

VOICE - ICRC Roundtable
Current Challenges to Today's Humanitarian Action: Legitimacy, Access, Security

Short minutes

Today, civilian humanitarian actors are working in an increasingly complex international environment. The operating environment is changing with the increased role of the military and other actors in relief tasks. The implications of the humanitarian reform process initiated by the UN are yet to be assessed. With this event, VOICE and the ICRC aimed at creating the opportunity to exchange experiences and views between NGOs and the ICRC on key issues at stake for all humanitarians: access to populations in need and the relevance of the humanitarian principles, the preservation of the humanitarian space and the security of aid workers.

The Round Table saw three speakers taking the floor: Mr. Baltasar Staehelin, General Delegate for the Middle East and Northern Africa, ICRC Geneva, Mr. Howard Mollett, Humanitarian Aid Policy Adviser, CARE International/ UK, and Mr. Eric Chevallier, Director, Head of International Missions and Programs at Médecins du Monde – France.

Mr. Staehelin's presentation focused on three risks which challenge the ICRC model in relation to the humanitarian space: the risk of the blurring of lines between humanitarians and other actors in different crisis settings (e.g. the PRTs in Afghanistan, private security companies in Iraq,...); the risk of instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid – including in the eyes of warring parties; and thirdly, the risk of rejection of “western” aid groups. The ICRC representative gave examples from his field experience in the Palestinian Territories, Iraq and Lebanon. He concluded his presentation by mentioning three key challenges for humanitarian actors (in the Middle East): increase the “security acceptance” of aid workers by having a positive impact for the local communities; respond to the pressure put on IHL and the humanitarian principles, and demonstrate the added value of a neutral and independent humanitarian aid through concrete and effective humanitarian operations.

Mr. Mollett opened his presentation by pointing out that civil-military relations are being reduced to military-driven, “short-termist” force protection measures. On the issue of access, he outlined the opposition of approaches between NGOs (based on the humanitarian principles and local acceptance) and Private Military Companies (PMC) (armed deterrence based approach). When access is hampered or limited, the INGOS use remote management, devolve responsibilities and risks to frontline national staff and local partners, and assume local ‘acceptance’. The issue of legitimacy is linked to accountability. CARE is supportive to the UN humanitarian reform agenda, NGO initiatives such as SPHERE and HAPI and promotes accountability to beneficiaries. Mr. Mollett closed his presentation by putting forward some ideas for the future: advocacy on civil-military relations, based on international principles/frameworks, field research to demonstrate counter-productive nature of short-term ‘hearts and minds’ approach to CIMIC, field research & advocacy on PMC involvement in aid & armed deterrence-based approach to programmes, learning on ‘remote management’ implications for programme strategies, national staff and local partners, and constructive engagement in the Global Humanitarian Platform.

Mr. Chevallier's presentation was structured around three main questions. The first question is whether the humanitarian space is « our (INGO) space »? Victims and people in need “belong” to no one and humanitarian NGOs have to recognize that other actors can also contribute. The INGOS’ main challenge is to search for autonomy in an increasingly inter-dependant world. They should not be defensive, but pro-active in explaining their values, strengths and comparative advantages for the benefit of the victims / people in need. This is crucial as there are more and more new actors: civil protection, military, the PMCs and local actors. The second question is whether within this space, can / should INGO's be promoters of change or should they have only an emergency substitution approach (vs. a crisis continuum capacity building approach). On the ICRC-INGOs relations, the “tension” between neutrality and advocacy is in fact complementarity. Finally, is remote management a “magic bullet” in a humanitarian space which is characterised with higher risks for aid workers? Remote management raises challenging practical and ethical issues such as the need for a long-term confidence building process as a prerequisite, « free » acceptance and ownership by local actors, and the potentially reduced accountability. In conclusion, Mr. Chevallier believes that INGO's should be clearer concerning their comparative advantages, keeping in mind the first one: their capacity to be accepted in a space which is not theirs. An additional reason for

the EU to continue to strongly support European NGO's is the fact that they represent the mobilisation of the European civil society.

The presentations were followed by a **debate** with the audience chaired by VOICE Director Kathrin Schick. The following main points came out of the exchange:

- Neutrality does not mean that NGOs should not advocate for the respect of IHL. In fact, NGOs should advocate more effectively on IHL, as this stronger mobilisation would help promoting security for aid workers and the population.
- The humanitarian principles are not being questioned everywhere, but mostly in countries such as Irak, Sudan and the Middle East. Elsewhere however, European NGOs are being perceived as western organisations and no distinction is being made between the NGOs and other actors. The challenge for NGOs is to demonstrate their independence.
- This being said, as soon as NGOs provide aid in a certain crisis, they in effect become part of this crisis, and might come up against the interests of specific parties.
- NGOs have further a very important role to play in terms of advocacy, mainly aiming for a political solution to settle the crises.
- INGOs should accept that in the future, local actors become the "heart" of the humanitarian agenda. These actors are the first responders to humanitarian crisis.
- Representatives of ECHO reminded the fact that what matters for the Council and the EU (and its Member States) is the impact of humanitarian aid in real terms. What differentiates NGOs from the military is their professionalism: the NGOs' mission is to provide professional humanitarian aid, while the military do charity work.

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