandated to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Clearly, humanitarian actors and peace operations undertake complementary activities that necessitate constant dialogue and cooperation. Humanitarians can advise peace operations on the formulation of unarmed protection strategies and engagement with local communities. In the Central African Republic, for instance, humanitarian actors supported the UN mission in identifying "enclave communities" facing extreme threats and in developing a "Flashpoint Matrix" with "verified information on threats to civilians to prioritize prevention and response."⁴

In cooperating effectively, peace operations and humanitarian actors need to preserve operational flexibility in complex operating theaters. This is underlined by the crisis in South Sudan where UN peacekeepers and humanitarian actors work closely on so-called POC sites – camps of internally displaced persons on or immediately outside the UN mission's (UNMISS) bases. While UNMISS' main task was to provide security on the camp sites, the mission also at times provided basic service delivery, such as food distribution and health services. Despite concerns that working on

³ United Nations, "United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Principles and Guidelines," p. 30, January 2008.

⁴ OCHA Global Protection Cluster, "Partner Contributions to the Independent High Level Panel on Peace Operations," p. 3, 15 January 2015.

UNMISS bases would threaten their neutrality, some humanitarian actors soon cooperated on improving the living conditions of camp residents and on conflict mitigation efforts, such as community-led dispute resolution mechanisms to address tensions among camp populations.⁵

1.2 Peacebuilding | Humanitarian actors and peace operations share the overarching objectives of reducing the risk of relapsing into conflict and laying the foundations for sustainable peace and development. Peace operations work closely with host nations and international partners on formulating priorities, and by strengthening local capacities for conflict management. Similarly, humanitarian organizations work on building resilience and capacities to deal with crises at the community and national level, contributing to stability in post-conflict and post-disaster situations.

Tensions around closer cooperation arise from both the political nature of peacebuilding activities that are generally in support of state authorities as well as from the blurring of lines between peacebuilding, development and humanitarian activities. The level of engagement on peacebuilding activities is primarily driven by the conditions on the ground. In the right context, humanitarian state capacity building can contribute effectively to building resilience to future crisis. At times, humanitarian actors also have little choice but to take on longer-term projects that go beyond the provision of basic needs.

In Guinea-Bissau, humanitarian partners work closely with the UN's peacebuilding office (UNIOGBIS) as part of the "Partnership Framework," which aligns peacebuilding tasks with national priorities. UN humanitarian agencies contribute *inter alia* to enhancing food security in climate change and natural disasters scenarios, enhance public health sector capacities to address diseases, and strengthening the protection of civilians through child protection and women's rights advocacy.

1.3 Disaster response | Disasters pose significant security, access and logistical challenges to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Where peace operations already have a presence they can leverage their capabilities to support humanitarian activities in providing relief, security and reconstruction as well as coordination efforts. Following the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the UN stabilization mission (MINUSTAH) was crucial in supporting assistance efforts and in restoring key infrastructure despite its own heavy losses. It also facilitated coordination among national and international humanitarian and military actors.

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

OCHA works to enhance the international humanitarian system through policy development, promotes prevention and disaster preparedness, and mobilizes funding. Once a disaster exceeds national capacities and a request for international assistance is issued, OCHA supports the national government in information management, and "ensures coordination between the UN's humanitarian, political and peacekeeping dimensions"⁶ for a coherent response.

During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the UN mission in Liberia (UNMIL) played an important complementary role to humanitarian organizations in coordination, dissemination of information and outreach, monitoring and advocacy, as well as in training Liberian government agencies and providing equipment, logistics and engineering support. The mission was also crucial in supporting the government in maintaining public order as the anger over the perceived inadequate government response to the crisis threatened to provoke protest.

An interesting development in regard to future large-scale health emergencies is the now completed regional *UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response* (UNMEER) – the first UN field mission deployed to combat a public health crisis. Autho-

⁵ Damian Lilly, "Protection of Civilians sites: a new type of displacement settlement?" Humanitarian Practice Network, September 2014.

⁶ United Nations, "Special Political Missions Start-up Guide," p. 33, 2012.



rized in September 2014, UNMEER primarily acted as coordinator for policy and logistics in the three Ebola affected countries, cooperating closely with UNMIL and the UN mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) as well as with humanitarian partners. A lessons learned report revealed that while UNMEER worked well at the strategic level, it had less value when it was "involved in operations or the technical response in actual implementation." The report concluded that an "improved and streamlined model ... that builds on existing humanitarian coordination mechanisms and in-country capacities" could be considered for the future. This would require the UN system to exercise "greater flexibility in adjusting and adapting existing operational coordination and response systems to address the specificities of crises as they unfold."⁷

2. Way forward

The bleak outlook of an increase in the number of violent conflicts, a shift in the nature of conflict toward internationalization, the spread of violent extremism, and the prospect of more extreme weather and natural disasters means that the need for closer cooperation in crisis response and prevention is growing. In tackling these challenges, UN peace operations and humanitarian actors have much to gain from more flexible and coordinated responses. One positive development in enhancing cooperation is the development of tools designed to help identify areas of convergence and comparative advantage.⁸ Highlighting possible benefits such as more comprehensive conflict assessments and threat analysis and improving community involvement through capacity building could provide further impulses.

Integrated Missions

The UN formally introduced a policy on integration in 2008. It is applicable to all contexts where both a country team and a peace operation are present and establishes a strategic partnership between the two. Integration arrangements are country- and context specific and can include common reporting lines, joint offices, assets or resources. Integration is not without challenges. In addition to concerns over the perceived co-option of humanitarian aid for political ends, integration has also been criticized as an impediment to a more robust political role of a mission that is no longer perceived as impartial.⁹

As the lead organization for shaping humanitarian policy, OCHA is well placed to address the concerns of humanitarian actors, while defending the necessary space and respect for humanitarian principles. In addition to supporting these efforts, the UN Departments of Peacekeeping Operations and Political Affairs, should seek to enhance training on international humanitarian law and principles as part of peace operations' pre-deployment preparations. The WHS and the UN system reviews, meanwhile, provide opportunities to introduce the necessary structural changes, including in developing flexible mechanisms for coordination in different contexts. It is time to put greater cooperation across the UN silos into practice. The world humanitarian situation demands it.

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⁷ United Nations, "Lessons learned exercise on the coordination activities of the United Nations Mission for Ebola Emergency Response. Report of the Secretary-General," A/70/737, p. 21, 4 March 2016.

⁸ OCHA Global Protection Cluster, "Partner Contributions to the Independent High Level Panel on Peace Operations," p. 3, 15 January 2015.

⁹ Center on International Cooperation, "Review of Political Missions 2010," p. 53, October 2010.

