Integration and UN humanitarian reforms

by Eric Stobbaerts, Sarah Martin and Katharine Derderian

There are serious unanswered questions about how recent humanitarian reforms impact on how humanitarians are perceived in the field and their ability to provide timely and appropriate assistance to those most in need.

The UN and donor doctrine of integration or coherence seems to underpin most current international responses to humanitarian crises. While politicisation of aid is hardly new, increasingly it is now the prevailing doctrine in UN and state-led humanitarian interventions. From the Brahimi Report in 2000[1] to the reaffirmation of the centrality of integrated missions within the new UN 'humanitarian' reforms in 2006, the UN system consistently maintains that humanitarian action must remain subordinate to political objectives. By contrast, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) believes that the humanitarian imperative of saving lives and meeting immediate needs should be the primary goal of humanitarian assistance – a goal that remains independent from and thus often incompatible with political solutions to crises.

Following requests by MSF teams for guidance on how to interact with the recent UN humanitarian reforms, we carried out a field-based study to see how these reforms were impacting humanitarian space and the populations that we serve.[2] We conducted our research from July 2006 to July 2007 in Darfur, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Haiti, Liberia and Ivory Coast with additional interviews carried out in Iraq, Somalia and Uganda.

Our findings suggest that the UN humanitarian reforms represent an extension of the UN's approach to integrated peacekeeping missions with their interlinked political, military and aid approaches. The UN's vision has grown into a highly coordinated system where humanitarian action is structurally subordinated to economic, military, diplomatic and security visions. The UN Secretary-General's 2006 Note of Guidance on Integrated Missions[3] reaffirms the central role of integration for the implementation of UN peacekeeping missions to ensure "efficient coordination between the peacekeeping mission, the UN's operational agencies and non-UN partners", "a clear and shared understanding of the priorities" and "the willingness of all actors to contribute to the achievement of shared objectives". The on-going UN humanitarian reforms follow the same logic, strengthening the reach of integration's momentum into humanitarian response.

While coordination of response can be a positive thing and should theoretically improve effectiveness, one of the main critiques of the humanitarian reforms has been that coordination has become an end in itself. New and parallel 'cluster' structures have multiplied rather than simplified the existing platforms of meetings and exchange. These additional layers have not yet resulted in quantifiable improvements in response, leadership or information sharing. Bureaucratic complaints aside, however, the most problematic intention of the clusters – joint operational and strategic planning between various stakeholders – is of concern as each stakeholder inevitably has a different agenda and mandate.

While long-term efforts towards building states, peace and justice are laudable, they clearly do not always equate to an effective response to immediate humanitarian and emergency needs. From the UN perspective, it appears logical to reconcile what often look like schizophrenic intentions of a multiplicity of actors. But it becomes a dangerous, not to say perverse, exercise when the UN attempts to incorporate independent humanitarian actors with different objectives into the same logic.

The common technical, coordination and funding tools introduced by the reforms in order to increase coherence among the UN, Red Cross/Red Crescent family and NGOs reveal the tension between the requirement to arrive at joint analysis and response, as opposed to the inherent diversity and complementarities of humanitarian action, based on independence of analysis and intervention. In this highly politicised atmosphere, where the UN and donors seek a determining role in the operations and agenda of aid actors, humanitarian principles remain under threat and diverse, independent voices are in danger of being sidelined, to the detriment of meeting needs. The UN humanitarian reforms and their logic of coherence risk compromising humanitarian action that can save and protect the lives of victims.

Clusters, CERF and Humanitarian Coordinators

One innovative aspect of the clusters is the principle that UN agencies serving as cluster leads would be responsible as 'providers of last resort'. Designed to increase accountability of agencies to the different clusters, this concept has caused much confusion and controversy on the ground. Practical questions about its implementation remain open as past problems concerning operational and financial capacities remain unresolved. The clusters have taken on a life of their own, moving from the nine original clusters to multiple sub-clusters in some areas. There has been very little evidence that these proliferating clusters have improved information

sharing and impact at the field level. For example, in Uganda, the UNHCR-led protection cluster has been criticised as 'reductionist' and interested in engaging only in limited sharing of information outside the cluster. In Somalia, 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 from far-away Nairobi; there are too few interventions being implemented on the ground for coordination to have any real meaning. In characteristically bureaucratic style, the clusters have multiplied, with overlapping UN, government and NGO coordination structures, creating – in the words of one person in Liberia – a "committee city" in Monrovia.

Re-launched in 2006, the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) is a financial instrument to ensure effective and predictable funding for rapid response and under-funded emergencies.[4] The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and OCHA at the global level and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in country lead the process, while priority setting for response may occur through the clusters. In recent years, the number of organisations involved in crisis response has proliferated, with many NGOs depending heavily on institutional funds and acting as implementing partners or service providers on behalf of donors, thereby increasing the risk of politicisation of humanitarian assistance. This dependence comes with limitations on freedom to advocate and to operate, and should, in our view, be of considerable concern to independent humanitarian actors. Save the Children and other NGOs have highlighted the problem that the CERF has been allocated mainly to UN agencies while the majority of field-level aid operations currently underway in most contexts are carried out by NGOs.[5] The ostensible increase in funding through the CERF has not meant an increase in field-level activities or improved access to populations in need. Apart from contexts of natural disaster where the deployment of agencies has been

enormous, there is still a real lack of effective actors working on the ground in most media-isolated and difficult environments like Somalia, South Sudan, Darfur or DRC.

CERF funds, promoted as targeting those most in need, have often been used in an effort to promote the overall (political) objectives of UN country missions. Some programmatic choices are likewise questionable in terms of impartiality. For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, the first CERF recipient worldwide, programmes covered non-emergency

MINUSTAH (UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti), Haiti, 2006

and not strictly humanitarian interventions – including "social events to improve inter-community relations and promote peace culture." MSF field teams are concerned that such 'protection' activities are increasingly becoming a Trojan horse for political objectives to penetrate the sphere of aid and relief within UN integrated missions. Protection activities have taken a variety of forms, mostly disconnected from the spirit of the Geneva Conventions, and can be questioned from the angle of operational relevance. Similarly, 75% of the three CERF instalments in Haiti have focused on infrastructure and rehabilitation projects in politically sensitive and insecure areas, projects that are structural, longer-term and high-visibility and more suited to advancing security interests than fulfilling a humanitarian agenda.

As the primary aid counterpart within a UN mission, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator serves as the hub for decision making for both coordination through the clusters and funding through the CERF. This key position is often 'multi-hatted' i.e. acting simultaneously in a political and humanitarian role as Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and the Resident Coordinator (RC) and in peacekeeping missions as the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General (DSRSG). The strengthening of the central role of the multi-hatted HC/RC/DSRSG

in both coordination (clusters) and funding (CERF) risks further conflating political and humanitarian aims. In many missions this is indicative of the UN system's inability to uphold a separate mandate for its humanitarian instruments. This is evidenced by the prominence of political rather than humanitarian considerations in shaping returnee processes in northern Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire and Darfur. In these contexts, donors and policy makers focused on promoting return in the interests of political gains, such as elections, peace agreements, perceived stability and/or international funding, neglecting the ongoing and still evident humanitarian needs.

The new mechanisms put in place by the UN reforms are not ensuring a more effective needs-based response

to assist IDPs but rather promoting the alignment of aid with UN and donor political objectives. The natural tension which exists between short-term, life-saving activities for humanitarian response and longer-term objectives of achieving peace and state building are continually jeopardised by efforts to bring humanitarian issues into line with political aims. The need for an immediate humanitarian response today cannot and should not be driven by the objective of bringing political benefits tomorrow.

In the often volatile and dangerous areas where humanitarian agencies try to deliver aid, neutrality or, more importantly, the perception of neutrality facilitates access and acts as a guarantee of security for both for those providing and receiving aid. While access and security problems for humanitarians pre-date and are not necessarily linked with the UN reforms, it is still an urgent concern for Médecins Sans Frontières. The increasingly invasive politicised concepts of integration and coherence will further erode the already fragile local perceptions of the neutrality and independence of humanitarian actors. Nowhere is this clearer than in contexts like Iraq, Somalia or Darfur where populations perceive humanitarians as pursuing political goals through partial and politicised or regionally biased assistance, rather than as impartial neutral actors working to help those most in need.

MSF made the decision not to participate in the clusters at the 'global' level because of our principles of independence and neutrality. In response to complex field realities and pragmatic needs, information sharing and practical operational exchanges may lead MSF to participate in certain clusters as observers at the capital and field levels. For MSF, independence and neutrality cannot mean isolation and MSF must maintain key bilateral contacts with UN coordination structures. Yet, in the end, the UN-led clusters' insistence on joint analysis and response is incompatible with independent, diverse and innovative humanitarian response, and represents the limits of MSF interaction with these or any other coordination structure. MSF teams must continually monitor how our interaction with other actors, including the UN-led clusters, impacts on the perception of our independence, impartiality and neutrality.

No definitive conclusions can be drawn at this stage as to how the UN humanitarian reforms are impacting humanitarian space, either positively or negatively. While there is no evidence that the reforms directly impact the populations we serve, the enormous time, energy and funding dedicated to the reform process and the prioritising of increased coordination over immediate response represent an indirect impact of lost potential to assist the most vulnerable populations. These reforms are still a work in progress and must be challenged and questioned by all humanitarian actors. By further expanding the logic of coherence and integration, the UN humanitarian reforms pose a threat to the independence of humanitarian actors and the crucial diversity of approaches that MSF believes are key to effective and meaningful humanitarian assistance.

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1. www.un.org/peace/reports/peace_operations

2. The inter-sectional study includes the MSF sections in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK, as well as the MSF-Brazil office. The study is not an institutional MSF position on the UN humanitarian reforms. For more information on this study, please note our upcoming article in ODI/HPG.

3. www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/missions/ sgnote.pdf

4. http://cerf.un.org

5. See Blog by Toby Porter (SCF) on http://blogs.odi.org. uk/blogs/exchange/archive/2007/01/18/1591.aspx

Insecure environments: the missing piece?

by Matthew Benson

While current reforms address a number of key issues affecting civilians in conflict, they do not address other, arguably more pressing, issues facing the humanitarian community – such as the provision of humanitarian assistance in insecure environments.

The perceived politicisation of humanitarian assistance – resulting from deterioration of the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence – has led to the targeting of national and international humanitarian personnel and their local partners and may also be contributing to physical insecurity for the very beneficiaries that humanitarians seek to assist.

In today's globalised world, poorly practised humanitarianism risks becoming a liability to all humanitarian actors. Humanitarians ought collectively to take the necessary steps to allow for the continued provision of principled humanitarian assistance to intended beneficiaries in even the most insecure of environments.

Humanitarian action is often synonymous with conflict