

UN HUMANITARIAN REFORMS: A FIELD-BASED OUTLOOK

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¹This external document represents an abstract of wider-reaching research conducted by an MSF intersectional working group including MSF-Belgium, MSF-Holland, MSF-UK and the MSF office in Brazil. This document does not represent a formal position of MSF as a movement.

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INTRODUCTION

What is it?

During the second half of 2006, an intersectional Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) working group undertook a field-based study on the UN humanitarian reforms:

- their implementation;
- their impact on response to beneficiaries; and
- their influence on the working environment of humanitarians, with a particular focus on MSF activities and staff

The motivations for this study were many. Both at field and headquarters levels, MSF has long been concerned with UN policies of coherence and mission integration and their influence on the politicization of aid in contexts such as Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Sierra Leone and Afghanistan.² Recent UN humanitarian reforms generated renewed concern about how the policy of coherence translated into field realities, and motivated MSF to gain a field-based vision of the reforms' implementation and

their impact through the key coordination and funding mechanisms involved, in particular the clusters, the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). To date, the working group has assessed the following contexts: Darfur, South Sudan, DRC, Somalia, Haiti, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Uganda. Field research was conducted in all these countries, except for Somalia, where research took place in Nairobi and in Uganda, where research was conducted by telephone. This study did not aim to provide a comprehensive, global overview of the reforms nor to establish an MSF position on the humanitarian reforms. Our objective was to gain a field-based perspective drawing on some of the contexts where we work, to inform MSF international debate on our interaction with other actors and to contribute to the upcoming development of an external institutional position to be advanced by the MSF international office. The following conclusions of our study draw on sometimes divergent developments in different country settings, in an effort to highlight the commonalities observed across contexts and draw practical conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

The project aimed to assess how the UN humanitarian reforms and the agenda of integration are being implemented in several countries of intervention, examining in particular their effects on beneficiaries, on the humanitarian environment and on MSF activities in terms of response, access, coordination, security, perceptions...

The countries studied were selected according to the different phases of a crisis (acute to reconstruction) as well as their accessibility to host a visit. The sample of countries evaluated is reduced (7) and does not encompass contexts linked with the GWOT nor with natural catastrophes. We have however included two contexts where the UN reforms were not being implemented, as a control-group.

Information was gathered by a group of five MSF employees coming from different sections of MSF. The method used was semi-structured interviews with different actors on the ground

as the main stakeholders in the international humanitarian response, including MSF, INGOs, ICRC, OCHA, UN agencies and major donors. A total of about 140 persons were interviewed.

Data was manually analysed.

Confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees limits our ability to source the evidence used.

This field-based outlook did not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of these issues based on exhaustive research but to underline overall trends highlighted by those we met on the ground from August 2006 to February 2007. We consider this document a means of feedback to MSF headquarters, capital and field teams, as well as to the external contacts whom we interviewed. The study is still a work in progress that should be finalized by the end of 2007.

² E.g., Penny Harrison, "The Strategic Framework and Principled Common Programming: a challenge to humanitarian assistance," Humanitarian Exchange 19 (September 2001), see: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/ACOS-64CRV5?OpenDocument>; MSF, "Angolans left to die," (October 2002).

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REFORMS

The humanitarian reforms represent a positive attempt to respond to gaps in assistance and to increase effectiveness and timeliness of humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, however, the reforms' implementation often aims for efficiency while failing to further independence and diversity of approach that are vital to humanitarian response.

In general, the recent UN humanitarian reforms follow and reinforce the already existing **logic of integration and coherence**, in which the UN's formal structure and programmatic orientation couple political, military and/or development aims with humanitarian response. In integrated missions, humanitarian priorities generally end up subordinated to the UN's current political agendas (e.g. peace-keeping, state-building, development, security sector reform), if not those of individual donors with similar coherence-based approaches.

Even in contexts where the humanitarian reforms have not been implemented, the logic of coherence applies, with the continuation of on-going trends. While their implementation remains highly dependent on individual personalities and context, our study observed several general tendencies. Individual UN missions have achieved different levels of implementation of the reforms with the overall understanding of the content and objectives of the reforms varying starkly, even among UN staff. Despite the reforms' stated objectives of accountability, timeliness, effectiveness and gap-filling in aid, acceptance of the reforms was only moderate even within the UN system. Re-structuring coordination and funding architecture have not functioned as a panacea for wide-reaching gaps in global humanitarian response. In addition, as coherence introduces political strategies into the humanitarian sphere, the assessment and response to needs are likewise in danger of losing impartiality and becoming subordinated to political agendas, to the very real detriment of the most vulnerable.

Examples

Within the wider agenda of peace, security and reconciliation in **Uganda**, the government and certain UN agencies have actively promoted a return process viewed as indicative of the advancement of the peace process, as well as of country stability permitting greater financial investment, particularly in development activities. Yet, even as return activities are underway, not all areas are ready for return. Basic facilities and assistance are lacking in places like Bira, Corner Agula and Adak, while in some instances, security for returnees cannot be assured (e.g., Atoll Hill).

After the signature of the **Darfur** Peace Agreement (DPA) in May 2006 involving only one rebel group (Sudanese Liberation Army/Minni Minnawi, SLA-MM), most donor governments invested time and funding on establishing policies and initiatives aimed at peace dividends. Efforts to facilitate the return of displaced families and the "post-recovery" Joint Assessment Missions (JAM) led by the World Bank were carried out throughout summer 2006, even as indicators showed that, in reality, the conflict and insecurity for both beneficiaries and aid workers was worsening seriously.

In Port-au-Prince, **Haiti**, the common understanding between the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) and donors seems to be that the provision of assistance is an important tool to undermine the popular support that militias in the capital still enjoy. Efforts are put into providing assistance as soon as possible in the aftermath of violent confrontations. This translates into one-shot 'assistance' interventions by MINUSTAH such as mobile clinics, or in mixed UN/NGOs/government staff task forces that strive to identify high visibility interventions, not always defined on the basis of needs alone.

In **DRC**, (joint) operations by the UN mission MONUC (with or without the national army FARDC) against 'negative elements' have resulted in humanitarian crises with significant population displacement and high needs. Military operations have been prioritised at the expense of human costs – after which MONUC has often appealed to humanitarian agencies to respond to the needs generated and so to ensure that MONUC maintains a more 'human' face in the aftermath. Although the number of MONUC operations has decreased over the last year, this has largely been due to reduced need rather than a change in priorities.

The UN clusters represent an attempt to improve coordination and to fill gaps in humanitarian assistance in an effective and timely manner. Although increased effectiveness and accountability were the stated goals of the reforms, the clusters have so far resulted in a proliferation of coordination platforms, e.g. clusters and sub-clusters, NGO sectoral working groups operating simultaneously with UN and government structures. In specific contexts, questions have also arisen around the appropriateness of the cluster approach and/or the real capacities of cluster lead agencies.

Examples

In **Liberia**, the WHO-led health cluster doubles up with the Ministry of Health's Health Services Coordinating Committee (HSCC) and an NGO-headed forum on health that meets in advance to prepare for the HSCC. These three groups co-exist with working groups on specific diseases (e.g. HIV) as well as the general bi-weekly UN-NGO coordination meeting, the Humanitarian Aid Coordination Committee (HAC). In Monrovia, aptly titled "committee city" by one UN staff member, the clusters' implementation belies the reforms' aim at increased effectiveness. Coordination structures proliferate and the more recent UN coordination structure tends to pre-empt the government coordination body, even in the midst of a "transition" away from humanitarian assistance.

Liberia also faces overwhelming needs for water and sanitation; UN figures for 2006 state that only 32% of families countrywide have access to clean drinking water and less than 25% had access to an adequate sanitary facilities. The result are regular outbreaks of cholera and other water-borne disease. Yet, as the designated cluster lead for water and sanitation and "provider of last resort," UNICEF will need to respond in case of emergency, but as of September 2006 remained dependent on NGO capacities for sufficient emergency preparedness in the area of water and sanitation— by contrast to the very idea of the "provider of last resort."

In **Ivory Coast**, the protection cluster was suggested by the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) during a February 2006 visit in the aftermath of riots targeting UN peacekeepers and humanitarian organizations. Despite ongoing violence in the buffer zone at the heart of the country and the signs of UN political will to launch the cluster, it was only officially approved in August 2006 and still remained non-operational a half year later. For the volatile area of western Ivory Coast, UNHCR's planned activities for implementation through the protection cluster included, e.g., peace-building and peace education in schools, a highly political activity risking the perception that the "humanitarian" arm of the UN and UN-associated NGOs lack impartiality in the conflict. In addition, plans set out by the cluster were focused on IDP return, even as insecurity continued on the ground and MSF structures treat high levels of violent trauma in the same region.

In the case of Somalia, it is too early to make anything more than a preliminary judgement on cluster implementation. Apart from a proliferation of coordination meetings and the willingness to share more information, cluster output is negligible primarily because Somalia is a case of virtual coordination. There are too few interventions being implemented on the ground, for coordination to have any real meaning. The clusters thus risk compartmentalising humanitarian aid and losing a more holistic approach. One example of this increased compartmentalisation is in water and sanitation, where WFP was said to have little idea of what UNICEF is doing in this sector.

According to our observations, the degree and timeliness of coordination through the clusters depends on various factors, including the individuals and agencies involved, as well as the acuteness and nature of the crisis—conflict, post-conflict, natural disaster. As with integrated missions, the speed of implementation may appear to increase as the reforms progress and structures such as the clusters and CERF become standard-issue for UN missions, in particular newly-launched missions in quick-onset crises.³

At closer examination, cluster lead agencies often demonstrate limited leadership capacity, mainly focused on information-sharing and training or administrative support. To date, the clusters have shown little added value to effectively and systematically mobilise resources for concrete projects in the field in a timely manner.

As a medical actor, MSF is particularly concerned about the function of the health cluster, where WHO is mandated as a provider of last resort in emergency contexts, despite having rarely been operational in health in the field to date.

In principle, one positive dimension of the clusters is the development of a systemic UN response to the needs of IDPs and attempts to promote a clearer division of responsibility among agencies for different sectors in IDP contexts on the ground. Still, the clusters adopt the questionable response of increasing (technical) coordination to address issues of lack of political will, responsiveness, effectiveness and/or accountability in humanitarian aid. It is also unclear what the responsibilities of the lead agencies entail (especially as “provider of last resort”) and whether lead agencies have the operational capacity or political backing to act as “providers of last resort” where there are gaps in humanitarian response.

Like already existing UN integrated missions, coordination through the clusters runs the risk that political considerations enter into operational exchanges through funding mechanisms implicitly or explicitly linked to common operational or policy positioning, as well as through “inclusive” participation of a wide range of actors in cluster meetings, including (inter)national aid actors, UN bodies, the national government, (inter)national military and donors. In such a context, coordination bodies tend to exert pressure toward collective positioning on overall priorities and types of projects seen to be relevant, rather than facilitating independent operations, analysis and/or advocacy based on the real needs of the population.

Example⁴

In **Uganda**, ECHO is increasingly requiring ‘partners’ to explain how their proposals fit into cluster strategies (where these are in place), before granting funding. Likewise, DfID’s new policy also appears to be to focus on funding clusters rather than individual NGOs so as to streamline their own management – but making NGOs dependent on cluster leads and organisation.

Although early on in **DRC**, significant amounts of humanitarian funding are being channelled through the clusters, which submit proposals to different multi-lateral funding mechanisms including the CERF. Despite some checks and balances (such as the Pooled Fund Board with the presence of NGOs and donors), UN cluster leads wield significant power in inviting participants to relevant meetings, submitting proposals and in the case of the CERF, further contracting out to NGOs.

³ E.g. in the recent crisis in Lebanon, where clusters for emergency shelter, protection and logistics were launched practically at the outset of UN activities.

⁴ Cf. Also the case of health clusters in DRC, where WHO seems to support the application of user fees.

Our study found that the **CERF (Central Emergency Response Fund)** seems promising to attract increased funding for emergencies, but has so far been implemented in a highly politicised manner. Despite its aim to support life-saving activities and/or to respond to (under-funded) emergencies, the CERF was often used in an untimely manner without addressing concrete acute emergency needs. Instead, activities have largely focused on facilitating the saving of lives rather than direct emergency interventions, which leaves room for politicisation (e.g. peace and stability objectives) rather than concentrating on the most urgent need. In principle, the CERF exists to cover emergencies which remain under-funded (i.e. under 40%) through the regular channel of the UN Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP). In theory, the CERF was never meant to become an emergency band-aid to cover the chronic under-funding of often non-emergency UN programs through the CAP.

Examples

After initially being turned down for CERF funding in May 2006 as it was neither considered an emergency nor grossly under-funded, **Liberia** received “surprise” CERF funds of \$4 million for October-December 2006, in response to “under-funding”. Of this sum, 2 million were allotted for health, 1 million for watsan and 1 million for food/ agriculture. The mid-year CAP review in April-May 2006 argued that Liberia was under-funded at 28%—but many interviewees said the CAP was also over-budgeted at 120 million. Ultimately, the CERF in Liberia mainly funded projects that were re-visited and drawn from the CAP, which in itself is less a comprehensive reading of humanitarian needs in-country than the sum of project proposals of UN agencies and UN-linked NGOs.

The three CERF instalments destined for **Haiti** in 2006 focused for the most part (75% of funds) on infrastructure and rehabilitation projects in Savane Pistache, Mariani and Cité Soleil, insecure areas of Port-au-Prince that the military branch of MINUSTAH strives to maintain under control. Although categorized as under-funded emergencies, these projects are structural, longer-term and high-visibility ones that seem to fulfil a security agenda more than a needs-based humanitarian one.

In Sudan, the CERF is intended primarily to fund relief work in North Sudan, particularly in Darfur. Of USD 20 million foreseen in 2006, only USD 1 million was earmarked for Southern Sudan. **Southern Sudan** has its own Emergency Response Fund (ERF), which together with the CERF is intended specifically for the funding of humanitarian and emergency interventions. Still, the ERF is also a relatively minor funding source; in 2006 it will have funded 7 organisations for a total of USD 320,000, primarily for cholera. In parallel, a Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) exists for Southern Sudan, originating from the Joint Assessment Mission (JAM), and coordinated by the World Bank and UN after the signing of the CPA. Yet the MDTF focuses on development, with its stated intent being to “improve and accelerate progress on development outcomes – poverty, income, human development and governance.”

There were serious questions about the impartiality of CERF funding, which was often used to support specific regions or populations in ways that served (inter)national political interests.

Example

Ivory Coast was the first CERF recipient worldwide in March 2006. This and the two subsequent “tranches” of the CERF funding imparted to the crisis in June and August 2006 were all focused in and around the region of Guiglo, a town which had seen anti-UN riots and widespread destruction of UN and NGO infrastructure in January 2006. While the first “tranche” of the CERF (\$950,000) covered “emergency” needs in Guiglo, including e.g. IOM infrastructure and the ill-defined “protection” of IDPs, the next two instalments covered 1) the return of Liberian refugees from the area (\$1 million) who represented a strain on assistance together with Ivoirian refugees, and 2) again vaguely-defined “life saving protection” activities in the region (\$3 million). Activities funded by the CERF included clearly non-emergency elements of a nature that was not strictly humanitarian, e.g. “social events to improve inter-community relations and promote peace culture...bring[ing] together about 30,000 members of all communities during the football world championship.”

At the time of writing, the CERF is said to have committed \$261.2 million, \$184.2 million for “rapid response” and \$77 million for “under-funded emergencies” since its start in March 2006. Yet, from a global perspective, the amount pledged by donors remains relatively small and, as it is sometimes also channelled through the UN to NGOs, the question is how much of this much-needed funding eventually trickles down to reach those most in need and how timely will this process be.

The **UN Humanitarian Coordinator (HC)** is a position often fused with the Resident Coordinator (RC, i.e. head of UNDP) in UN integrated missions, who often also functions as a Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG), and therefore as part of the political branch of the UN. As a result, in the context of an already integrated mission setting, the reinforcement of the HC position through the humanitarian reforms simply strengthens the role of a multi-hatted HC/RC/DSRSG, negotiating between political, development and humanitarian agendas. This combination would tend to reinforce the agenda of global priorities (e.g. peace-keeping, state-building, development, security sector reform) over the imperative of humanitarian action.

The heads of the UN agencies are now supposed to be accountable to the HC and the DSRG in-country, but the real ability for follow-up remains unclear. Tensions could be generated around a number of open questions: the definition of a humanitarian crisis and need for gap-filling or last resort action, the prioritization among different fields of intervention, accessibility to funds such as the CERF, the type and scope of operations, and the imposition of security rules that hamper assessment and deployment. Although too early to ascertain, the results could include agency inaction, delays in response and further politicization of aid delivery—developments that need to be monitored in future.

In parallel, OCHA (led by the HC in principle) often appears increasingly sidelined in the implementation of the humanitarian reforms and in ever more frequently integrated UN missions. Instead of functioning as a real watchdog for humanitarianism within the UN system, OCHA has often either been abolished altogether, left under-funded or relegated to a diminished role of general coordination and inter-face with NGOs.

It remains to be seen whether the reforms will actually lead to more predictability, leadership and accountability in humanitarian response and, ultimately, if the needs of vulnerable populations will prevail over the considerations of a global institution in search of efficiency and legitimacy.

Examples

In **Haiti**, OCHA has been marginalised and has had hardly any presence in the country for the past two years. Without an official representation, under-funded, excluded from the CAP and having its remaining staff incorporated into the Humanitarian and Development Unit, responding to the H/D DSRSG, OCHA was almost entirely absent from the country until mid- 2006, when a more field-experienced staff member was sent to the country.

In **Liberia**, OCHA slowly phased out in the second half of 2005, leaving behind a gap in terms of coordination. Months later, OCHA was replaced by the Humanitarian Coordination Section (HCS), which is formally part of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), even if it remains physically separate and retains many staff originally from OCHA. Not only does HCS’ connection with UNMIL suggest a possible alignment of their work with the political and military UN, but HCS’s connection with UNMIL also renders them vulnerable to the political decision to reduce or withdraw the UN political/military mission in the future, rather than assessing their role according to the extent of ongoing humanitarian needs. The HCS is likewise subject to UNMIL’s bureaucracy and lack of flexibility in their response to emergencies. HCS has no coordination mandate, only an information-sharing role. Still, together with the SRSG or the HC/RC, the HCS heads the key UN coordination meeting, the bi-weekly HAC (Humanitarian Aid Coordination Committee), which groups together the UN agencies, UNMIL and NGOs.

In **Southern Sudan**, OCHA emphasizes its formal independence from the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), but in fact depends on the political and military mission both politically and financially. Not only is OCHA on the UNMIS payroll, but the HC/RC as its head answers to the SRSG as the head of the overall UN mission. The question of relative resources is also important here - the massive resources of UNMIS give it considerably more leverage and influence than the meagre resources of OCHA. As a result, OCHA will continue to struggle to assert itself in Southern Sudan.

THE REFORMS' IMPACT ON PEOPLE IN NEED

Our study found widespread optimism about the ability of the reforms to increase mobilisation of resources for projects, but the resulting programmatic choices have been questionable in terms of impartiality—the choice to assist those most in need, whether in insecure or secure settings. In addition, the proliferation of additional layers of administration and coordination provide cause for concern that increased funding through the clusters may not reach populations most in need. UN security rules themselves sometimes represent a barrier for their implementing partners to access people in insecure areas, with consequences for the effectiveness of UN-led assessment, monitoring and evaluation, as well as impact on inhabitants of the most precarious contexts.

Returnee processes in several contexts were the focus of programming, less to serve the humanitarian needs of IDPs than to promote their return in the interests of political gains. The new mechanisms put in place by the UN reforms did not ensure a more effective needs-based response to assist IDPs. In fact, the safe and dignified return of IDPs to areas with sufficient security and infrastructure still took a back seat to the logistic organization of return and overall political objectives (e.g. elections) connection with return.

Examples⁵

In **DRC**, the establishment of the Pooled Fund and the CERF have led to increases in the amount of aid allocated to DRC. However, it is not known how much money, either in-cash or in-kind, actually reaches those in need. Moreover, there is no objective and comprehensive assessment of needs. Due to often severe security restrictions, limited possibility for many UN agencies to monitor and quality and effectiveness or timeliness of projects – assuming that these agencies have the appropriate tools to do this (e.g., UNDP for humanitarian projects). MONUC continues to implement Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) for small but high visibility projects through both local and international NGOs which do not appear to have been evaluated in terms of results for the target population.

Although attention and resources were poured into the highly insecure areas of Port-au-Prince, **Haiti** where MINUSTAH is intervening, this rarely translated into proper assistance programs for the population based on accurate needs assessments. Strict UN security rules were said to hamper UN agencies' capacity to assess needs and respond to them, frustrating both assistance providers and people in need.

Examples

In **Darfur**, UNMIS and major donors emphasised a possible flux of returnees as an indicator of peace after the signature of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA). Although no real change in needs was observed on the ground, funds and programmes were redirected toward efforts to help people to return and to create a general environment in which the peace process could progress. This pressure put on agencies soon dwindled as the logic of the conflict took over. Still, despite the absence of the humanitarian reforms in Darfur, the close partnership with institutional donors is indicative of a broader, overall dynamic forcing humanitarian actors on the ground to align their activities with global political priorities.

By contrast, however, in **Southern Sudan**, some believe that UNMIS' Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) have had positive consequences for beneficiaries. Although the QIPs do not apply a needs-based approach and they raise issues of principle around military participation in aid delivery, it could be argued that QIPs have ensured the delivery of assistance to beneficiaries that otherwise would not have happened.

⁵ In Southern Sudan, however, it could be argued that the presence of UNMIS has ensured greater delivery of assistance to population. Although generally regarded as too conservative in terms of security, some would argue that the military component of the Integrated Mission has contributed to greater stability in the South. This in turn has made certain areas of Southern Sudan accessible for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Nonetheless, it is impossible to determine how much of this can be attributed to UNMIS, and how much to the respect of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Another recurring emphasis in programming through the clusters and the CERF has been “protection”, a concept which remains very vague, risking the launch of highly politicized projects with negligible or negative impact. Such a trend may compromise measures of IHL-centred protection provided through established channels such as the ICRC.

Examples

In **Ivory Coast**, UN activities after the humanitarian reforms focus on “protection”—including the protection cluster and the third CERF “tranche” of \$3 million in August focusing on protection in the west. The protection cluster plans represent a wide span of vaguely-defined activities including peace-building and peace education in schools, police training on the IDP guidelines, monitoring and programs directed at women and children (sexual and gender-based violence SGBV, child trafficking). CERF-funded programs for likewise undefined “life-saving protection-oriented activities” will be carried out by UNHCR, UNICEF, WHO and IOM. In a setting where violence is frequent and ongoing, if at a low level, these trends in programming pose the question of the UN definition of protection, transparency about how such programs operate and the real effectiveness of such programming to ensure physical security as well as protection—the upholding of human rights and the right to assistance.

In **Uganda**, UNHCR has prioritised protection activities but their scope has been criticised as ‘reductionist’-- focusing on issues of freedom of movement and neglecting other issues such as forcible eviction of IDPs by landowners. In addition, the Protection cluster is said to engage only in limited sharing outside the cluster of wider information gathered through the return monitoring system). Still, the SGBV cluster under UNICEF, appears to be functioning relatively better in these respects.

In **DRC**, the protection clusters in different provinces have often called for MONUC deployment, launched human rights fact-finding missions, written letters and physically followed-up military and judicial authorities to react against troop movements, indiscipline or impunity on behalf of cluster members. It is not always known what is done with highly sensitive information and even less what might happen should targeted actors begin to seek out those behind the information / action.

THE REFORMS' IMPACT ON THE HUMANITARIAN WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Ultimately, the UN humanitarian reforms represent a further blurring of the lines around humanitarianism. Actors in the field expressed concern that NGOs could be excluded from funding or subjected to conditions in order to receive funding through the UN system after the launch of the clusters and CERF. Such conditions could include dependence on UN analysis of context and security, as well as on UN or donor strategies, e.g. cost recovery for health care. As assistance grows more politicized, the resulting negative perceptions towards the UN and international NGOs have the potential to impact on security and access for all and so diminish timely and appropriate response to those people most in need

Some access and security problems for humanitarians predate and are not necessarily linked with the UN reforms. Still, perception is fragile and can quickly decline where populations perceive MSF or other humanitarians as pursuing political or other goals through partial and politically or regionally biased assistance. With its independent action, funding and analysis, MSF often enjoys a particularly strong level of access and proximity to local populations.

That being said, in several cases, humanitarian actors have liaised to develop independent positioning vis-à-vis the UN, in order to emphasize the special character of humanitarian action and to defend humanitarian space.

Such initiatives give us food for thought even as the policy of coherence advances and becomes ever more the standard for humanitarian response.

Example

In **Ivory Coast**, on January 15, 2006, the Groupe de Travail International (GTI), monitoring the Ivorian peace process and co-chaired by the African Union and the UN, declared that the mandate of the country's National Assembly would not be extended after its expiration on December 16, 2005. The next four days of resulting unrest in Abidjan, Daloa and other locations targeted the UN peacekeepers (UNOCI), demanding their withdrawal from the country. Pro-government groups in the western town of Guiglo surrounded and besieged the UNOCI compound. The UN battalion responded by killing five people (including two children of 14 and 16 years of age) and injuring at least 20 others before withdrawing from the scene. The rioting in Guiglo was that it specifically targeted humanitarian agencies along with the UN. Local radio "La Voix de Guiglo" encouraged the jeunes patriotes to destroy "all the symbols of the UN, including humanitarian organizations present in the town." Beyond UNOCI, the offices of many humanitarian actors were looted and wholly or partially destroyed, including OCHA, WFP, UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, Save the Children UK, Caritas and Solidarités. MSF remained on the ground and unharmed, but other than MSF and ICRC (which re-started activities the day following the riots), humanitarian activities came to a halt for the entire month thereafter in Guiglo. There was a consensus among UN and NGO staff that the riots in Guiglo were the tangible result of the UN's simultaneous involvement in both the Ivorian political process and in the provision of aid.

Examples

In **Ivory Coast**, several NGOs have created an independent network to exchange security information in a volatile environment where close contact with all military (French forces, UN peacekeeping force UNOCI) and political actors (political UN, embassies) could be considered partial. If this initiative is not comprehensive, it has proven a useful tool to operations where few alternatives are available, as well as key to independence—as later experience showed, with OCHA launching in January 2007 the ECHO-funded project RECIS (Réseau d'Échanges de Communication et Informations Sécuritaires), which foresees the formalized transmission of security information from NGOs via OCHA to UNOCI.

In **Darfur**, OCHA has aimed to maintain distance from their political/security colleagues at UNMIS. OCHA has taken the lead at field level, thanks to quality staff, institutional knowledge, their relationship with INGOs, and perhaps due to the weak presence of UNMIS on the ground. Yet even though OCHA has negotiated and maintained this parallel structure alongside the UNMIS mission, this independent space for humanitarian matters remains an artificial one, because in practice, they must report and coordinate with the SRS, the political head of the overall UN mission.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Although the implementation of the reforms is moving fast and in divergent ways in each context, our study found that the logic of integration is as strong as ever across the contexts reviewed. As with coherence in general, it is a challenge to demonstrate a definitive causal correlation between the loss of humanitarian space and UN policies of mission integration and coherence. Yet the blurring of the lines between political and humanitarian agendas persists and the result of different reforms does appear to have an impact on people in need – above all the failure to increase resource mobilisation and to further appropriate, timely and effective responses. In this environment, humanitarians must also remain vigilant where the humanitarian response may fail to assist some beneficiaries as a consequence of “coherence” and the resulting politicization of aid.

As an impartial and neutral response to the needs of the most vulnerable, humanitarianism may be losing ground in the search for commonalities and the resulting tensions between the civil and politico-military arms of the UN. Although UN agencies are under pressure to coordinate activities, tensions generated by different views of operations, funding and co-ordination roles have not always contributed to strengthening the humanitarian response. The present reforms may further institutionalize these tendencies, and

seriously hamper humanitarian actors’ ability to sustain and defend impartial and neutral humanitarian action both inside and outside the UN fora.

Meanwhile, the potential risk to the security of both humanitarians and their beneficiaries remains.

The undefined yet often highly politicised buzzword of “protection” in UN-linked activities and the emphasis on return also deserve critical scrutiny in the aim of ensuring that humanitarian action responds to those most in need first and foremost, before any other political motive.

In the end, our study highlights the need for humanitarians to continue to pursue critical independence in engagement with the UN and other political actors in the field. Independence cannot mean isolation, but assertive and clear information exchange and contacts, together with intensive reflection about the real impact of “coherent” policies on vulnerable populations and above all, an active engagement to preserve humanitarian space with the aim of serving those most in need.