

Too big to fail

Ross Mountain

The UN integrated mission in DRC and the piloting of humanitarian reform there have been necessarily innovative in a challenging context.

In the UN General Assembly's review of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), DRC's MDG indicators are among the worst in the world – and not only in the east of the country where the world is aware of the conflicts and humanitarian crisis but in the west too. It is well known that DRC has all the makings of providing an economic motor for Africa but the brakes on its progress are, most importantly, governance and state authority, security, and infrastructure, all of which are chronically weak.

From the perspective of the international community, there is a disappointing lack of political leadership and vision. Yet, for progress to be made the engagement of local and national authorities in reconstruction and development is essential and the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS)¹ initiated by the UN, which is now a core ingredient of the government's STAREC initiative, is an important part of this process.

Security, stabilisation and reconstruction are goals embraced by humanitarians. Thus measures for transition should be promoted beyond immediate humanitarian response. This has nowhere been easy to manage, and in some countries the instrumentalisation of humanitarian action for military or political ends has been the result. The UN Security Council has come to recognise that the overriding priority for the UN mission in DRC (MONUC, now MONUSCO) is the protection of civilians. It could therefore be said that the humanitarian community has been able to leverage the support of UN military and political actors to that end.

Arguably progress in security sector reform – the army, the police, the judiciary – is the major need of DRC. Yet this is where the least tangible progress has been made and where

the international community has been least effective. Apart from the difficulties internal to DRC, international actors bring their own impediments to progress along with their uncoordinated visions for how it should be, their own structures and equipment, and so on. Nevertheless, recognition that physical protection of civilians is a military goal has led to the use of UN military forces to protect the civilian population. Innovative structures have been set up, such as joint protection teams, humanitarian/UN military contingency planning and mobile operational bases, which enable humanitarians to ask for the dispatch of UN soldiers to ward off attacks by militias, and the national military, and around which IDPs routinely cluster.

Recent incidents (in mid-2010) where the international military forces have been criticised for not preventing or responding to mass rapes in North Kivu show how hard it is to be in the right place at the right time. The distances are huge, the roads terrible, and the will to succeed cannot overcome these obstacles all the time. DRC has 20,000 UN peacekeepers for a landmass of 3.4 million km² versus more than 40,000 NATO troops sent to Kosovo, a territory of only 10,000 km².

The UN chose DRC as a pilot for the humanitarian reform programme. That MONUC was an integrated mission, bringing together military and civil aspects, has posed issues for the Humanitarian Coordinator but also facilitated logistics and made innovative activities for the protection of civilians possible.

On the coordination side, given the scale of the problems faced by DRC and its people and the range of international actors at work there, it was necessary to create or adapt the tools that would have the potential to bring order to the humanitarian response. Among these were a

comprehensive cluster network, regional groupings of humanitarian actors (Comités provinciaux inter-agences, CPIAs), the Humanitarian Action Plan (HAP) – the country-wide, inter-organisational plan setting out strategic humanitarian priorities and objectives and an outline of the specific programme activities in each province that need to flow from these – and the Pooled Fund (PF), on the basis that promoting synergies is the best way to have impact. The PF was established in 2006 in order, among other reasons, to focus humanitarian aid on evolving priority needs, to improve the predictability of funding and to allow key gaps, often arising from extensive earmarking both by sector and region, to be addressed. It allows donors to contribute their funds for flexible application to the response strategy laid out in the HAP.

The HAP was designed as a comprehensive plan in full collaboration with UN agencies, international and national NGOs, donors, Congolese government officials and local authorities. An important innovation was obtaining donors' agreement to allocate funds to objective parameters of humanitarian need for cluster activities by region. This has meant elimination of the time-consuming – and often fractious and ultimately irrelevant – exercises of designing and agreeing specific projects by partners months in advance of funding availability.

Objectives and activities within the HAP are defined at the level of the cluster, and then selected – in the regions, not just centrally – by the province-level CPIAs before submission to an Advisory Board, chaired by the Humanitarian Coordinator, of agencies representing Clusters and key donor and NGO representatives. After this comes a process of vetting the viability of what is proposed as part of the system of quality assurance for programmes. In practical terms this still means that it takes less than three months from the first call for proposals until the funding is made available, a time-

scale that compares very favourably with that of bilateral donors.

So the HAP is designed around both effectiveness – in terms of defining global humanitarian objectives – and efficiency, and the PF is one of the vehicles through which it is operationalised. Although there is a general tendency to think that everything should be funded through the PF, in fact only about a quarter of the total humanitarian funding for DRC passes through the PF. Nevertheless it plays a leading role in the process, and in particular has set up standing arrangements with OCHA and UNICEF for a front-loaded rapid response funding mechanism (the Rapid Response Reserve, RRR). Thus when a population displacement occurs, supplies that can be rapidly allocated are available.

Yet in DRC, as in every other humanitarian operation, it has been exceptionally hard to define or measure the impact of our actions

in specific terms. The currency of humanitarian actions still generally remains inputs rather than impact. Encouragingly, donor commitment to DRC has grown, despite the intractable nature of its problems and despite it not being at the current centre of geopolitics. Overall donor funding has grown over the past years from some \$120m in 2004 to over \$650m in 2009.

The 2009 elections provoked considerable international interest which permitted the UN to promote innovative measures to transition from the largely humanitarian focus to addressing the broader issues of governance, justice and security that will potentially allow DRC to provide a better life for its people. The ISSSS, conceived as distinct from the humanitarian operation, brought together military, political and development actors of the UN and international community with local and national government authorities in the conflict-ridden east of the country.

Looking at DRC and the parlous state it is in, we cannot claim that our goals have been achieved. But there has been progress in putting in place a number of innovative responsive mechanisms that have improved the impact of international action, reduced the suffering of the Congolese population and established a basis for stability in the most seriously affected areas of the country. While all contexts are different, lessons can be drawn for other situations of complex humanitarian demand.

Ross Mountain is Director General of DARA (www.daraint.org). He was previously Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General and Humanitarian Coordinator in DRC from 2004-09. He can be contacted through info@daraint.org.

1. The ISSSS has five priorities: improving security, supporting political dialogue, strengthening the state, supporting reintegration, recovery and reconciliation, and preventing/responding to sexual violence.