

The Search for Coherence: UN Integrated Missions and Humanitarian Space

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Roundtable Summary

Introduction

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Stimson Center organised a roundtable meeting to discuss the impact of UN integration on humanitarian space. The meeting aimed to foster a discussion on how UN efforts to ensure coherence in conflict and post-conflict settings have impacted humanitarian space. It sought to explore concerns expressed by some humanitarian actors that UN integration can adversely affect humanitarian space as well as explore examples in which integration may have enhanced humanitarian action. The roundtable will inform a study commissioned by the Integration Steering Group on this topic and focus on the three confirmed country cases for the study: Somalia, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This event was also part of a series of roundtable meetings on key themes relating to humanitarian space organised by HPG between October 2010 and March 2011. Given the sensitivities of the issues and to promote an open and frank discussion the meeting was held under Chatham House Rules. What follows is a summary of the discussion.

Integrated UN Engagement in Conflict Settings: rationale and challenges

‘Integration’ within the UN system started out as an attempt to create greater coherence between the multiple components of the UN in a country context. In that sense, it is the equivalent to ‘whole of government’ approaches in many donor countries. Since the former Secretary General, Kofi Annan, introduced the concept of integration in the late 1990s, there has been a debate within the UN system on how this concept should be implemented in field operations. Three key issues dominated the discussion in the early years of integration: a) integrated planning; b) the structural relationship between individual agencies and the mission including leadership roles and reporting lines; and 3) the role of human rights in integrated missions.

Discussions on these issues focused largely on structural relationships for several years (2000-2008), rather than the broader objective of *strategic* coherence. This early emphasis on structural integration generated tensions as different agencies sought to protect their independent mandates and accountability lines to their own headquarters and executive boards. In Afghanistan, a 2001 Review of the Strategic Framework highlighted these tensions, particularly in the relationship between aid, politics and rights, which were characterised by division and animosity.

The rationale for integration has, however, shifted and coherence, at least at headquarters, is not seen as an end in itself. Instead, the overarching purpose of integration is to maximize the collective and individual impact of UN efforts towards peace consolidation. Official UN policy now recognises that structural integration in some circumstances may not be the most appropriate means to achieve this objective. Form should follow function, based on the conditions in each case. Strategic coherence is at a minimum a way to de-conflict various UN components and ensure they are not working at cross-purposes and at best a way to

encourage efficiency and effectiveness by leveraging various strengths across the UN system. There is recognition that some processes and systems need to maintain a degree of independence and this is not only limited to humanitarian action. It may also be advantageous in certain contexts for other components, such as human rights, to be perceived as distinct from the wider UN family. There is a fine balance to be struck between allowing agencies to do what they are mandated and have particular capacity to do and ensuring they are not working at cross-purposes. The tendency to view the UN as composed of wholly independent and unrelated components should be overcome to ensure all of the UN's components are working towards one strategic vision. At the same time, the various components should be recognised for their respective roles, responsibilities and the contributions they each make to the overarching vision. Strong leadership at the field level is essential to achieve the right balance.

The challenges of integration are often contextual, which is evident in the difference between debates in Somalia, where there have been significant tensions between political and humanitarian actors and those in the DRC where there have been more positive experiences. This may be due to a number of variable factors such as staff/leadership, conflict dynamics and the level of active ongoing conflict, and historical background to the debates. It is important to better understand why integration is more acceptable to humanitarian actors in some contexts and not in others.

In terms of fostering coherence, a principal challenge is how humanitarian components of the UN system can collaborate effectively with peacebuilding and peace consolidation components present in the same context, particularly in situations of ongoing armed conflict. Engagement of the wider UN system with external peacebuilding or peace consolidation actors such as the World Bank is also a challenge. And whilst the issue of preserving humanitarian space – the independence of UN humanitarian action – is important, this debate has sometimes drawn attention away from the challenges of achieving coherence among other parts of the UN and with external actors.

UN Integration: what role for humanitarian action?

Humanitarian agencies within the UN are not against the idea of enhancing strategic coherence with other agencies and with the wider political, peace-building and development communities. Whilst there are differing views within the humanitarian community on what engagement is desirable with other actors most organisations accept that their activities have an *indirect* contribution to peace and stability. The tensions lie in the overarching priority which for humanitarians is always based on need, rather than political or peacebuilding objectives. This prioritisation cannot be contingent on context or on country-specific UNSC mandates; the priority for impartial, needs-based humanitarian assistance must always remain. The contribution to peace consolidation or stabilisation can only be a secondary impact/consideration.

There needs to be greater understanding of the concept of humanitarian space. It is not just a conceptual issue. It is also tactical. Humanitarians require access to people in need and this depends on acceptance of humanitarian actors. This acceptance is threatened when humanitarian responses are used to explicitly serve political goals. For example, in the recent action taken in Libya, the humanitarian response was considered by some stakeholders as a tactic to enter into political negotiations and achieve political goals. At the same time, political responses were originally considered as an adequate and appropriate vehicle to raise

humanitarian concerns. Such actions create the perception that the two agendas are inter-related. This could hinder humanitarian access if the political strategy goes wrong. These concerns contributed to the push for a separate Humanitarian Coordinator in the case of Libya.

Acceptance also requires engagement with non-state armed actors, yet there is a current trend amongst member states and by some UN actors to restrict this engagement where it is perceived as undermining a political strategy. There is concern among humanitarian actors that greater integration of the UN may result in pressure on humanitarians to restrict their engagement. For example, humanitarians assert that they are being or have been discouraged (to varying degrees) from engaging with the Taliban in Afghanistan, FARC in Colombia, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Political and peacekeeping actors in the UN argue that no general restrictions on humanitarian engagement have been imposed by the UN in any of these recent or current cases, but that most of the pressure in fact comes from key donors. Engagement with non-state armed actors is deemed essential to gain access to populations in need and/or undertake protection activities that encourage them to uphold human rights and international humanitarian law. This becomes even more difficult when these groups (e.g. Hezbollah, Hamas) are part of an elected government, and members hold official ministerial positions with whom humanitarian actors are required to engage (e.g. Ministry of Health, Ministry of Planning).

Whatever form it takes in field contexts, an integrated UN strategy or presence needs to ensure the ability of humanitarian actors within the system to operate according to the principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence, which are essential to delivering effective humanitarian assistance and protection to those in need. However, the principal concern or fear expressed by many humanitarian actors both within and outside the UN system is that humanitarian objectives are often subordinated to political imperatives. This is not only confined to the more high profile cases of Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia but concerns have also been expressed in relation to Libya, Pakistan, Sudan and Cote D'Ivoire. Nonetheless, humanitarians must also recognise that integration does not always mean structural integration and that strategic integration, if implemented in an appropriate manner, is in the interest of all. The humanitarian community is often too quick to reject integration, without understanding the nature of the relationship proposed and the potential opportunities for enhancing humanitarian action that come with it. It is important to recall similar debates in the 1990s which highlighted concerns that humanitarian action alone cannot resolve conflicts or alleviate suffering in the long-term. The Rwanda evaluation in 1995 highlighted the fact that humanitarian action cannot substitute for political action; the persistent rejection of political efforts by humanitarians could lead to similar failures.

Humanitarian actors (both UN and non-UN) should also consider the impact of their work on other agendas being pursued by the UN and its partners. Whilst they aspire to being apolitical, their work invariably has political consequences whether intentional or not. It is not possible or practical to simply dismiss UN Security Council mandates since they represent the will of the international community. More needs to be done to reconcile the tensions that emerge between supporting UN sponsored transitions, often through the extension and legitimisation of fragile or contested states, with the humanitarian desire to insert themselves between all conflict parties and operate in a neutral manner. The more successful and sustainable these transitions become the greater likelihood that humanitarian needs will decrease.

Determining the exact nature of this interface is important, as it is commonly the case that humanitarian work continues in the immediate post-conflict period, even though the context requires a more recovery and development focused engagement. Is it appropriate, for example, in Afghanistan for humanitarians to continue to provide essential services according to humanitarian principles after the government has established itself through one or two elections or should these humanitarian actors create space for and/or support efforts of state expansion and legitimization? There is a general tendency among humanitarians to claim 'space' for the full range of 'humanitarian activities', even if many of them can be classified as recovery and/or development (e.g. support to education or health ministries). However, there are also instances of downplaying humanitarian need in order to demonstrate political progress or peace-consolidation. This clearly links to the perennial debate about the boundaries of humanitarian action, and when humanitarian activities should make way for recovery and development strategies.

Humanitarians need to determine how they engage operationally with UN missions on overlapping issues of concerns, such as protection of civilians. The humanitarian strategy of inserting themselves between all conflict parties and operating in a neutral manner may not be the most effective strategy when protection or the recovery of people's livelihoods is at the centre of the political/peace-keeping mission's objectives. Humanitarians need to find a balance between neutrality and coherence on these shared objectives and the 'one foot in, one foot out' model is a logical starting point.

UN Integration and Humanitarian Space: perspectives from Somalia

UN integration in Somalia has been highly contentious and the tense debates between different components of the UN have impeded the adoption of a common approach. Tensions stem in large part from the UN's historical engagement in the country. The political missions involved in Somalia over the last two decades, such as UNISOM I and II, were largely perceived to be partial and were forced to withdraw due to serious deteriorations in the situation. Humanitarian actors (including UN humanitarian agencies) have, however, remained consistently engaged in Somalia. Ensuring they could continue to operate in this environment has required major investment in building relationships with all conflict parties, and local communities, and in developing innovative modes of operations (e.g.: remote management). As the UN seeks to politically re-engage and recover lost ground, many in the humanitarian community fear that the same mistakes will be made again and that a partisan approach is being adopted and the association (real or perceived) with this strategy will undermine the relationships and investment which humanitarian actors have made in the last decades.

These fears stem partly from the mandate given by the UN Security Council, which calls upon UNPOS to support the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The TFG is weak, lacks legitimacy and is accused of corruption, committing human rights violations and in some circumstances obstructing the delivery of humanitarian assistance. As a result, humanitarian actors involved in Somalia have been reluctant to engage and collaborate with them. They see the TFG as one actor amongst many in a complex emergency. Furthermore, re-engagement on the political side is perceived by many humanitarians as being primarily driven by the counter-terrorism agenda and that consequent engagement has been short term and has not been successful to date in achieving peace or stability objectives.

The evident lack of coherence between the political mission and the humanitarian and development communities in part explains the former SRSG's insistence that all actors work together to achieve the overall mission of creating stability in Somalia. There was also reported concern amongst some in UNPOS, the TFG and other stakeholders that humanitarians were negatively affecting political efforts. Humanitarian engagement with Al Shabaab and aid diversion were viewed as lending the opposition credibility and providing them with a steady income. That led to a drive by the former SRSG to be better informed about how humanitarians were engaging with non-state armed actors and ensure this was not having a negative effect on the UN mission's objectives. However, his leadership style led many humanitarian actors to feel as if this was an attempt to curtail humanitarian activities and prohibit them from engaging with non-state armed actors which they believed was essential for gaining humanitarian access. UNPOS has counter-argued that this was not an attempt to subsume humanitarian action to political objectives but simply aimed at preventing the various components from working at cross-purposes.

The concerns of the humanitarian community in Somalia primarily stem from the need to ensure both real and perceived independence of action for tactical and operational reasons. They have argued that only by being perceived as impartial can they obtain the trust from the communities they seek to assist, and acceptance from the parties which control access to those populations. There is some evidence that attacks against UN staff in Somalia have been selective and have explicitly sought to target certain agencies over others based on the extent to which they are supporting the TFG.

These debates on humanitarian space in Somalia whilst important have perhaps distracted from the fact that the push for integration was also driven by the need to ensure coherence between UNPOS and the development community. Some development actors working in Somalia have engaged in governance and security sector reform (areas that are explicit tasks in the UNPOS mandate) but have tried to avoid explicitly supporting the TFG as the central authority, thereby, arguably, stalling the capacity building process that may have resulted in a more effective government. The need for greater coherence also stems from the sheer number of actors operating in Somalia under different agendas, and strategies. AMISOM, UNPOS, UNSOA and the humanitarian and development communities are all operating in the same context and the same time, often with overlapping or contrasting strategies.

The creation of new multi-actor platforms, such as the Joint Planning Unit, and the recent Integrated Strategic Framework process, represent important opportunities to facilitate communication between the different components of the UN in Somalia. In recent years, there has been extremely limited communication, with hostility and negative perceptions on all sides. The challenge is to develop an overarching strategy that everyone agrees to and can work towards; otherwise there is no common ground on which to discuss respective roles and responsibilities.

UN Integration and Humanitarian Space: perspectives from Afghanistan

The debate on integration in Afghanistan has been equally contentious over the years. There is continued concern from many in the humanitarian community that aid is being politicised: it is not being delivered to areas controlled by the Taliban and it is being used to further a political agenda. The integration of the UN mission and its mandate to support ISAF forces and the Afghan government are deemed to be a significant factor in the politicisation of humanitarian aid and the perception amongst conflict parties and communities that aid

agencies are not neutral, independent and impartial. This in turn, has affected aid worker security and access to populations in need.

There is currently no access to over 50 per cent of the country, thereby impeding assessment of needs and the delivery of appropriate assistance and protection. The lack of access is also due to the fact that security restrictions have confined most UN humanitarian agencies to fortified aid compounds which further restrict engagement with local populations. This raises questions about whether the UN, in highly politicised situations, can effectively play an operational humanitarian role. The fact that the organisations with most access are those that strictly adhere to the principles of humanitarian action further emphasises the need to separate humanitarianism from politics in such contexts.

But can humanitarian action be separated from politics? Humanitarian action always has a political impact. For example, if an opposition group is trying to cut off supplies to an area in order to punish the local population then they are likely to resist attempts by humanitarians to engage, even if they adhere to humanitarian principles. This is because their assistance will negatively impact the political strategy being pursued. Most armed groups understand the concept of humanitarian principles but decide to attack aid workers for other reasons. This may be ideological or be a means to create the impression of continuing instability in a given context. Therefore, rejecting integration and calling for a separation between aid and politics is ideological and problematic. One of the reasons why the Brahimi report in 2000 called for integration within the UN was to ensure that humanitarian organisations were not negatively affecting political processes. This was deemed to be the case in Afghanistan before 2001.

There is also a perception of double standards within the humanitarian community. Many humanitarian actors have criticised ISAF for using aid to win ‘hearts and minds’ yet they remain silent with regards to the Taliban when it has sought to manipulate humanitarian assistance for their own advantage. Furthermore, the difference between different components of the UN system is not visible to most communities on the ground. They do not distinguish between different parts of the UN (e.g.: blue vs. black). In fact, adhering to principles can cause delay in providing emergency relief (if they reject logistical support by the military) and political action can actually help open up access through negotiation with the *de facto* or *de jure* authorities.

However, there are instances in which political action can also adversely affect humanitarian outcomes. For example, whilst transitioning towards a stable and secure Afghanistan is important, this has been exaggerated to show political progress at the expense of recognising continuing humanitarian needs and ensuring an adequate humanitarian response. Ensuring a conflict sensitive approach does not mean subsuming the humanitarian response to political imperatives but does mean recognising that humanitarian action can have political implications. Political action on the other hand can create both opportunities and risks and integration needs to ensure these are managed effectively. On the humanitarian side, politically-savvy engagement and analysis of key political actors and institutions would help ensure opportunities are enhanced and risks managed or mitigated.

UN Integration and Humanitarian Space: perspectives from DR Congo

The debate on UN integration in DRC has been less contentious than in Afghanistan and Somalia. There is recognition that the presence of MONUSCO has created a more secure environment for humanitarians in North and South Kivu and Province Oriental. The mission

has also developed a number of initiatives to help protect civilians with tangible impact. These have involved the deployment of forward operating bases and temporary operating bases to remote locations to act as a deterrent or from which to launch pre-emptive operations, which in turn have opened up access for humanitarian organisations. Humanitarians also benefit directly from MONUSCO's logistical support, such as the use of air assets. MONUSCO has provided over 7500 non-UN personnel flights per year. The protection of civilians (an objective shared and influenced by humanitarian actors) and logistical benefits are not available in political missions, which may also help explain why integration has been less contentious in DRC.

Successful cooperation has also been put down to a robust Civil Affairs Section (CAS) within MONUSCO which acts as a facilitator between the humanitarian community and the mission (ensuring access to MONUSCO assets and strategies). The CAS undertakes regular assessments and consistently engages with humanitarians to exchange information. They also ensure that humanitarian concerns are taken into account during military planning. For example, some humanitarian actors contribute to a tool that helps prioritise protection needs when the military considers where, when and how to act. The sharing of information has become systematised and has been an effective means for humanitarians to advocate their concerns. MONUSCO has participated in the protection cluster and this collaboration has resulted in the better provision of physical protection in key areas. The triple-hatting of the DSRSG/RC/HC and since 2009, the deployment of an OCHA liaison officer within the mission, has helped build constructive relationships between humanitarians and the mission and has enhanced the humanitarian 'voice' both within the mission, and externally. Strong leadership has been central to ensuring coherence between humanitarians and the mission.

There are concerns, however, that the humanitarian community is over-reliant on MONUSCO for logistics and security. Rather than engaging local communities directly to develop an acceptance of humanitarian actors, many have relied on MONUSCO escorts, security analysis and local contacts. Whilst the peacekeeping mission has opened up access to areas which were previously too insecure for humanitarians, UN security restrictions mean that UN humanitarian agencies do not have the same level of access as NGOs; it is estimated that they are not reaching up to 30 percent of populations in need. MONUSCO's own resource constraints mean that they cannot provide security analysis or support for all areas where there is humanitarian need. There are also signs that security is deteriorating. In 2009, there were 166 incidents in the Kivus and in 2010 this increased to 194 incidents.

There are also some concerns regarding the impact of humanitarian actors and affected populations being associated with MONUSCO. Some local populations largely see MONUSCO as the UN and cannot distinguish between MONUSCO and UN humanitarian agencies. This can be problematic given MONUSCO's close association with the FARDC, which has a poor human rights record and is the primary perpetrator and contributor of insecurity in some areas. There are also areas where the mission cannot deploy and the UN humanitarian agencies have not established the relationships needed to operate without MONUSCO. The humanitarian community have perhaps not done enough to distinguish themselves from the peacekeeping mission. This is particularly important as the mission seeks to reduce its role and transfer responsibility to the government. This will require greater engagement with non-state armed actors. And whilst the mission has not sought to curtail humanitarian engagement with these actors, there have been some instances in the past (e.g. with Laurent Nkunda) where engagement was discouraged so as to avoid giving greater

legitimacy to opposition groups. However, the existence of platforms and mechanisms including the triple-hatted DSRSR to discuss these issues has meant that concerns were largely effectively resolved.

These platforms may partly explain why there has been quite a different experience of integration in the DRC compared to Somalia and Afghanistan, where there has been an absence of effective communication channels or those in place are not being used. A committed DSRSR/RC/HC helped make these work in practice, as did the CAS, which used to be a humanitarian liaison office in the mission and therefore has good knowledge and understanding of humanitarian concerns. The protection of civilians is also a common, and in the case of MONUSCO, now principal, operational objective. Another potential difference between DRC and the other case studies is the stage and dynamics of the conflict, in particular, the goal and tactics of the armed groups. The non-state armed groups operating in DRC are not competing for or trying to undermine the legitimacy or political power of the central government in the same way that armed groups are in Somalia and Afghanistan. This may explain why engagement with them by humanitarians has not generally been believed to be of political significance. Moreover, in Afghanistan and Somalia, the international military presence is under a separate command and control structure (NATO and the AU respectively). The fact that MONUSCO's troops are under UN command, rather than NATO or another force structure, has facilitated closer and more effective engagement at policy and operational levels. Ultimately, the advantages of humanitarians engaging with MONUSCO are tangible and operational and this has gone a long way to ensuring a more constructive relationship.

Concluding Discussion

The 2008 SG decision on integration reflects substantial progress on addressing earlier tensions and trade-offs between integration and humanitarian space. The decision emphasised the need for context specificity and that 'form should follow function'. This is particularly important with regards to leadership roles, such as determining whether there should be a DSRSR/RC/HC or a separate RC/HC. However, further work needs to be done to understand how the form of integration can better take into account the nature of the transition sought in the country of concern, both in terms of progress towards stability and also when a context deteriorates into a crisis situation. This requires further consideration of when and how an integrated presence should be reviewed and re-structured as the situation changes on the ground.

The SG decision also introduced a mechanism, the Integrated Strategic Framework process, which seeks in part to provide a platform to ensure that the concerns of various UN actors in a country are raised and resolved and that opportunities for greater efficiency and effectiveness are leveraged. These must take into account the tactical importance of various humanitarian modes of engagement. Humanitarian principles are not ideological, they serve a specific purpose: to ensure humanitarians are able to respond to those in need. This was reiterated by a recent [independent study](#), commissioned by OCHA.

Moreover, the humanitarian community is not monolithic and most major humanitarian actors (UN agencies and NGOs) also have development mandates and engage with institution building and support recovery and development processes. Greater clarity from these organisations on what they are seeking to achieve in given contexts could help facilitate

coordination and also clarify humanitarian-development boundaries, which are often confusing for political actors.

Tensions and hostility with regards to integration may stem more from the way in which integration is sometimes being carried out in practice rather than integration per se. It is not integration, but rather poor implementation of integration policies that has been problematic in key contexts, for example as a result of attempts to ensure command and control, a lack of transparency in decision making processes, and inappropriate personalities in leadership roles.