

Humanitarian Space and Security of Humanitarian Workers: A Review

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Abstract— Humanitarian crisis leave the affected people in need of water, health care, and shelter. In order to promptly and adequately respond to the overwhelming needs of the vulnerable people, both the local and the international community has formed several humanitarian organizations, charged with the responsibility of providing aid and assistance to people affected by crisis, irrespective of their geographical location. Humanitarian organizations require safe passage to carry out their operations; the concept of humanitarian space was developed to ensure this. While preserving humanitarian space in conflict zone is proving challenging to humanitarian organizations because of various factors, it is however clear that the security of aid workers is a major concerns for aid organizations working in areas experiencing social change or armed conflicts. The rates of kidnapping, injuries and deaths of aid workers seems be on the increase, requiring aid agencies to be more security conscious and adopt measures to save guard the lives of their employees. Some measures taken recently by humanitarian organizations include suspending aid when and where the security of their employees is under threat and in some cases withdrawing completely from such environment. Thus, affecting the ability of aid organizations to carry out their mandate and as a result, those who are in dire need of relief and assistance suffer. For there to be an improvement in aid delivery, warring parties should respect the sanctity of humanitarian space and the ethics governing humanitarianism. This paper therefore present a review of humanitarian space and the security of humanitarian aid workers.

Index Terms—humanitarian organization, humanitarian space, security

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2012, 65 million people worldwide were provided with humanitarian assistance by humanitarian organizations. According to a recent report by the United Nations (UN) [1], a small number of protracted crisis accounted for the majority of humanitarian need in the last decade. The crisis in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger and Yemen alone resulted in over 5 million people to be in need of relief and also accounted for 70% of funding request in 2012 [1]. Violence perpetuated by Boko Haram in

Nigeria is reported to have resulted in the displacement of at least 3,350,000 people [2].

NGOs are maybe the most important actor in the humanitarian sector after the UN. Most UN programs are usually carried out by NGOs that are partnered with the UN [3]. Aid organizations are expected to be seen as independent actors when intervening in crisis as their primary goal is to reduce the suffering experienced by vulnerable people in the society.

Aid organizations are expected to operate within the principle of humanity, neutrality and impartiality. However, remaining neutral is very challenging and costly condition for humanitarian organizations [3].

For fast and effective delivery of aid in areas experiencing armed conflicts, respect for humanitarian space is expected from all parties involved in the conflict. However, this is not always the case; sometimes the aid organizations are denied access to the crisis scene, while in some cases the aid workers have been targeted.

In the last decade, aid workers have been the victims of threats, abductions and extreme violence. According to a recent Aid worker security report (2013), nearly 546 aid workers were killed, over 474 were kidnapped and over 580 were injured [4]. The report indicates that 167 attacks on aid workers were recorded in 2012, making an increase of about 397% increase since 2000.

Majority of these incidences are reported to have occurred in countries that are experiencing armed conflicts, with the likes of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Somalia topping the list [4].

II. HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Humanitarian emergencies usually attract a large and diverse pool of actors, although the various key players have the same goal of saving lives and reducing suffering, their motives, mandates and constraint may be different [5]. The actors involved in humanitarian aid include; the Government, the military, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), donors and private sector logistics firms [6]. The media and beneficiaries are also identified as important stakeholders [7]. Humanitarian organizations, particularly Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are the primary vehicle through which donors channel their contributions.

A. Government

Local and foreign government plays an important role during a crisis. The Local government can restrict or limit the activities of humanitarian organizations. For instance, the international community cannot intervene in a crisis except

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the government declares a state of emergency and request for foreign assistance. Also, some government policies have been found to hinder international relief efforts [7], [8]. Appropriateness and timeliness of the declaration of state of emergency by the government is very important and enhance prompt responses by the aid organizations.

B. Military

The military plays an important role during a crisis, the humanitarian activities they perform ranges from setting up temporary shelter, installation of communication equipment, transportation, search and rescue operation and also to maintain law and order. The military response is usually well coordinated, fast and very effective. This is as a result of their well-defined command structure and their high logistical capability. An example of military intervention during the crisis in Haiti in 2010 [9]. Aircrafts and Naval ships were provided by the United States and French military, which were used for emergency operations and the distribution of large quantities of relief materials to victims of the earthquake. More recently, in August 2014, the United States military used its jets to provide humanitarian relief materials to the Yazidis minority group who fled and took refuge in a mountain due to persecution from the Islamic state in the ongoing armed conflict in Northern Iraq [10].

C. Logistics service Providers

Private logistics firms and other service providers like DHL and United Parcel Service (UPS) are playing an increasing role in emergency response. Some Logistics service providers have disaster response teams that work in collaboration with humanitarian organization with whom they have strategic partnership with.

D. Media

Both local and international media are a reliable source of information during a crisis, they are usually among the first group of people to arrive at the scene of a crisis. The level of media coverage a disaster has, could positively impact relief effort directed towards it. When there is little or no media coverage, the number of donations and commitment from donor is low and also, such emergencies are quickly forgotten. On the other hand, when there is visibility due to high media coverage, more funding could be obtained.

E. United Nations and Non-Governmental organizations

While the United Nations (UN) is not wholly a humanitarian organization by its structure, it does have specialized aid agencies within the organization that have specific obligations such as the World Food program (WFP) which was setup to address hunger and famine worldwide, The World Health Organization (WHO) provides health care services and Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) provides coordination during humanitarian actions. Other agencies under the UN include the UNICEF, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

F. Non-Governmental organizations

Non-Governmental organizations (NGO) are the primary mechanisms through which donors connect to victims of a disaster. NGOs are maybe the most important actor in the

humanitarian sector after the UN. There are several Non-Governmental organizations (NGO) providing humanitarian assistances and aid worldwide. NGOs vary in size, influence and experience, they could be small local organizations, large international organizations or faith based humanitarian organizations [3], [11]. Although, there are several of humanitarian organizations worldwide, the scene is dominated by a group of international non-governmental organization (INGO) because of their budget, assets and influence. According to Thomas and Kopczak (2005), in 2004, the overall expenditure of the top ten humanitarian organizations was over 14 billion dollars [12]. In 2010, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Oxfam, Save the Children alliance, and World Vision were the top five aid agencies, having a combined expenditure of \$2.8 billion [13].

III. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR DECLINING HUMANITARIAN SPACE

Humanitarian organizations operate on the principle of humanity, neutrality and impartiality developed by Henry Dunant in 1859 [3]. The goal of the principle was to protect relief agencies and their personnel from interference and violence while carrying out their mandate. These principles not only form the basis on which they operate but also define the role of humanitarian organizations [3]. Humanity ensures that victims of disasters are provided with aid and assistance in order to reduce their suffering, this is done irrespective of their geographical location [3]. Neutrality ensures that humanitarian organizations do not take sides when delivering aid and assistance. In essence, when aid organizations intervene during a crisis, they are expected not to form any kind of affiliations or allegiance with any group in a conflict. While, impartiality discourages discrimination, thus ensuring that aid and assistance is given based on the urgency of the need but not for political reasons or nepotism.

Humanitarian space has various meaning depending on who is defining it [14]. The concept was first used by United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees (UNHCR) during the cold war in Central America [14]. Oxfam International defines humanitarian space as an operating environment in which the right of populations to receive protection and assistance is upheld, and aid agencies can carry out their mandate freely, by responding to the need of their beneficiaries in an impartial and independent way [15]. For the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), humanitarian space has its foundation on International humanitarian law (IHL), while for UNHCR, the term is defined based on international refugee law [14]. Humanitarian space has also been described to exist in a physical and virtual sense [7]. In the virtual sense, the humanitarian space serves to protect humanitarian organizations and ensure they remain ethical. While in the physical sense, it denotes a zone free of strife. In recent times, there is a discuss amongst humanitarian actors that humanitarian space is shrinking, because of the increased attacks on aid workers especially those that operate in society experiencing social change or an armed conflict.

Establishing and maintaining humanitarian space during a crisis is quite difficult and challenging, especially during armed conflicts [7]. There is a general belief among humanitarian actors that humanitarian space is decreasing, in other words the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality is not being respected during crisis. The decline in humanitarian space are indicative in the increasing attack of aid workers, politicization of aid, lack of respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the inability to reach those in need of humanitarian aid [14].

According to the United Nations Interagency Standing Committee, insecurity of Aid workers is one of the major indicators of shrinking humanitarian [16]. While all forms of attacks against aid workers have increased as stated earlier, abductions of aid workers have considerably increased in the past decade. There were 11 recorded cases of kidnappings in 2000 to 92 in 2012.

Although the reason for most attacks on aid workers are largely unknown, the militarization and politicization of humanitarian aid has been attributed as some of the major reasons for the increasing attacks on aid worker. Humanitarian actors should operate in isolation from politics. Another important factor for the increasing attacks on aid works is perception of lack of independent between Aid workers and their donors, because Aid organizations rely on donors to finance their projects. Donors are sometimes linked to a crisis and try to use their donation to gain political advantage or promote their agenda. Humanitarian organizations that are financed by such donor with ulterior motives, could affect the perception of these organization as being affiliated with that particular donor.

Though humanitarian organizations are supposed to be seen as impartial and independent actors, as a result of this are viewed as proxy targets because they are seen as apparatus used to promote Western agenda, for example, The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) carried out a covert operation in Pakistan under the guise of conducting a hepatitis campaign to hunt and gather information on Osama Bin Laden. In 2003, a Muslim cleric - Mullah Omar publicly denounced aid agencies, he stated that these organizations were opponents of Islam [17].

Although, this type of incidence does not explain attacks on humanitarians, it does however puts many aid organizations at risk, as any recklessness or contentious act by one aid organization could affect all others operating in that area at risk, changing how all other aid agencies are perceived. The overall effects of these attacks, has led to the subsequent suspension of humanitarian aid in conflict areas due to security concerns especially where attacks are prevalent or go unabated, this consequently means that less people in need of aid and assistance will be served. For instance, in April 2007, several humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam and Triangle working in Darfur temporarily stopped operations stating the increasing violence on aid workers in the area, as a result almost 100,000 vulnerable people were affected [18]. Similarly, in April 2014, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) suspended activities in Central African Republic (CAR) when an MSF hospital in the northern part of the country was attacked killing 16

people, three of which were employees of Médecins Sans Frontières [19].

Others factors that have been attributed to the decreasing humanitarian space include [16]: (1) the blurred distinction between the roles of the military and humanitarian organizations; (2) Close Alignment of Humanitarian actors with the Military. (3) Banditry; (4) Political manipulation by occupying powers and other de facto authorities' of humanitarian assistance and actors; (5) Perceived specific social, cultural, and religious agenda by humanitarian workers, Just to mention a few.

IV. IMPROVING SECURITY OF HUMANITARIAN WORKERS

In order to improve the security of humanitarian workers, aid organizations need to take a firm stand on security. Practices that will reduce the vulnerability of aid workers to attacks should be adopted. The 'security triangle' model of acceptance, protection and deterrence should be the basis of humanitarian organizations security strategy. Furthermore, those who perpetuate acts of violence on aid workers should be prosecuted and also efforts should be made to ensure that the lines between humanitarian, military and political lines are not blurred. Aid agencies need to promote their image as a neutral organization, they must not be affiliated with any group in a conflict and their operations should be based solely on the needs of the key stakeholders.

IV CONCLUSION

The victimization and insecurity of aid workers in conflict areas is in the increase. As a result, the capacity of humanitarian actors to provide relief and assistance to vulnerable people has been affected, because aid organizations are forced to suspend or in some cases completely wind up their operation when the lives and properties of their employed is under threat. In order to improve aid delivery in conflict areas, there should be renewed push for the respect of humanitarian ethics in war zones by both warring parties in a conflict and also aid organizations.

Humanitarian organizations are the custodians of humanitarian space, so therefore, they should endeavor to remain neutral in a conflict and consistently carry out their mandate in line with ethics in which humanitarian organizations are built on.

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