Coherence in crisis?
Re-examining the relationship between humanitarian and political responses to conflict-related crises

Over the past decade, much emphasis has been placed on enhancing the 'coherence' between humanitarian and political responses to conflict-related crises. Ensuring that humanitarian action is placed within a wider framework of diplomatic and military action is seen by many to be vital if it is to contribute to peace-building and to avoid doing more harm than good. However, this integration of humanitarian action within a broader security agenda remains controversial.

On 12 March 2003, the Humanitarian Policy Group held a seminar at ODI to review the implications of an integrated approach to humanitarian action, drawing in particular on case studies undertaken by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue of the UN's experience of integrating humanitarian, political and military responses to crises in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone.

This report presents an edited summary of the proceedings. The speakers were HPG Coordinator and Research Fellow Joanna Macrae, and David Bryer of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva. The debate was chaired by Mike Aaronson, Chief Executive of Save the Children. Under the rules of the debate, contributions from the floor are unattributed.

1. Presentations

Lost in translation: the coherence agenda from Rwanda to Iraq

Joanna Macrae, HPG

Many people credit the Rwanda evaluation of 1996 as defining the coherence agenda. However, although the evaluation refined and advocated for the concepts, it did not invent them; the basis through which aid instruments would be linked to political instruments, and occasionally with military engagement, was in fact provided by the concept of human security.

Human security and the humanitarian agenda

Human security articulated a space in which aid became part of a wider security agenda. This was not, of course, particularly new: aid had a clear role to play in the Cold War, for instance. What was new was the way that the human security agenda articulated the role for aid in delivering a new vision of security in a more explicit way. The other feature that marked the early days of the coherence agenda was the fact that it had very little to say about how the longer-term aims of conflict reduction would or would not entail compromising the much more immediate humanitarian objectives of saving lives and reducing morbidity and suffering. This was partly because humanitarian assistance as a concept was largely absent from the discussion, and partly because, when it was thought about, no distinction was made between development assistance and humanitarian assistance.

By the 1990s, this was changing. Development actors were not present in the majority of conflict-related crises. As a result, humanitarian aid departments, rather than development aid departments, began taking the lead on conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution initiatives. There was also a significant reinterpretation of the Rwanda crisis and of the evaluation. Thus, whereas the evaluation argued that the primary responsibility for the genocide and the levels of violence that followed were political and military, this key finding was reinterpreted such that the primary responsibility was laid at the door of aid agencies, who were accused of ‘feeding the killers’. As a result, increased effort was placed on making sure that humanitarian aid actors were ‘doing no harm’. And finally, it quickly became possible to integrate arguments about the relationship between aid and politics into the wider debate about linking relief and development, particularly in chronic political emergencies. Aid agencies assumed increasing responsibility for managing and reducing conflict in the ‘non-strategic areas’. This partly came out of claims about the scope for developmental relief, whereby it was argued that more developmental approaches can contribute to resolving the root causes of conflict. If only relief aid became more developmental, so this argument went, it could play a significant role in conflict reduction.

The coherence agenda implies a shift in the objectives of humanitarian action, from a palliative to conflict to a part of the mechanism of resolving conflict. While the jury is still out, our view is that this is a very questionable and dangerous shift. An integrated approach to humanitarian action suggests that all actors will actively seek to resolve together a particular conflict, and that in doing so they will conform to some kind of common framework. Thus, we have seen the emergence of strategic frameworks, and we have seen donors increasingly influence how humanitarian operations are being conducted. This has entailed the rapid removal of the neutrality, and potentially of the independence, of humanitarian action.

The geopolitics of coherence

If everything on the global stage was peace and harmony, and there was a great deal of political consensus around the globe, the coherence agenda might still be troubling for the humanitarian purists, but might not have any great operational outcome. However, the coherence agenda has been played out in a contested geopolitical environment. There has been a ‘humanitarian’ war in Kosovo, and now there is the ‘global war on terrorism’. The association of the humanitarian label with high levels of military intervention and the imposition of political sanctions have obvious implications for the position of humanitarian actors both within affected countries, but also internationally. It also raises the question of whether humanitarian action is just one of several possible instruments to achieve international peace and security, or something different. Is it a peculiar project in its own right?

In practice, what has happened? There are signs that the kind of coherence originally envisaged, a very integrated model with a ‘chain of command’ with the politicians sitting at the top and keeping humanitarians in order, has not emerged in a very organised way, nor would it be a particularly popular way of presenting the debate. A number of donors are actually renouncing more-or-less publicly the idea of applying conditionality on humanitarian assistance, and claiming a willingness to re-embrace traditional principles of impartiality, if not neutrality, as guiding their humanitarian programming.

The question is whether or not these changes are being driven primarily within aid bureaucracies by a group of civil servants who have seen these policies in action and question their efficacy. If this is the case, will they be able to resist pressure from different quarters that potentially counters this reassertion of principles? There is a rumoured restructuring of ECHO at the moment, which may end with it being repositioned, both within the Commission but potentially also in relation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy. What we are also seeing is that different donor governments are interpreting the coherence agenda differently, according to the location; models have differed in Afghanistan, Sierra Leone and the DRC.

What is probably happening is that governments are realising that political conditionality is limited in its efficacy and impact on conflict; it is probably a pragmatic move as well as perhaps being informed by some level of principle. In its place, there is increasing selectivity in the disbursement of humanitarian assistance, a trend echoed in the development sphere. In countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, there is a return to the idea that being seen to uphold principles of impartiality and neutrality is part of the process of legitimising international intervention.

Coherence at the margins

One of the most pervasive and persistent elements of the coherence agenda is probably happening outside the most visible conflicts, and is less to do with aid and politics directly, and more about developmental relief. This is where we need much more careful analysis. Developmental relief is of course not apolitical. It implies changing the terms of engagement between national authorities and non-state actors. In particular, it implies making decisions regarding the relative legitimacy of different forces. In other words, developmental relief must be seen as part of the securitisation of the development agenda. More broadly, the objectives of relief and development are different, and we should not gloss over this. In particular, we need to look carefully at the extent to which issues of sustainability can and should be traded off against the humanitarian imperative of saving lives.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the concept of coherence is unhelpful, and is probably no longer meaningful. It has encouraged us to focus attention on coordination and management, when what we really need to be asking is what the objectives of the different actors are, what the impact of coordination has been and whether these different actors' interventions conform to humanitarian principles and law. The fact that humanitarian actors are finding themselves embedded in a political discourse means that it is very important that those responsible for humanitarian action clearly establish the criteria against which their actions and those of their colleagues in political and military departments should be judged. This means being much clearer about the nature of humanitarian action. Is it a palliative or is it something more? What values are driving it, and how can we monitor these and advocate for them? At the moment, this kind of debate is not happening very loudly, or very clearly.

If such a discussion is to take place, humanitarian organisations will need to be clear that they do not have sole responsibility for addressing either the origins or the impact of humanitarian crises. If Rwanda has taught us anything, surely it is that political or military intervention may be necessary, but it needs to be of the right type, and for the right reasons. Humanitarian politics is concerned with trying to articulate what those are, and how different actions come together to protect life with dignity.

Finally, those concerned with humanitarian policy need to invest in capacity to analyse and possibly to influence the rapidly changing humanitarian architecture. We will need to watch, not only the UN, but also new formations such as those arising from the European Union and indeed from the US response in Iraq. Less obviously perhaps will be to watch emerging discussions regarding aid to poorly-performing countries, or as the World Bank likes to call them, LICUS countries [low-income countries under stress]. As aid resources increase, so interest is increasing among actors like the World Bank, which are likely to be engaged much more intensively in this very competitive environment.

Humanitarianism and politics: coherence in crisis?

David Bryer, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue became involved in the coherence debate partly out of its conflict-mediation work, and part out of its work on general humanitarian issues, particularly as they appertain to the Geneva-based humanitarian community. It was also a response to the lack of hard evidence. We decided to look at coherence in three places: Afghanistan, the DRC and Sierra Leone. In each, the type of complex emergency is very different, and the UN and indeed individual governments have responded in very different ways. Most of what our three researchers found is not exactly rocket science; in fact, much of the debate is precisely at the common-sense level, perhaps even dull. But if it is so obvious, why is it so difficult to have this debate?

Case studies

We decided to approach each case differently. In Afghanistan, we had somebody working within the second, as it were non-political, pillar of UNAMA [the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan]. She was there for five months looking at how decisions were made. What were the trade-offs when political, humanitarian, or human-rights decisions were being made? How were decisions taken? Were they open? The other two studies were much more traditional, looking back at what had been going on mainly in the UN in Sierra Leone since 1998, and in the Congo since the Lusaka Agreement of 1999.

Sierra Leone

This case study looked first at the period just after Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's government had fallen and the junta had taken over in Freetown. As an organisation, the UN basically took the view that it humanitarian assistance should end, and that agencies should work only from across the border in Conakry. The UN was very hostile in its statements about aid to junta-held areas. This position was strongly supported by DFID. Despite opposition from agencies such as ActionAid, the pressure on NGOs not to work within junta-held areas was extraordinarily strong. What also happened, of course, was that the UN's ability to negotiate access evaporated, because of lack of interest, and because of lack of respect for that part of the UN that might have negotiated such access. Absurdly, the UN Exemptions Committee blocked its own humanitarian aid. Yet when one looks back, one wonders what people thought this was going to achieve. Was the war going to be won by removing medical aid and food assistance from people? Reckless I think is the word. To quote Toby Porter, who wrote this part of the study, ‘regime change is not usually accomplished by starving people to death in the forest. It can be achieved by military intervention’.

The next period, between March 1998 and 2000, saw the arrival of UNOMSIL [the UN Observer Mission in Sierra Leone]. UNOMSIL failed to pass information, or gave out misinformation on what was going on in the war, and what it meant for the security of NGOs. Yet one of the chief assets one would hope to gain out of the presence of the military is good information on security and access. This broke down completely. Then, after the horrors and disasters of 2000–2001, we get some serious peacemaking, as the UK made a major effort, and ministries and budgets worked together. Rarely does this happen. This is another form of coherence, and an interesting and rather useful one. DFID’s hope, of course, was that other governments would follow, which did not happen.

One of the interesting things to emerge from this experience was the inconsistency between humanitarian agencies and the various military forces in the country. In 1998, the NGOs produced a Code of Conduct to guide their relations with the armed factions. This worked well until major military operations ended; with the physical threat removed and the arrival of foreign peacekeepers, it broke down, and very different views emerged as to the appropriate relations between humanitarians and the military. It is easy to blame the military when there is clear harm to humanitarian work, but there is also a need for greater clarity on the humanitarian side. In Sierra Leone from 2001 onwards, there was simply a muddle.

Another interesting point was that, in Sierra Leone, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General has been unusually successful. Typically, the division between the ‘big boss’, who does the political work, and a Deputy to concentrate on the humanitarian side of things hasn’t really worked. The question is whether this was because the individual appointed had a humanitarian background and due to their personal qualities, or whether it tells us something more broadly about how the UN can better organise itself for integrated operations.

Lastly, human rights. In all the cases we looked at, human rights were fairly closely integrated. Funding for human rights-related activity was available, and human rights issues probably had more influence on the thinking of the Special Representative. But it is hard to see whether this led to greater human rights protection. It is hard to see what was gained by having human rights as such a central pillar of the UN.

Then, of course, there were the other dilemmas. If you're part of a structure that negotiates the Lomé agreement, then it becomes a little difficult to stand outside and look at the issues of impunity and justice and so on. There is a large set of issues there that we didn't look at, but which would deserve a lot more attention in the debates about what you cohere and what you bring together.

The DRC

By any standard, the DRC has seen the worst humanitarian disaster of the past decade. Yet the lack of will among the humanitarians – the whole range, UN, NGOs, donors – to go out and get resources or to fight for access has been extraordinary. It is not clear why this is so. How much is this a self-imposed limitation? How much is it caused by Mary Anderson's 'do no harm', interpreted as 'you'd better not do much at all because you might do some harm'? Applications for funding always state how the humanitarian work will achieve some long-term developmental or peace goal, as if it would be unacceptable without this.

Second, there has been an enormous poverty of sound assessment of need. In this area, James Darcy's work on needs assessment at ODI is long overdue. How can you ever make judgements about what you do in a humanitarian situation if you haven't got some basic information? NGOs get everything wrong, but at least they ought to make sure they get their information right. They at least ought to be sure that they try and understand the needs which they are supposedly working to. And yet this really seems quite low down on the list of priorities for most of the humanitarians working in the DRC.

As for human rights, the picture is much the same as in Sierra Leone, and it is unclear what effect integration into the UN team had. A separate issues is the question of NGOs moving out of their narrow humanitarian role into investigating human rights. Does examining the economic causes of the war in the Congo seriously limit access for humanitarian work, and even cause problems for security?

Afghanistan

Afghanistan was the first place where the UN in its fullest sense established an integrated mission. There was very considerable coherence, but it was by consensus. Most actors within Afghanistan were very much behind the idea of building up the new government, and supporting most of the things that came out of the Bonn Agreement. But it is hard to see that any of that was achieved through the managerial presence of an expensive and quite large UN structure. At the same time, there is very little within that structure that formally allows humanitarian principles and humanitarian space to flourish.

Again, the humanitarian voice was lacking as to what the UN humanitarian agencies or the NGOs actually needed, what their space needed to look like, what their independence needed to be. Even where agencies had great clarity back at headquarters, in situ people were very unclear as to what was really guiding their action.

As for the military presence in ISAF, this made relatively little difference because it was confined to Kabul and surrounds; its effect in helping or preventing humanitarian work was negligible. DFID was very generous in its funding of ISAF in the early part of 2002, for quick-impact projects, but it is unclear how good those projects actually were. Were they meeting a need? Were they the most effective way of using the money? The coalition forces were much more of a problem; their pretending to be humanitarian is fairly obviously outside what is legitimate. For humanitarians, the biggest question was the fact that, although the aim was to build a country under a single government and bring peace and justice, the coalition was still working closely with the warlords.

Conclusions

Some general conclusions emerge out of this work. First, the main point of the joint evaluation of Rwanda still stands: if the major powers are not involved politically in complex emergencies, humanitarian action is not feasible or useful.

Second, what is the UN for? How much is the UN the broker of peace solutions, and how much is it the guardian of norms for the international community as a whole? The more one looks at the UN and talks to the UN, the more one recognises that it is an extraordinarily heterogeneous beast. Nonetheless, this is a dilemma that needs a bit more thinking through. If you talk to senior managers, they are clear that they want the UN to be as cohesive as possible. They want to talk with a single voice. We do not want a cacophony, it was said to me last week. As far as humanitarian assistance is concerned, they do not want to fuel a war, but it is not clear that humanitarian assistance has ever really done that. This is precisely the argument that Oxfam had with the British government back in 1942. Are we so important? Do we really make such an impact? And they want humanitarian assistance to assist peacebuilding. Again, this really needs a lot more thought. Do we really think that our humanitarian assistance in saving lives can also build peace?

This search for coherence in the UN founders, not at the top, where there is broad consensus that we want, for instance, peace in Afghanistan. Similarly, at the basic level of coordinating on a day-to-day basis, there is not much difference of opinion. Where the project falters is at the middle level. This raises the question of whether there are tensions between the different parts of the UN, the political peacebuilding part, the human rights part, the humanitarian and others? Whether such tensions matter is one of the most interesting questions. Within the UN, there seems to be a feeling that these tensions are inappropriate, but it is difficult to imagine a large organisation that doesn’t have them. And particularly in the UN, these are very legitimate tensions. There needs to be a recognition of the legitimacy of the different roles of the different parts of the organisation, and an acceptance of the legitimate tensions between them. Then perhaps we could look at more subtle ways of managing them than are currently being used.

There are at least two ways forward the UN could take. One is radical: split off the humanitarian side. Back when establishing OCHA was being discussed in 1996–97, one of the possibilities was to bring all of the UN’s humanitarian parts together, and give them a certain degree of independence. This would provide leadership in the humanitarian field, but would be free of political pressures. This is clearly impossible at the moment. Given that, how can the UN manage its operations so that these tensions are less harmful, and cause less irritation, pain and whinging? This comes back to the role of the Special Representative. Most of the people who have held this post have been diplomats or foreign ministers, and their success has been judged in political terms. Yet actually running a UN operation is much more like running a large company, with all its different departments. Maybe SRSGs need to be different sorts of people, with different recruitment criteria, briefing and support.

Lastly, the ‘humanitarian voice’. I am dispirited, frankly, at how unclear, weak and uncoordinated the humanitarian voice is in these issues. There are exceptions, and perhaps over Iraq some of those have come forward. But the lack of clarity among the field staff of NGOs is a major problem. There is not enough thinking about what developmental humanitarianism means for humanitarianism, and there is a major lack of leadership, either collective or individual. OCHA, on the cusp between the political and the humanitarian, doesn’t provide it. Almost by its nature, the ICRC can’t provide it, and NGOs find it difficult to present a common voice.

So, what is the bottom line for those who want everything to cohere? Is the UN the pragmatic ‘peace fixer’? Is it the guardian of norms, or can it manage its schizophrenic role? Does it *need* to be schizophrenic? Can it be managed in a different way? Do donors think that humanitarian principles matter? What does being humanitarian mean for the agencies themselves? What bit of the organisation is humanitarian and what isn’t, and what does this mean when they’re multi-role? And how can they appear less holier than thou? One persistent complaint from non-humanitarians is that they are tired of this perceived attitude from humanitarian agencies. Will the military’s role in the humanitarian field continue to grow? Is there clarity as to the role? When should the military absolutely be the humanitarian agents, and when not?

2. Floor discussion

This section presents an edited selection of key questions and comments from the floor, together with the panellists' response. Floor discussants are not identified.

On Iraq, one speaker voiced concerns that the humanitarian response would simply be 'overwhelmed', and noted that DFID's contingency for the year was already exhausted by additional spending in Africa and the Palestinian territories, while Afghanistan also needed large volumes of aid. This raised the real danger of work being left 'half-finished'. Another problem identified by the floor was the lack of discussion around the shape of the potential humanitarian response, and the political difficulties agencies faced in trying to make contingency plans. One speaker observed that the Swiss government had convened a meeting of interested and neighbouring states, along with the UN, the Red Cross and NGOs, to look current vulnerability, issues of coordination and questions of humanitarian law. Yet the meeting was boycotted by the US government, which in fact sought to block it, and it only took place the month before the conflict began. Another speaker raised concerns about the simplistic assumptions that were being made about outcomes. Some speakers were persuaded that funding for a response in Iraq would be made available, but were concerned that other emergencies, in Sierra Leone or Angola for example, would suffer.

One of the challenges identified in terms of financing was trying to understand exactly how much money is available globally; although humanitarian assistance funding appears to have risen significantly during the 1990s, a more critical reading reveals that not all of the money actually counted as official humanitarian assistance by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) really is such. A large and growing portion remains in donor countries to support refugees. Many countries count these funds as emergency funds (the UK is one of the few that does not). This means that humanitarian assistance is not increasing as rapidly as is commonly suggested, not least by donor countries. The second challenge is to try understand how the money is being allocated. It is argued that development assistance is becoming increasingly concentrated on a small number of countries where performance is supposedly good, and where the environment is positive for the delivery of this assistance. In Holland, for instance, assistance was concentrated on just 17 countries, and later on 17 plus 3.

Humanitarian assistance went to those countries where full bilateral programmes were problematic. This has meant humanitarian aid budgets being spread over more and more situations.

The discussion then moved on to humanitarian politics and policy. One speaker noted the institutional changes that had taken place within the British government, as responsibility for aid and relief moved from a department within the Foreign Office to become DFID, a free-standing department in its own right, and how the DFID agenda had 'captured' the Treasury, and was potentially influencing other sectors of the government, such as the Department of Trade. In turn, it was noted how NGOs had themselves influenced DFID.

Concerns were raised about this apparent broadening out of DFID's reach and responsibilities, noting how, in peripheral areas, the department was increasingly seen as framing overall British government policy, not just policy for assistance and relief. While it is perhaps right for DFID to concern itself with issues of governance and security-sector reform, the question arises as to how this kind of political engagement sits next to humanitarianism, which in its conventional form operates according to different principles. It is a cause of concern if the humanitarian project is seen as the same as the security project, or the trade liberalisation project. Broadening out the humanitarian agenda means that the policy framework becomes unclear.

Another speaker focused on the managerial questions of aid, and drew attention to the comparison between a large UN mission and a private corporation, with different departments competing over resources. There were, the speaker noted, non-policy issues at stake, to do with lack of leadership and poor resource allocation and information management. Another speaker observed that policy and structural managerial issues were interwoven and inseparable. Unless there is a clear policy framework within which managers are working, managerial problems will not be resolved. There was no clear policy framework around such issues as, for example, military forces giving out food aid, who might be doing this not according to need but as part of a hearts and minds campaign, or because they recognise their obligations under international law to ensure that civilians in the area in which they have authority have enough to eat. This means that middle managers may be blamed for what are in fact mixed messages of policy.

This question of the role of the military in relief also arose in relation to Iraq. While one speaker did not in principle see a difficulty with military forces delivering assistance, the need for clarity of purpose was stressed. This point was taken up by another speaker, who outlined how, for the British armed forces, the essential task was to provide a safe and secure environment for others. Work was under way in the UK Ministry of Defence to fix the terminology around these questions – an ‘unsexy topic, but an absolutely critical one’ – so as to clarify precisely what the various actors meant when they talked of humanitarian aid and assistance, and precisely what a humanitarian operation entailed, and did not entail.

This question of definitions was raised in the context of the response to Sierra Leone and the sanctions against humanitarian assistance there, identified by the audience as one of the major changes in the humanitarian landscape of the 1990s. While the British military intervention was clearly important in stabilising the security situation in the country, concerns were raised about the very political way that aid was used, and the pressures that were brought to bear on NGOs and the ICRC to comply with a political agenda. For one speaker, the regularisation of this kind of approach would entail the collapse of the humanitarian sector as a whole, and would make humanitarian action in conflict impossible. In this context, it was noted that definitions and the differentiation of different types of assistance were extremely important. To be called humanitarian, an action had to meet certain criteria of, for example, impartiality and neutrality.

To close, the discussion returned to the concept of coherence. One member of the audience regarded humanitarian action as having been ‘colonised’ by the concept, to the extent that some evaluations included it as a category. Another speaker sought to move away from the negative aspects of coherence by asking whether there was room for humanitarian assistance to be more sensitive to the dynamics of the conflicts whose effects it sought to alleviate. The focus on coherence was obscuring another, different debate about political awareness, and how such an awareness could work to achieve the humanitarian mandate. It was noted in reply that one of the main conclusions to emerge from the Humanitarian Policy Group’s work on coherence was that there was an important distinction between politically-informed humanitarianism and politically-led humanitarianism. One of the key points of contact between the political domain and the humanitarian domain was identified in the exchange of political analysis, and here it was argued that there had been an important failure by military and political actors to provide humanitarian agencies with adequate information. Thus, in Macedonia NATO was extremely reluctant to pass on necessary information to the humanitarian actors, and what political analysis was passed on provided a weak basis for independent planning. Conversely, there was a risk that political information provided by NGOs and submitted by donor governments may then be used in unintended ways.