1 The Political Limits of Humanitarian Assistance

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Let us assume that the principal fixtures and dynamics of the UN and its member states, and the main currents of international relations, remain essentially unchanged but that unprecedented levels of cooperation and coordination for the provision of humanitarian assistance combine in a widening virtuous circle. How much could we then accomplish through the betterment of our operational capabilities? After improvements to the timeliness, efficiency and possibly even the scope of our activities, what would still remain on any humanitarian agenda? We know that the most appalling humanitarian disasters can engender a combination of hard-headed practicality and heart-felt goodwill capable of cutting through entrenched interests, institutional inertia and all manner of otherwise insurmountable obstacles, but has a recurrence of these catastrophes been rendered any less likely as a result?

This is not a heartening line of speculation to place beside the bravery and dedication required to save lives in difficult and often dangerous circumstances. But it is all the more pertinent because the three communities of actors involved – national militaries deployed on the authority of the UN, the specialised Agencies and the NGOs – have indeed achieved novel and more effective means of combining their resources and efforts for the provision of humanitarian assistance. But they do so within a context which is contracting in political and resource terms, even as the emergencies increase in number, severity and complexity. The prospects are such as to confound even utopian expectations.

‘FRAMING’ EMERGENCIES

It was necessity rather than foresight which initiated the reconceptualisation of peace support operations as they edged ever further from ‘classic’ peacekeeping after 1988.\(^1\) A re-reckoning of UN–civil–military relations has followed, as large-scale humanitarian emergency compounded by war or civil unrest and the increasing involvement of a wide range of NGOs made some degree of cooperation essential, much though ‘coordination’
remained anathema to many. However, while the delineation of legal and organisational preconditions and the refinement of UN, military and NGO operational matters continue apace,² the encompassing political milieu is largely accepted as a 'given'.

Of course, those most immediately involved in responding to humanitarian emergencies cannot be expected to concern themselves with larger issues, at least to the extent that they do not immediately impact on the crises to hand. But away from the field of operations, Zygmunt Bauman's observation that 'all social organisation, whether purposeful or totalizing . . . consists in subjecting the conduct of its units to either instrumental or procedural criteria of evaluation'³ is much reinforced by the nature of the work and the expectations of those who support it, in moral as well as practical terms. An often undifferentiated insistence on 'effectiveness' and an expectation of 'success' work to keep attention focused on the ground and away from the political horizon, even as other disasters, impending or sidelined, loom over the work.

Moreover, in the kinds of militarised humanitarian emergencies which now appear to be the norm, perceived national interests are not only central to peace support operations, but are formative of the character and duration of the response – however much NGOs assert their operational independence. In such situations, NGOs and the specialised Agencies do not have the capacity to re-open airports or sea ports, mount enormous logistical operations, establish comprehensive communications systems or provide physical security. In the worst crises, it is the commitment by governments of their militaries, particularly those of the larger and better-equipped powers, that makes possible a Security Council resolution – and the subsequent arrival or return of the majority of civilian organisations. The UN can commit to a humanitarian peace support operation only through the agency of its member states and this is in turn contingent upon such factors as existing military commitments and the readiness of military forces, domestic political considerations and perceived national interest. Despite the popular perception of the UN that it operates an international community 'ambulance service', the true situation is quite different: the governments of the UN's member states take into account the full range of national considerations in respect of humanitarian peace support operations as they do in any other deployment of their troops abroad, so a range of political calculations – by no means limited to humanitarian concerns – is a precondition for the operational matters that subsequently become the focus of attention.

The character and pervasiveness of national and international media are also hugely formative. Broadcast media in particular rely heavily on framing