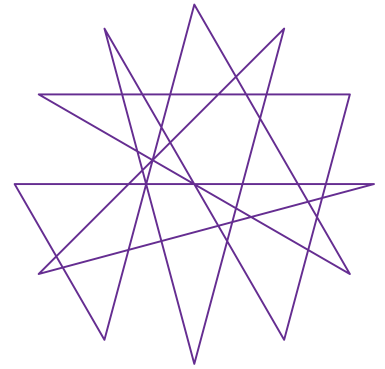
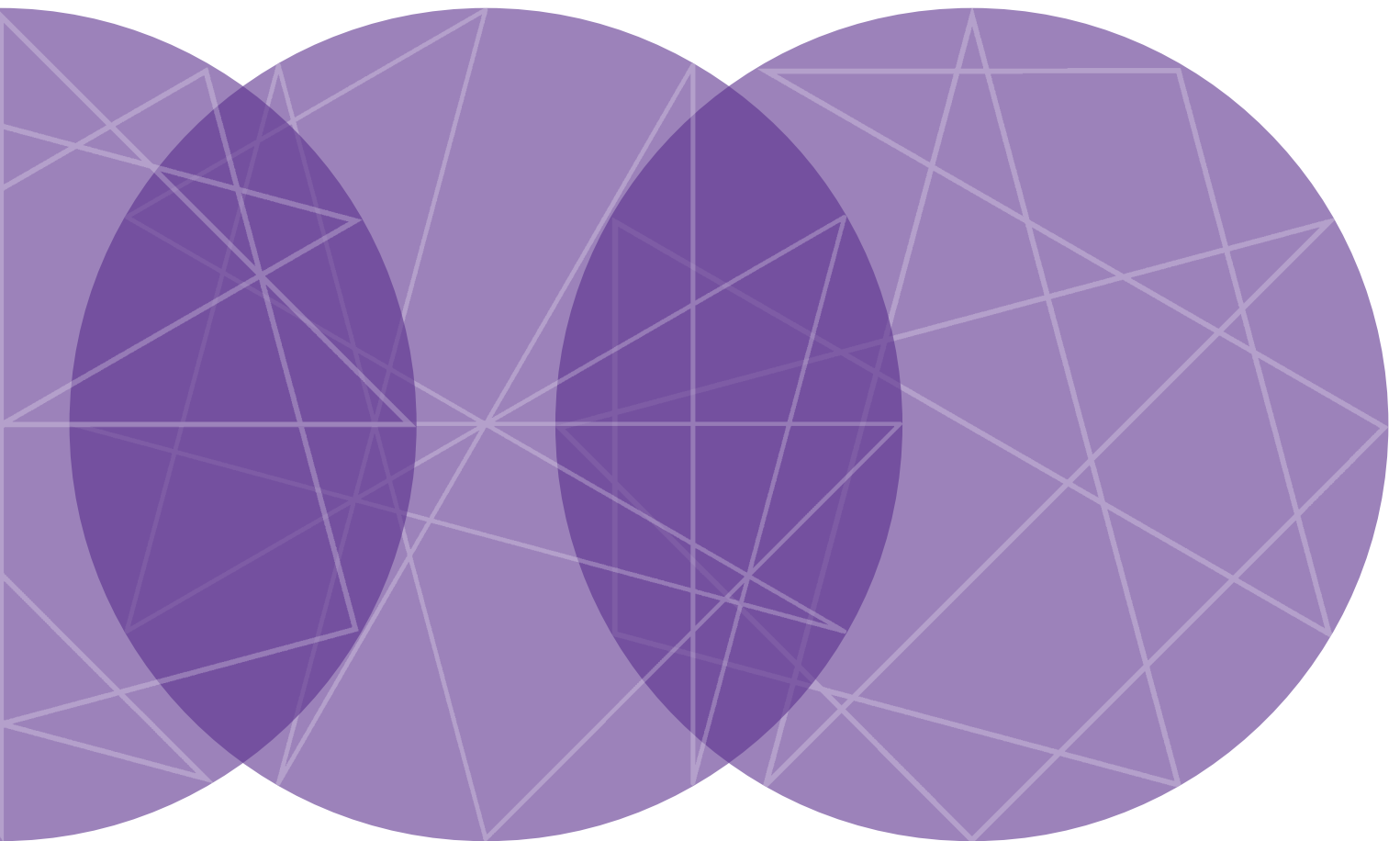


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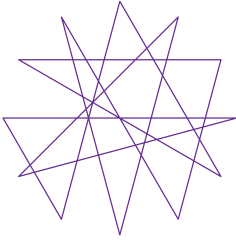


# The Future of Humanitarian Security in Fragile Contexts

An analysis of transformational factors affecting humanitarian action in the coming decade



eisf



## European Interagency Security Forum (EISF)

EISF is an independent network of Security Focal Points who represent European based-humanitarian NGOs operating internationally.

EISF is committed to improving the security of relief operations and staff. It aims to increase safe access by humanitarian agencies to people affected by emergencies. Key to its work is the development of research and tools which promote awareness, preparedness and good practice.

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[www.humanitarianfutures.org](http://www.humanitarianfutures.org)

HFP is part of the King's Policy Institute, which aims to create a bridge between policymakers and King's academic and research excellence.

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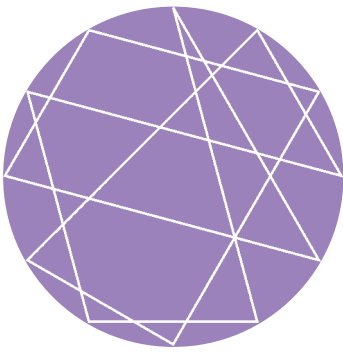
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# Preface

This report stems from a recognition that the humanitarian landscape has changed dramatically in the past decade. Though futures thinking has become more prominent in the humanitarian sector, these changes and their potential impact on security risk management have yet to be widely explored.

The transformation of the humanitarian landscape has already made a significant impact on the operational security of INGOs and other humanitarian actors. Moreover, as contexts defined as 'fragile' increasingly draw the attention of the international community, humanitarian actors will need to give careful consideration to the impact of changes unfolding in fragile contexts.

EISF and HFP have responded to this need with the following exploratory analysis. The study looks at how changes in the humanitarian landscape might affect security risk management and operational security for INGOs. It is hoped that the study will stimulate further discussion of potential and long-term impact, and thereby help EISF members and others to integrate thinking on these issues into their risk management strategies and operational security plans.

## Acronyms

<b>ALNAP</b>	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
<b>AWSD</b>	Aid Worker Security Database
<b>AWSR</b>	Aid Worker Security Report
<b>BRIC</b>	Brazil, Russia, India and China
<b>EISF</b>	European Interagency Security Forum
<b>GHA</b>	Global Humanitarian Assistance
<b>HFP</b>	Humanitarian Futures Programme
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>SLT</b>	Saving Lives Together
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UN OCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs



# Overview

The global landscape within which humanitarians act has become increasingly complex, connected, and polarised. Many factors are driving these changes, both from inside and outside the humanitarian system. Collectively, these factors are fuelling a rate of change that is unprecedented, and producing levels of uncertainty which have the potential to confound strategic and operational decision-makers.

Many factors are already driving change across the humanitarian landscape and, in combination with factors unconsidered in this piece, are likely to continue to do so over the coming decade. The potential future impacts of these changes, and what they may mean for operational security, highlight a number of challenges and priorities for humanitarian organisations to consider in the coming decade.

Many of these changes, as well as the challenges and opportunities they represent, are most pronounced in fragile contexts, which today receive the vast majority of official humanitarian assistance. These contexts equally present the greatest risks to the operational security of humanitarian organisations. Though fragile contexts vary greatly in many ways, they generally share common characteristics; on-going or recent conflict, political instability, vulnerability to a range of crises, and an absence of the rule of law – the last-named arguably having the greatest impact on the security of humanitarian organisations.

Though the approaches of humanitarian organisations to security risk management in fragile contexts have evolved significantly in the past decade, it seems clear that most within the sector feel that the issue is not given sufficient attention or resources by humanitarian organisations or donors, and that the longer-term implications for humanitarian organisations are not adequately considered.

Greater understanding of fragile contexts will be essential for strategic engagement with the range of actors now relevant to humanitarian crises in such contexts. This goes beyond those most evident to humanitarian organisations. Improved awareness of their operating environments, including the threats therein, should also help humanitarian organisations to understand their own roles, as well as how they may be perceived – and how such perceptions may influence their security. Given the diversity of actors now found in many contexts, the perception that humanitarian actors can remain remote from the messy realities of the contexts in which they work, and from the other spokes of international engagement, no longer holds.

As the humanitarian landscape becomes increasingly crowded, the definition of humanitarian action, the principles which underpin it, and the stewardship of what is often referred to as the ‘humanitarian system’ are all being challenged. Though many feel that in spite of these challenges, the fundamental elements of how humanitarian organisations have approached operational security up to now – through negotiation, acceptance, delivering quality programmes, degrees of protection, and, at times, deterrence – will largely remain the same, humanitarians will be required to pay greater attention and make more calculated approaches. The days of assuming security as a result of benevolent and apolitical intentions are long past and are unlikely to return as competition to influence crises grows.

The scrutiny faced by all actors in a crisis, humanitarians included, is likely to continue to increase, along with the volume of information distributed about and demanded from humanitarian organisations. The potential for ubiquitous communications technology to burrow deeper into crises will also change the relationships central to humanitarian action: how communities and humanitarian organisations relate to each other, how humanitarians relate to their peers and donors, and how others – potential partners, competitors and threats – relate to humanitarian organisations. Individuals and organisations of any type from any location will increasingly have the potential – and the inclination – to add their voices to any discussion, broadening debates surrounding humanitarian issues with potentially far-reaching implications for the future of humanitarian action.

The words and actions of the ‘humanitarian community’ as a whole and the communities they originate from have always influenced perceptions and acceptance. Choices made by humanitarian organisations will play a large part in determining how these relationships affect their security. However, organisations will have diminishing control over the narrative and interpretation of their ambitions and actions.

These issues are reflected in the final section of this report, which poses a number of questions that humanitarian NGOs should consider when analysing how changes across the global humanitarian landscape may affect their operational security in fragile contexts over the coming decade. Some questions point toward new ways of engaging with fragile contexts, while others illustrate the implications of the fundamental challenges facing humanitarian action now and in the future. Many difficult questions, both new and enduring, arise from the issues raised by this report, challenging how humanitarian organisations prepare for, assess, mitigate and respond to operational security risks.



# Introduction

In line with growing interest in the future of humanitarian action,<sup>1</sup> the European Interagency Security Forum (EISF) has sought to stimulate discussion amongst international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and the broader humanitarian sector, as well as other relevant actors, on what the evolution of the humanitarian landscape might mean for operational security in fragile contexts. This report serves to inform the strategic policy priorities and approach to security planning and coordination of these actors, and addresses three main questions:

- **What are the emerging trends, developments and drivers of change that are likely to affect or change security issues and considerations in the humanitarian environment of the future?**
- **How will the humanitarian sector need to adapt in order to continue to deliver programmes within this changing operational context?**
- **How prepared are organisations for this future, and what might they need to do differently in order to be prepared?**

The Humanitarian Futures Programme (HFP) has identified critical factors which are contributing to the transformation of the humanitarian landscape, and are likely to have a considerable impact on the operational security of INGOs. These factors will oblige INGOs to reconsider how they assess risks, risk mitigation, and their role in the humanitarian landscape. Building on, and drawing from the research of HFP and others on such 'transformational factors',<sup>2</sup> the report considers how these factors impact the ability of INGOs to safely deliver humanitarian assistance in fragile contexts.

## Defining Operational Security

'NGO security is achieved when all staff are safe, and perceive themselves as being safe, relative to an assessment of the risks to staff and the organisation in a particular location.'

People in Aid (2008), p.6

Acknowledging that the question of how to ensure safe access is more relevant in fragile states, the report addresses the increasing influence of factors including, but not limited to: humanitarian action in so-called 'assertive states', the expanding range of actors in crises, diverse interpretations of humanitarian principles, the growing international significance and scrutiny of humanitarian crises, and the rapid evolution of science and technology. These factors were selected in consultation with the EISF Secretariat and project working group, based on their relevance to operational security in fragile contexts.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of the drivers of change for humanitarian actors, but represents a selection of factors critical to the future of humanitarian action and likely to have a significant impact on the way NGOs manage risk.

## Methodology

The key research questions and scope of this report were formulated by the EISF Secretariat and HFP, and were refined based on the input of the project working group. The project working group comprised representatives of EISF member organisations as well as individuals from the defence and private security sectors.

This report is based on research conducted by HFP, which included a review of relevant literature, as well as interviews with key informants from EISF member organisations, bilateral donors, NGO security forums, the UN, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the private security industry. Input from participants attending an EISF workshop session in Dublin in March 2013, as well as that provided by the project working group, is also reflected in the report.

<sup>1</sup> See generally: Humanitarian Futures Programme, [www.humanitarianfutures.org](http://www.humanitarianfutures.org); IRRC (2011); Van Brabant (2010); Labbe (2012); Kharas and Rogerson (2012).  
<sup>2</sup> See Kent (2011); Kent and Burke (2011); Kent, Armstrong and Obrecht (2013).



# The evolving humanitarian landscape

## Escalating crisis challenges

Many of the current challenges for humanitarian action differ in certain critical respects from those which shaped today's humanitarian landscape, and highlight many of the shortcomings of the traditional humanitarian system itself. These challenges are the result of the continued evolution, both gradual and transformative, of humanitarian action. This evolution is only likely to continue apace in the coming decade, particularly as international humanitarian action grows in scale, prominence and complexity. The drivers of crises, the nature of the parties involved, and the means through which crises are addressed will not remain static. Nor, crucially, will the expectations or demands of affected populations, whose suffering will remain just as much a product of disasters or conflict as it will of poor governance, poor infrastructure, and insufficient response capacity.

**Protracted crises** have been defined as 'those environments in which a significant proportion of the population is acutely vulnerable to death, disease and disruption of their livelihoods over a prolonged period of time. The governance of these environments is usually very weak, with the state having a limited capacity or willingness to respond to or mitigate the threats to the population, or provide adequate levels of protection.'

*Macrae and Harmer (2004), p.1*

While much of the world's most acute suffering can be found amidst its most protracted crises – many elements of which follow patterns established over decades if not generations or longer – these crises are by no means static. The means and methods of conflict across the globe have changed dramatically since the modern international humanitarian system took shape in the mid-twentieth century, shifting from inter-state conflicts to asymmetric non-international conflicts of varying

intensities, with civilians caught in the middle.<sup>3</sup> Recent years have further demonstrated that conflicts can fester for many years before escalating unexpectedly and rapidly, as they have in Mali and Syria. Cities, now home to the majority of the world's population, can also act as 'an amplifier to the vagaries of nature and war'<sup>4</sup> in protracted or emergent conflicts, regardless of the relative wealth of any state.

Access to, and control over resources are often key factors in conflicts. Many countries are now beset by ever-greater demands on their resources while at the same time many environments are being irreversibly and often unpredictably altered by climate change. As Bernard notes the 'map of climatic risks' is 'often overlapped by patterns of political instability, chronic insecurity, and underdevelopment.'<sup>5</sup>

## Phenomenal, chaotic growth and change across the humanitarian landscape

As crises have grown increasingly complex and far-reaching in recent decades, so has the international humanitarian system, and the ecosystem within which it exists. Over 4,400 non-governmental organisations are today engaged in humanitarian action, with an estimated 274,000 humanitarian workers around the world.<sup>6</sup>

The traditional pillars (or architects, depending on one's perspective) of this system, remain dominant, but the period of de facto hegemony of the United Nations humanitarian agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and the large Western-led INGOs may already be over. Though these actors may view themselves as the custodians of international humanitarian action, this role is now increasingly challenged by the growing prominence of new and diverse humanitarian actors. Though many traditional actors recognise this growing diversity, their version of a more inclusive humanitarian sector appears to be predicated on the reassertion of their own Western, ostensibly 'universal' values, and fails to make way for alternative models.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) has estimated that 172 million people were affected by conflict in 2012, 87% of whom were residents of conflict-affected areas, 11% internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 3% refugees. CRED also noted that the impact of conflict on the different categories is markedly different, with the worst health impacts on IDPs. See CRED (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Bernard (2011), p.892.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.892.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor et al. (2012), p.9.

<sup>7</sup> Fiori (2013), p.9.



The traditional humanitarian system, for the purposes of this report, refers to the trika of the (predominately) Western international non-governmental organisations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and the United Nations agencies. Of course, between and within these broad categories there is great diversity, not to mention discord, and the categories themselves are in many ways being challenged by many of the factors examined in this report, particularly the proliferation of new actors in and around the traditional humanitarian system.

The non-traditional actors who increasingly populate the humanitarian landscape can be taken to encompass all those not included in the above, amongst them new bilateral donors, militaries, non-state actors, the private sector, diasporas, regional and sub-regional organisations, and networks, including virtual and ad hoc networks.

Among the non-traditional actors are non-Western NGOs, operating both at home and abroad, foreign and domestic militaries, private enterprises, and members of diasporas. They are all engaging in actions once thought to be the near-exclusive domain of traditional humanitarian actors. Some of these actors (as well as others with contrary aims, including transnational militant and criminal networks), are now operating and often flourishing in crises – as the arms and drug trades have boomed amidst the conflict and food insecurity in the Sahel. Adding to the cacophony are the increasingly assertive voices of host communities and governments, many no longer willing to give traditional actors the benefit of the doubt when they arrive touting their ‘universal’ principles, laying claim to the moral high ground, and bearing assistance.

Donor governments, who in 2011 spent USD \$17.1 billion<sup>8</sup> on official international humanitarian assistance, now exert far greater control over the use of their funds, often in order to align humanitarian action with other foreign policy objectives. Following the global economic crisis and imposition of domestic austerity measures in many Western states, scrutiny of what critics refer to as the broad and opaque ‘aid industry’ has increased.<sup>9</sup>

## Bigger, yet still insufficient capacity

Despite overall humanitarian funding having grown significantly over the past decade,<sup>10</sup> it is still widely perceived by many within the sector as insufficient.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that international humanitarian action has itself been characterised as ‘inherently insufficient’,<sup>12</sup> many burgeoning influences have only compounded the shortcomings of the traditional humanitarian system. These include, but are by no means limited to: an increase in climate-related natural disaster,<sup>13</sup> more comprehensive accounting of the needs of affected populations, and the expansion of activities undertaken in the name of humanitarianism. The growth in the system’s resources – financial, human, and material – and crucially, its capacity to turn resources into impact, have not kept pace with the growth in appreciated need and the means for effective delivery.<sup>14</sup> Collinson and Elhawary have suggested that ‘many of the difficulties agencies face in delivering relief or providing protection in complex environments can be seen as a consequence of the rapid expansion in the reach and ambitions of the international humanitarian system’.<sup>15</sup>

Though these shortcomings are well documented and well understood by many in and around the humanitarian sector, authentic change has been sorely lacking, and even undermined by humanitarian rhetoric. As Ramalingan and Barnett note, ‘there is common usage of a language and rhetoric of change that enables standard operating procedures to be maintained’.<sup>16</sup> Organisations have often proven reluctant or unable to adapt their approaches to humanitarian crises despite the evidence of their failures. Agencies often doggedly struggle to apply traditional systems in new contexts, rather than adapting their systems and approaches – let alone seeking new ones – to cope with evolved challenges.

<sup>8</sup> Poole (2012), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Austerity measures and shrinking foreign aid budgets in the developed world have yet to reduce overall humanitarian resources. However, warning signs are visible, with some important humanitarian donors like the Netherlands signalling looming budget cuts to foreign aid. Budget considerations have also spurred re-examination of the humanitarian system and performance, resulting in a new policy emphasis among some donors on improving cost-efficiencies in humanitarian assistance.’ Taylor et al. (2012), p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> The humanitarian enterprise, according to Philippe Gaillard was ‘an effort to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist’. Quoted in Rieff (2002), p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> Ramalingan and Barnett (2010), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Poole (2012) notes that ‘the gap in unmet financing widened to levels not seen in ten years’. p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Collinson and Elhawary (2012), p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Ramalingan and Barnett (2010), p. 2.



# The complexities of humanitarian action in fragile contexts

While definitions and indicators for 'state fragility' differ, varying combinations of factors including political instability or illegitimacy, vulnerability to crises, on-going or recent conflict, and a lack of access to basic services (amongst other) will render many such states the focus of INGO and humanitarian funding. It is often in these situations that 'violence against aid operations thrives'.<sup>17</sup>

## Defining fragile states

'Fragile states lack the functional authority to provide basic security within their borders, the institutional capacity to provide basic social needs for their populations, and/or the political legitimacy to effectively represent their citizens at home and abroad.'

Source: *Country Indicators for Foreign Policy project* (<http://www4.carleton.ca/clp/app/serve.php/1172.pdf>)

The scale of humanitarian need has long drawn humanitarian organisations to fragile contexts. However, the increasing attention of traditional and non-traditional donor states and their attendant political interests has amplified humanitarian action in certain high-profile fragile states,<sup>18</sup> making them a major point of focus for humanitarian organisations.<sup>19</sup> Many of those interviewed for this report stated that the majority of their operations were focused in fragile contexts, either in terms of actual scale or of broader demands on organisational capacity and attention. This focus can have a distorting effect on NGO decision-making. As donors target fragile, and often highly politicised contexts, organisational ambitions can skew risk assessments and mitigation.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the pursuit of programmes and funds may lower risk thresholds and marginalise security concerns.

## Protracted and emerging fragile contexts<sup>21</sup>

While states and territories labelled as fragile certainly have much in common, their histories, wealth and geography are diverse. Conflict, political instability, vulnerability to crises, and other drivers of fragility are combined in unique ways in each context.<sup>22</sup> From the perspective of humanitarian organisations, the tangible impact of fragility on humanitarian needs and operational security varies greatly. Some contexts are seen as still having a sense of order despite their fragility and ongoing conflict (e.g. the Occupied Palestinian Territories), while others, such as South Sudan, are seen as far more chaotic and unpredictable. Convulsive crises, as in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and the ongoing instability in Iraq, are examples of more recently emerged fragile contexts, and present different challenges from those previously experienced by many humanitarian actors.

Despite the ostensibly needs-based approaches of many donors and organisations, the actual distribution of international humanitarian resources and capacities is highly imbalanced across fragile contexts.<sup>23</sup> Some of the world's most protracted humanitarian crises – in Sudan, South Sudan, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Haiti, and the Democratic Republic of Congo – receive massive amounts of funding and attention from the humanitarian system.<sup>24</sup> Others, such as the Central African Republic, receive far less attention from humanitarian funders and NGOs, due to their geography, global insignificance, hostility to Western intervention, relative wealth, or a combination of many other factors. Thus, as Healy and Tiller have observed, in 'many areas of chronic conflict and complex emergency, there continue to be too few humanitarian actors responding to emergencies'.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Despite the real or perceived increase in the dangers involved, there has been an unprecedented expansion into these contexts at every level, in terms of geographical reach, funding availability, agencies involved and the range and complexity of their responsibilities. This has been driven by a new and unprecedented form of international political and military patronage of the sector.' Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. iii. Collinson and Duffield have also noted that while 'there has been some recent research into aid worker security, and there is a rapidly expanding body of work on good practice in risk and security management, there has been surprisingly little research into how aid agencies are actually responding to the real or perceived security risks they face in these unstable environments.' p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Foresti, Denney and Metcalfe (2011) have also noted that while 'increasing links between security and aid agendas have resulted in more money being made available for humanitarian and development interventions in conflict-affected states, perversely this may result in a concentration of large amounts of aid funding in countries with limited absorption capacity, while ignoring other emerging or lower-profile crises' p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Fragility, by its very nature, is not easily tied to national boundaries (consider the regions of Kenya and Ethiopia which surround Somalia), nor to formal states (consider the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories), nor uniform throughout a state's territory (consider Nigeria.) Therefore, this paper will refer to fragile contexts, rather than states or territories, wherever possible.

<sup>22</sup> There are numerous sources which compile lists of fragile states, which while largely comparable, do vary. For instance, the OECD list includes Pakistan and Nigeria, but not Syria or Libya, which are both included in the World Bank list, while Pakistan and Nigeria are not. See OECD (2012); WB (2013).

<sup>23</sup> See Taylor et al (2012), p. 44; Kellett, Walmsley and Poole (2011), p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> See Poole (2012), p. 30; Taylor et al (2012), p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Healy and Tiller (2013), p. 2.

### 3.1 Trends in humanitarian security in fragile contexts <sup>26</sup>

Many of the world's most acute crises have become exponentially more hostile operating environments for traditional INGOs. While being caught 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' remains among the greatest risks to humanitarian staff and organisations, humanitarians have long been viewed as acceptable targets by many actors,<sup>27</sup> and can no longer assume they will be viewed as apolitical bearers of assistance, if that were ever the case. The advent of the global 'War on Terror' in 2001 exacerbated many of the changes permeating the sector, not least the politicisation of nominally humanitarian assistance in conflicts and the criminalisation of interaction with proscribed groups<sup>28</sup> – the very groups which often control access to populations in need.

'State fragility both engenders the dynamics that lead to the targeting of aid workers and deprives the international community of a partner with which to mitigate against this violence.'

*Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p.12*

Although long-term historical trends point to an overall decline in violence, torture, and human rights abuses around the world, attacks against aid workers<sup>29</sup> have proliferated, and are increasingly concentrated in relatively few highly insecure contexts.<sup>30</sup> After rising steadily since the late 1990s, attacks in many countries around the world have since levelled off, most likely as a result of increasingly effective approaches to security management by many organisations.<sup>31</sup>

#### Concentration of incidents and the increasing number of highly insecure contexts

Several extremely violent contexts, particularly Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan, have seen significant increases in violence against aid workers in the past decade, based on the absolute number of attacks.<sup>32</sup> Other contexts, including Yemen, Pakistan and Chad, have also become in recent years areas of extreme risk for aid workers, and in an increasing number of cases, off-limits to the international staff of Western INGOs, if not to entire organisations.

'Humanitarian action is under attack, but neither governments, parties to armed conflicts, nor other influential actors are doing enough to come to its relief. On the contrary, those who control territory, funding, or simply the closest guns are too often allowed to harass, politicise, militarise and undermine humanitarian action with impunity.'

*Egeland et al. (2011), p. viii*

Unsurprisingly, state fragility, along with other factors including conflict intensity, political stability, regime strength and the rule of law, has been cited as having a particular correlation with violence against aid workers.<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the Aid Worker Security Report (AWSR) 2012 also found that only the strength and stability of a political regime, not its type, seems to relate to rates of violence against aid workers.<sup>34</sup>

In approaching the issue of aid worker security, it is important to recognise the specific context of violence and how it affects the overall exposure of aid workers to prolonged risk. In Sri Lanka and the Occupied Palestinian Territories for instance, aid worker death rates as a result of indiscriminate violence, as opposed to targeted attacks, rose significantly during brief periods of intense conflict.<sup>35</sup> In other fragile contexts, such as Pakistan and Iraq, the Global War on Terror, its legacy and network of conflicts, has driven violence against aid workers due to their perceived ties to belligerent parties, or because they are seen as accessible targets and symbols of Western-led intervention. In DRC and Chad, amongst others, complex and highly fluid conflicts combined with pervasive lawlessness present a diverse range of security threats. Violent urban environments, such as those found in Haiti, present their own unique challenges for operational security, where population density, anonymity, and criminal activity can present a critical combination of risks. Lucchi has noted that despite having worked in violent urban settings for decades, humanitarian actors 'have been relatively slow to respond to the specific characteristic and dynamics of non-conflict violence generated by an urban environment'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Trends in operational security for humanitarian organisations in fragile states are difficult to interpret due to a number of factors. Foremost, the complexity and diversity of the actors, contexts, and risks involved make the collection and analysis inherently challenging. Additionally, both reporting standards and the lack of historical and complementary data leave any analysis rife with question marks and caveats; see also Van Brabant (2012), pp. 7-10.

<sup>27</sup> See generally: ICRC (2011); Human Rights Watch (2013); Harmer, Stoddard and Toth (2013), p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> See Pantuliano, Mackintosh and Elhawary (2011); Mackintosh and Duplat (2013).

<sup>29</sup> The term 'aid worker' is used by the Aid Worker Security Database, and defined as 'the employees and associated personnel of not for profit aid agencies (both national and international staff) that provide material and technical assistance in humanitarian relief contexts. These include various locally contracted staff (e.g., transportation, security, etc.). This includes both relief and multi-mandated (relief and development) organizations: NGOs, the International Movement of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, donor agencies and the UN agencies belonging to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (FAO, OCHA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and WHO) plus IOM and UNRWA. The aid worker definition does not include UN peacekeeping personnel, human rights workers, election monitors or purely political, religious, or advocacy organizations.' Aid Worker Security Report, <https://aidworkersecurity.org/about>

<sup>30</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Egeland et al. (2011), p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Harmer, Stoddard and Toth (2013) have noted that when the estimated global population of aid workers is taken into account, a 'modest rise in the long-term attack rate' is observed (p. 2).

<sup>33</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Lucchi (2013), p. 5.

Some key informants felt that the trend towards the concentration of humanitarian NGO operations in fragile contexts would continue in step with the politicisation of aid in such contexts,<sup>37</sup> consequently restricting the ability of UN agencies to operate directly. However, many states that have recently slid into fragility are middle-income countries with significant capacity within their own domestic civil society, or with links to regional civil society. Therefore a growing need for UN agencies to work through partnerships would by no means automatically lead to an increased role for Western NGOs.

Certain security threats are increasingly transnational, particularly in areas with poorly guarded or porous borders. Thus, humanitarians who are easy to access in one country may present an attractive soft target for armed groups in another. These contexts also allow for the ready flow of arms and other illicit materials across borders, the possible extension and exacerbation of crises, and the facilitation of the hostage-taking industry.

Kidnappings are now among the most frequent means of deliberate violence targeted against aid workers in many high-profile fragile contexts. At least 85% are resolved without the victim being killed (largely through negotiation, with few rescues and escapes).<sup>38</sup> Harmer, Stoddard and Toth observe: 'Not only have kidnappings increased in absolute numbers and as a proportion of overall attacks on aid workers, but also the average global rates of kidnapping among the field population of aid workers have risen by 28 per cent in the past three years compared to the prior period'.<sup>39</sup> Kidnappings are most often driven by financial motives, but can also be tied to local, regional, or even global politics. This pattern not only highlights the extreme risk to aid workers, but also the interconnectedness of many contexts, and the complexity of relationships amongst political, militant, and often criminal actors.

National staff face the vast majority of violence in absolute terms, comprising 82% of the victims in 2012. International staff comprised 18% of victims. However, with far fewer international staff than national staff in the field, the attack rate for international staff is over twice that of national staff.<sup>40</sup>

## 3.2 Changing approaches to humanitarian security

The desire for access and proximity still competes with the need to minimise risk. In recent years, and given the increased risks to the security of humanitarian staff, both national and international, this has prompted new strategies for mitigating risk and new ways of operating. In addition to negotiated access and acceptance, extensive protection-based risk mitigation has become the norm in many contexts for some organisations, along with the use of armed protection. Partnerships with national or local organisations and remote management have also emerged as alternative operational strategies where access for internationals is no longer possible.

### Challenges to acceptance

Acceptance has always been and remains the foundation for operational security, viewed by most as 'the essential cornerstone of effective security risk management'.<sup>1</sup> However Van Brabant has suggested that many organisations still fail to understand the practical implications of acceptance-based approaches to security.<sup>2</sup> Whether the recognition or adoption of such approaches has actually led to better security management has also been questioned.<sup>3</sup>

INGOs must to some degree be accepted by communities, governments, belligerents, and other actors who may pose a threat to their security, in order to operate in a given context. This requires sustained engagement with all parties; it cannot be assumed as it may have been in the past, but must be cultivated. While acceptance may have long been viewed by some as stemming from the universality of humanitarian principles and action, Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau's assertion that 'it is clear that adherence to principles alone will not solve the problems of security and access for the humanitarian community'<sup>4</sup> seems obvious. In reality, acceptance is dependent on other actors finding it benefits their own aims to allow INGOs to operate, as well as managing the expectations of such actors.

<sup>1</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 12

<sup>2</sup> Van Brabant (2010), p. 14

<sup>3</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 12

<sup>4</sup> Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010), n. pag.

<sup>37</sup> Collinson and Elhawary (2012) have commented on this trend: 'It is no accident that the aid industry's expanded involvement in contexts of international political and military intervention has gone hand-in-hand with a growing concern with politicisation: the fact that such a high proportion of humanitarian aid is concentrated in high-profile contexts, despite humanitarian needs not always being the greatest, reflects how humanitarian agencies are politicised at a global level', p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Harmer, Stoddard and Toth (2013), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

## Thinking about risk

In recent years an important shift in how organisations view risk has taken place. It is now widely acknowledged that organisations cannot avoid risk, but seek to manage it in order to remain present and sufficiently proximate to deliver effective programmes.<sup>41</sup> Risk management approaches seek to evaluate 'programme criticality', or the appropriate level of risk acceptance based on how critical a given programme may be, and seek a balance between risk aversion and recklessness.<sup>42</sup> These approaches acknowledge security risk as a subset of the broader range of risks an organisation or programme may face – programmatic, financial, or otherwise – and that these cannot be assessed and mitigated in isolation.<sup>43</sup>

Among the host of contending priorities they must consider, strategic and operational decision-makers within humanitarian organisations often find the uncertainty inherent in the assessment of potential security risks and their impacts awkward and sometimes unwelcome. However as Kent states, 'for those with humanitarian roles and responsibilities, the ever more complex and seemingly random nature of humanitarian crises and the contexts in which they occur require new ways of preparing for the challenges of the future'.<sup>44</sup> While new ways of preparing can only be conceived with a thorough understanding of the past and present, the potential futures for operational security in fragile states cannot only be examined from that perspective alone.

## Security Analysis

Some organisations are now moving towards a more intelligence-led decision-making model, as used in other security-related sectors, such as international private security. While the usual reservations regarding the adoption of practices from the private or security sectors remain within some organisations, the use of analytical models to assess potential scenarios and predict future risks are being adopted by some.

Some informants reported that these new approaches were well received at the headquarters level, but that they felt field staff were often reluctant to incorporate them into field-level security management. This was largely seen as a result of a lack of understanding, but also in some cases, as a reluctance to entertain what some might see as second-guessing traditional field-level information gathering and analysis methods.

## Duty of care

It has been suggested that the fear of legal consequences of staff neglect is taking priority within some organisations over the drive to provide assistance, and that has led to over-reliance on protective measures in some contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Whether, and to what extent, the various parties involved in humanitarian action owe a duty of care toward the individuals directly faced with security risks remain difficult questions to answer in crises.<sup>2</sup> It appears that despite some progress toward understanding the notion of a duty of care and its implications, the notion nonetheless broadly remains inadequately understood throughout much of the sector, and without strong judicial precedents.<sup>3</sup> Not only is this relevant for individuals and their employers, but questions regarding the concept relating to the role of donors, partner organisations, and others involved in humanitarian programmes are likely to persist. It was also noted by some key informants that some organisations have already settled individual claims related to security incidents with former international staff, and that certain organisations now held significant funds to settle future claims against them.

The difficult matter of assessing and weighing an organisation's duty of care to an international staff member in relation to its duty of care to a national staff member will remain. While such matters may be seen as a potential minefield, contradicting the notion of equality amongst staff, as far as security risks are concerned, the origins and identity of a given staff member do undoubtedly influence the risks. However, the duty of care of an organisation towards a staff member should not be influenced so much by their identity, but rather the level of responsibility of the organisation for that staff member's presence in an insecure environment.

<sup>1</sup> HPN (2010)

<sup>2</sup> Kemp and Merkelbach (2011)

<sup>3</sup> Van Brabant (2010), p. 6

<sup>41</sup> Egeland et al. (2011) p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Kingston and Behn (2010), p. 3; see also Metcalfe, Martin and Pantuliano (2011).

<sup>44</sup> Kent (2011), p. 941.



## Security Planning

Many respondents reported that their organisation's security strategies cover only the project cycle, often at most a 12- to 24-month period. This may be for many reasons, including the inherent unpredictability of many humanitarian crises, as well as the insufficient preparation for somewhat predictable crises – itself largely a result of the funding instability and cycles on which most humanitarian actors depend. Some respondents noted that larger and more risk-tolerant organisations have longer-term 3- to 5-year strategies which incorporate security, but these are seen as the exception. In the view of some key informants, for-profit contractors working for specific donors – primarily USAID – are among the more forward-thinking security planners, although their approaches to acceptance and independence are very different from those of humanitarian actors. That said, some respondents noted that elements of security management have been included in longer-term strategic planning, notably the organisation's duty of care towards its staff and risk assessment protocols, in some cases covering a 10-year period. Regardless of an organisation's security planning horizon, the lack of consistent attention to security issues can undermine plans and policies. Micheni and Kuhanendran have noted that '[c]omplacency about security during relative periods of calm appears to be prevalent amongst some humanitarian agencies and donors, leading to reactive, rather than proactive, intervention'.<sup>45</sup>

A number of respondents reported that some organisations first identify projects, programmes or contexts, and only after securing internal and external agreement and funding do they consider the security environment and risks. The sense of urgency that surrounds humanitarian action was cited by some key informants as another factor driving organisations to take undue security risks. This may lead to organisations operating in contexts without sufficiently understanding them, and without investing in building acceptance, or having the proper risk management measures in place.

It is worth noting that despite the relative progress toward structured and lucid risk management in fragile contexts noted here, the practical reality may still differ significantly. Collinson and Duffield have questioned the 'received wisdom and assumptions that underpin the current mainstream discourse and guidance on risk and security management'. They challenge

[...] the presumption that aid workers and agencies are likely to act and behave in rational, predictable and principled ways in these difficult environments. In reality, and as the history of the aid encounter shows in countries such as Afghanistan and South Sudan, operating in conditions of chronic insecurity is a messy, uncertain and compromising business. Because it is so focused on the immediate practicalities of trying to stay physically safe while keeping operations going, mainstream risk management has so far failed to properly capture the higher level strategic and programmatic problems, challenges and trade-offs that result from aid actors' engagement in contexts that they consider to be actually or potentially dangerous.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Micheni and Kuhanendran (2010), p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 1.



## Transformational factors affecting humanitarian action in the coming decade and their potential impact on operational security in fragile contexts

The evolution of the humanitarian landscape and its impact on the operational security of INGOs, both current and future, is driven by an array of interconnected factors which are at once internal and external to the sector. The effects, distinct or combined, of any of these or other factors as well as their function within the humanitarian landscape over the coming decade, can only be speculated upon. This section aims to identify some of the potential implications of these changes on the operational security of humanitarian NGOs in fragile contexts, and poses some critical questions that organisations operating in fragile contexts should consider. It draws on the opinions of key informants, other EISF members, and the project working group, in addition to HFP's analysis of broader trends affecting the humanitarian landscape.

Though many (rightly) believe that 'all security is local', in a world where few humanitarian crises are outside the reach of the forces of globalisation, matters beyond the local context cannot be discounted. The reach and potential impact of transnational armed actors, and the drivers of their actions, are of particular relevance for humanitarian organisations in fragile states, often regardless of the direct role such actors play in local conflicts.

Conflict and disaster are also likely to become more entwined, and not only with each other but also with new and unforeseen crisis drivers. As Kent states,

If disasters are reflections of the ways in which societies structure themselves, then it is more than likely that increasingly complex economic systems, the consequences of globalisation, and the inter-related nature of technology, population growth, demographic shifts, and natural phenomena such as climate change will result in new types of crisis driver and also new types of interactive crisis.<sup>47</sup>

Further complicating any assessment of future risks is the fact they are likely to have considerably different effects depending on the nature of the humanitarian organisations involved, their activities, and the specific context, amongst other factors. Direct medical assistance, for example, requires greater proximity to populations than food distribution. This proximity potentially allows for better contextual understanding, stronger networks, and increased acceptance, but can also increase exposure to risk. Other emerging trends, such as the use of cash transfers, could also have a significant impact on security management. Different risks are associated with physical cash and other digital methods of cash distribution, and such programmes require different levels of staff exposure to potential risks.

### 4.1 Humanitarian action in assertive states<sup>48</sup>

The international power structures of the twentieth century are increasingly influenced by the growing power of non-Western states, creating a new norm that is complex, fluid and multipolar. The rise of new powers, predominately the BRICs<sup>49</sup> and their impact on traditional power structures and international systems has been apparent for some time. The increasing influence, both collective and individual, of secondary and regional powers such as Indonesia, Nigeria and the Middle East on Western-led structures and institutions is arguably less understood and more complex. The dilution of Western influence may be far from upending the prevailing global order, but it represents an accelerating force in the redefinition of the roles of states in international and domestic affairs. Of particular relevance is the role of these newly influential states in shaping the future of multilateral agencies, including those who influence international humanitarian action.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Kent (2011) p. 943.

<sup>48</sup> The growing confidence of non-Western states on the international stage has been well documented, and the term 'assertive states' can be understood to encompass the 'increasing numbers of host states actively blocking, restricting, or controlling humanitarian response on their territory', as noted by McGoldrick (2011), pp. 973-974; see also Kent (2011); Ferris (2011); Labbe (2012).

<sup>49</sup> BRICs: Brazil, Russia, India and China.

<sup>50</sup> Ferris (2011), p. 929.

'For traditional humanitarian actors, the consequences of more assertive sovereignty mean that there will be even less receptivity to arguments about rights of access, that alternative providers (i.e. non-traditional actors, including the private sector) might be preferred 'humanitarians', and that the free-wheeling nature of autonomous humanitarian agencies such as international non-governmental organizations will be less and less tolerated.'

Kent (2011), p. 952

This rebalancing of power from east to west and from north to south is further complicated by the growing influence of formal and informal blocs or allegiances between states, driven by intricately entwined political, commercial, and security interests. The new relations China, India and the Gulf states are establishing with many African states show how rapidly these allegiances can develop.

### **The resurgence of sovereignty and opposition to (Western) interventionism**

Relationships such as these can allow otherwise fragile or less-powerful states to reposition themselves vis-à-vis external actors and exert a great deal of pressure on international humanitarian organisations,<sup>51</sup> with whom there has long been an air of 'mutual mistrust'.<sup>52</sup> This tends to compound the complexity of dealing with security in such contexts. However, as the AWSR has noted, 'both assertive and weak governments can create problems for humanitarian operational security'.<sup>53</sup>

As the sovereign authority of states continues to grow, particularly among those not previously considered assertive or globally influential, states increasingly determine the focus and boundaries of humanitarian action. This may leave humanitarian actors less space in which to negotiate access and independently plan their own actions, regardless of how well-intentioned these plans may be.<sup>54</sup> Many states have demonstrated their growing confidence that they will no longer passively accept what are often viewed as the Western-oriented values and institutions of the international community, including humanitarian actors, their principles, and their notion of a right to humanitarian access. However, as governments increasingly set their own humanitarian priorities, these may not be easily reconciled with

traditional INGOs' assessment of the priorities, or their fundamental concepts of humanitarianism. Those who control humanitarian access are able to insist that support is driven by their assessment of demand, rather than by needs as determined by outside actors. In fragile contexts, where governments are usually a belligerent party in an internal conflict and often endeavour to manipulate humanitarian aid for their own purposes, the impartiality of their assessment of needs cannot be taken for granted.

Host governments may view the exercise of control over humanitarian organisations as an easy way to be seen to assert their sovereign authority. In many contexts, such stances play well with segments of the population. Some states with limited capacity to provide assistance are also finding ways to use the provision of assistance by humanitarian actors to reinforce their sovereignty.<sup>55</sup> Host and donor governments alike may restrict access to certain areas on security grounds with the aim of isolating populations, keeping INGOs out of sensitive areas, or covering up aspects of crises for political or military reasons.

While they might view themselves as a response to critical needs, humanitarian organisations can also be seen as part of the broader problem of civil society and international intervention. Many, if not most, multi-mandate organisations with broad ambitions, programmes, and partnership networks are often viewed as political actors with distinct agendas and alliances, often at odds with the goals, stated or otherwise, of the states in which they work. Fiori notes that many multi-mandate organisations 'acknowledge that they have wandered into more overtly political terrain'.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, the mere presence of INGOs and their aim to address acute suffering and victims of crisis can also be seen by governments as contributing to perceptions of lawlessness, a lack of capacity, or in some cases, government actions against its own population. NGOs which doggedly pursue access to conflict areas or other highly politicised crises can be viewed as particularly problematic. It has also been noted that international agencies in some high risk areas 'confess a tendency to avoid communication with governments',<sup>57</sup> which is unlikely to allay governmental reservations regarding their actions and intentions.

The tense, if not hostile, relationship that can develop in such contexts between governments and INGOs can have considerable implications for operational security. Negotiating acceptance and access can be arduous,

<sup>51</sup> Influence can be applied in the interest of humanitarian action, but with commercial and security interests dominant, this has been the exception rather than the norm.

<sup>52</sup> Khan and Cunningham (2013), p. 5139.

<sup>53</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Kent (2011), p. 952.

<sup>55</sup> Khan and Cunningham (2013), p. 5147.

<sup>56</sup> Fiori (2013), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 9.



and governments can also avoid providing INGOs with the information, access, or protection they require for their security. Also, where the regulations, restrictions, or obstructions of a government or other actor impede engagement and negotiation with other actors, particularly those who are potential security threats to humanitarian organisations, an organisation's ability to assess and attempt to mitigate risks to its security is significantly impaired. A 2011 OCHA study found that states 'have at times created unfavourable conditions and overt obstructions which impede secure humanitarian access... the stated or implied policy of some governments and inter-governmental organisations to ban all contact with entities designated as "terrorist" has severely undermined opportunities for humanitarian actors to negotiate'.<sup>58</sup>

### Legal Frameworks <sup>1</sup>

Though some question the relevance of international and national law in many crises, particularly conflicts, and its ability to protect humanitarian staff and civilians, it should still be seen as an important foundation and source for legitimacy for humanitarian action.

As many states continue to strengthen legal controls for humanitarian actors, organisations will have no choice but to engage with these legal systems, and are undoubtedly better off doing so in an informed and constructive manner, even if the legitimacy or ethics of such legal systems are suspect. They are almost surely in most circumstances better challenged through advocacy rather than violation.

<sup>1</sup> See Fisher (2007), for an analysis of the domestic regulation of humanitarian relief

### Competition for funds

Some respondents also felt that government policies or actions towards INGOs were driven by specific institutional attempts to extract funds from seemingly wealthy humanitarian organisations through staff permits, registration processes, and other supposed formalities.<sup>59</sup> It was also a belief that host governments perceive NGOs as competitors for financial resources, and obstruct INGO activities to make themselves appear effective conduits for donor funds.

In some cases, it was noted that challenging or refusing such fees or restrictions resulted in security threats, either in the form of confiscation of equipment (including

communications equipment and vehicles), surveillance, intimidation of national and international staff members, and the raiding or occupation of INGO facilities by security personnel. Such repercussions clearly demonstrate the risks involved in situations where humanitarians challenge the competence of governments or other actors in certain contexts. Some also felt that many organisations were unwilling to discuss these actions for fear of further repercussions, thereby weakening any potential collective response from the INGO community.

Tensions with national or local governments, or other bodies controlling access or imposing restrictions, also have the potential to fuel broader resentment with other parties, including the host community. That said, any correlation between the level of tension with a host government and acceptance by a community (or other relevant actors), would depend on the views the latter groups held toward the government. Hence, internal relationships between governments and other actors who may control access or influence security could have positive or negative effects on the security of humanitarian agencies.

There is clearly a range of opinions on how to deal with such matters. Some respondents felt that certain organisations take a structured and formal approach to financial constraints, and are willing to coordinate with other INGOs to ensure the legitimacy and consistency of the imposed restrictions and fees, while others are perceived to be unwilling to challenge any such demands in order to maintain superficially smooth relations, and to avoid any potential delays to the execution of their project plans. Restrictions on access may not always be primarily driven by a desire to control INGO activities, but a desire to minimise an INGO's exposure to risk (either due to legitimate concern, or to protect the reputation of the government), particularly in contexts where governments feel an obligation to provide protection but do not consider INGOs as a priority.

### Government control through 'protection'

Host government attempts to provide security for humanitarian organisations can also prove counterproductive or disguise other motivations. High-profile protective measures, such as armed convoys, can actually increase exposure to risk, and compromise perceptions of neutrality and independence.<sup>60</sup> Such measures are often driven by a concealed or overt desire to monitor or control the actions of humanitarian

<sup>58</sup> Egeland et al. (2011), p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> It was noted that in some countries, government officials issue ad hoc orders, or 'regulations' that are directed to individual NGOs and expected to be followed. However, such 'regulations' are never formally recorded and can change without notice.

<sup>60</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 8; see also Fisher (2007), p. 359.

organisations. Governments, host or donor, often impede or prohibit the pursuit of acceptance-based strategies through restrictions on access to opposition or other groups. Cumulatively, this can have a significant negative impact on an INGO's preferred approach to security management, and hamper broader relations with governments and other actors.

The actions of concerned foreign governments and multilateral organisations can in certain cases lead to – or at least be seen to excuse – the obstinate or even hostile attitudes of some host governments towards international and national NGOs. They often appear unwilling to acknowledge publically the difficulties and risks involved in working with some host governments. In certain cases, this can be due to the donors' investments in the legitimacy of such governments, and can be seen as a reckless commitment to superficial political solutions. In complex and insecure environments, this forgiving approach can exacerbate the divisions between humanitarian organisations and host governments.

While the trend toward governments that are more assertive – and often confrontational – in their relations with humanitarian INGOs is likely to continue, INGOs must consider other factors which might counter the potential negative repercussions for their operational security. For instance, the empowerment of citizens and communities through their own advancement, coupled with new communications technologies, may have a moderating effect on the actions of host governments towards INGOs. This may limit government ability to deny humanitarian needs and access, or to inadequately protect, if not threaten, the operational security of humanitarian INGOs. Similarly, in fragile contexts, INGOs' relations with other actors, particularly communities and armed opposition groups who might pose a threat to them, may be considerably more important for operational security than government relations.

## 4.2 The expanding range of actors in crises

While traditional humanitarian actors still dominate the international humanitarian landscape, new humanitarian actors and actors newly engaged in humanitarian action – including non-Western or faith-based (I)NGOs, host governments, new donors, the private sector, and militaries – now form a substantial and, in some contexts, highly effective and influential segment of the humanitarian sector. These new and emerging actors have already forced INGOs to

substantially alter their approaches to operational security in fragile states, and they will probably continue to influence INGOs' decisions, requiring ever-increasing investment in building and maintaining relationships. That said, some respondents felt that many Western INGOs still lack understanding of the multitude of other actors who are operating in what was formerly – and in some cases still is – viewed as their 'humanitarian space'.<sup>61</sup>

'[t]he future of humanitarian action is also conditioned by military, political, or civilian actors who can not only facilitate but also manipulate or obstruct humanitarian action.'

*Bernard (2011), p. 893*

Perhaps equally important for humanitarian actors will be how they differentiate themselves from others who share the same space and whose actions can substantially affect – or even threaten – their operational security.<sup>62</sup> Crises are now more crowded, not only with actors seeking to engage in humanitarian action, but also with those drawn in by divergent aims that may not be readily visible, and are often contrary to the objectives of humanitarian action. As they may intentionally or unintentionally exert influence on the humanitarian landscape, it is vital to understand such actors, how others perceive them and how they perceive INGOs. It is also vital for INGOs to understand the potential impact of such actors on their security, partly in order to differentiate themselves in the eyes of those with whom they must build acceptance. However, a number of respondents noted that project staff with responsibility for security often did not have the time, resources, or training to analyse and understand such actors, which may present considerable risks.

'While the decreasing proximity of humanitarian organisations to the people they claim to help is partly due to security constraints, and partly due to national sovereignty considerations and host government control of aid, there is another major reason. This is the deliberate choice of most UN agencies and many large international NGOs to effectively outsource their response – and the risks associated with it – to local partners.'

*Daccord (2013)*

<sup>61</sup> See Collinson and Elhawary (2012), Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010), and Magone, Neuman & Weissman (2011) for discussion on varying definitions of 'humanitarian space', its origins and usefulness. Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau have suggested abandoning the term altogether: 'By conflating a range of largely disconnected phenomena under this single heading, humanitarian organizations have generated an unnecessarily gloomy outlook on the prospects for effective humanitarian operations. This conflation is a barrier to analyzing and responding to the very real challenges of security and access facing humanitarian organizations. The alternative is to focus on constituent elements, carefully examine the context-specific nature of the challenges, and then seek to address them issue-by-issue'. n. pag.

<sup>62</sup> It has been observed that local stakeholders often perceive entities as diverse as the private sector, militaries, religious organisations, and humanitarian actors as indistinguishable. See Fast and O'Neill (2010).

## The end of the traditional actors' de facto monopoly

Traditional humanitarian actors are inescapably – and often uncomfortably – bound to these new actors who, as Bernard notes, 'define the humanitarian response in their own terms, challenging the de facto monopoly of Western organisations'.<sup>63</sup> Some respondents cited the increasing numbers, diversity, and ambitions of such organisations as a significant factor in complicating security management in certain contexts. Others noted that some of the new actors who operate safely in fragile states where Western INGOs haven't been able to operate, may not have novel approaches but simply not yet have acquired the reputation and baggage of traditional actors.

While traditional INGOs acknowledge the significance of new actors, they continue to promote the dominance and universality of their own Western model of humanitarian action. Collinson and Elhawary have noted that the humanitarian system 'can act as a vector of Western values and interests that are not universally shared in the places where it intervenes'.<sup>64</sup> This attitude may be contributing – perhaps unwittingly – to the perception of 'international humanitarianism's functionality as a tool of Western hegemony'.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, efforts by traditional INGOs to portray themselves as actors who respect local communities may be undermined. Detachment from other aspects of Western intervention becomes more complicated too, in turn influencing local perceptions – critical for acceptance and security in fragile contexts.

National and local NGOs, as well as non-Western INGOs, are significant actors in many contexts, but are not yet integrated into the 'humanitarian community'.<sup>66</sup> The long history of Western INGOs in certain contexts is but one of the factors that has driven the rise of capable and influential national and local NGOs in many fragile states, where the involvement of external actors of any variety can often be problematic. That is not to suggest that organisations less dependent on Western support can automatically operate more safely in fragile contexts, or that the risks they face can be judged only on the basis of their official origin. Indeed, while the identity of an organisation is often derived from its origins, its identity is also associated to its partnerships, funding sources and the origins of its staff. The variety of influencing factors makes the management of perceptions very complex for any organisation, and though it may be easier for independent or small and focused organisations, no organisation can fully avoid

the volatility of an outsider's perceptions, and the attendant security risks.

The management of perceptions is further complicated by the fact that in some countries very little is required in order to qualify or register as an (I)NGO. This is despite the various initiatives promoting humanitarian standards and certification. A broad range of organisations and activities are covered under the terminology of 'NGO' and, in certain contexts, 'NGO' can be a discredited term, associated with ineffective and self-serving foreign organisations.

## The rise of partnerships and sub-contracting

Though Bernard states that 'the model of intervention for humanitarian organisations generally remains that of the unilateral deployment of Western expertise to support the victims of the "South"',<sup>67</sup> the modes of implementation are changing. Some respondents felt that the traditional model was no longer predominant, particularly in certain fragile states. Indeed, here it was felt by some that programmes run by standalone INGOs were becoming the exception, with partnerships, consortiums, and other forms of collaboration becoming the norm, often involving international and national actors.

While on one hand a move away from an operational model dependent on foreign (and often predominantly Western) staff should be welcomed where local capacity is sufficient, such a shift can be undermined if decision-making is not concurrently localised and those who retain control over critical aspects of a programme lose all proximity to those they intend to assist.

It was also noted that many nominal 'partnerships', including those between international and national NGOs, are in fact quite rigid hierarchical relationships better described as sub-contracting.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, Western INGOs are also often sub-contractors themselves within complex hierarchies. Such arrangements can have objectives and funding streams that flow from donor country to multilateral fund, or from organisation to INGO to national NGO before finally reaching their implementing agency (or agencies), where they effectively 'compete with local organisations or [act] as an expensive "middleman"'.<sup>69</sup>

As the variety of relationships and layers of contracts mount, so do security risks. Identities and perceptions become more intertwined and difficult to manage. The risk of corruption or mismanagement increases, and accountability is harder to ensure. Collinson and Duffield have noted the perverse effects of such detachment:

<sup>63</sup> Bernard (2011), p. 893.

<sup>64</sup> Collinson and Elhawary (2012), p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> Fiori (2013), p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Healy and Tiller (2013), p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Bernard (2011), p. 895.

<sup>68</sup> Nightingale has observed that the reality of partnerships with local organisations does not match the policy commitments of many organisations, with southern partners viewed as only pipelines for delivery, and local capacities frequently, and often systematically, undermined or excluded. Nightingale (2012), p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> Van Brabant (2010), p. 12.

By withdrawing from the point of implementation, liability for negative outcomes can be avoided by claiming ignorance: reference to the security risks and obstacles involved in monitoring outcomes provides an alibi for not knowing; meanwhile, any vested interests in the status quo may seek to exaggerate the scale of the danger.<sup>70</sup>

Partnerships, consortiums, subcontracting and other types of collaborations can therefore have direct and negative effects not only on the security of those involved, but also on the broader perception of humanitarian actors.

### Remote Management

Remote management, or remote control programming, has also become a common approach for organisations seeking to operate in insecure contexts. By removing international staff, particularly staff from Western countries or from regions party to the conflict, from an insecure environment, organisations seek to reduce their overall exposure to risk. However, this is seen by many as simply transferring risk from international or Western staff to local or regional staff, and is not without its critics.<sup>1</sup> In some contexts, this has become, often unintentionally, a long-term operation model, while in others it is a recurrent but temporary arrangement driven by specific security incidents and evacuations. It is also important to note that this approach represents a trade-off between the proximity of international staff to a population and the security of a programme.

Remote management is often conflated with partnerships between INGOs and national or local NGOs, which are often programmatic choices driven by factors aside from operational security. The partnership model has long been a programming staple for many international actors, and as a result of many factors, including those which will be examined in this report, has become an increasingly prominent and influential operating model for humanitarian agencies. This is just one example of how security often fits awkwardly into broader organisational planning.

<sup>1</sup> See Behn and Kingston (2012); also Collinson and Duffield (2013), pp. 7-8

Transfer of risk<sup>71</sup> to national or local organisations, and duty of care towards local staff remain highly sensitive topics not often acknowledged or examined forthrightly, according to some key informants. Collinson and Duffield have suggested that for some organisations risk transfer to partner or subcontracted organisations may be an 'easier alternative to resourcing and supporting more active acceptance-based security management'.<sup>72</sup> According to Van Brabant, in regard to risk transfer, 'no credible framework for decision-making – which should also incorporate moral dilemmas – seems to have emerged yet'.<sup>73</sup> It was also noted that in some cases, where larger NGOs have held grants, they have not passed on sufficient funds to partners or sub-contractors to pay for what they themselves would consider basic risk mitigation measures. If this is representative of wider practice within sector, INGOs will need to re-evaluate their approach to collaboration with local organisations. As such organisations mature, they are likely to take a more assertive role within the sector, and better articulate their own approaches to operational security and the support they require, either through INGO partners, or directly to donors.

### Diasporas

Diasporas also play a role in the aforementioned new and evolving relationships. While diaspora populations may mirror their home communities, they are often distinct as a result of their comparative wealth, mobility and access to external actors. In some cases, such as the Somali diaspora, members are deeply involved in the politics, conflicts, and economies of their home countries. There, as well as in conflicts such as Syria, diasporas play an active role in leading and/or facilitating aid work.<sup>74</sup> In fragile contexts, where access and acceptance are more difficult to build and maintain, diasporas can provide valuable and accessible contacts and contextual information, and assist with crisis management. However, they can also compromise perceptions of impartiality and neutrality, as they may not be objective sources of information or contacts, and may have their own competing aims. In this regard, it is also therefore worth noting that as much as diasporas can assist humanitarian actors, they can also assist belligerents. As these communities potentially become wealthier and more mobile, and technology allows for ever-closer links with their homes communities, the relevance of diaspora communities for the humanitarian sector is likely to grow.

<sup>70</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 25.

<sup>71</sup> See Behn and Kingston (2012); Wille & Fast (2013), p. 7; Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010).

<sup>72</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> Van Brabant (2010), p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> See Weissman, "Scaling up aid in Syria: the role of the diaspora network."

## Private sector as a provider of assistance

'Private sector', like NGO, is a broad and generic term, inadequate for demarcating the different types of for-profit organisations now engaged in crises, and their varying forms of engagement with other actors.<sup>75</sup> Private sector engagement comes in many forms, including as donors, service providers and partners, and through direct commercial engagement in crises, both within and outside the humanitarian sphere.<sup>76</sup>

Many varied elements of the private sector are now engaged in the provision of humanitarian assistance, from banks and mobile phone operators to engineering firms, as well as private military and security firms – which have become increasingly prominent actors in some fragile contexts.<sup>77</sup> Collinson and Duffield have suggested that this is part of a 'wider tendency among aid agencies – particularly UN agencies – to contract out operational activities to commercial providers in response to insecurity and as a means of circumventing internal security, human resources and insurance conditions and restrictions'.<sup>78</sup>

Such engagement may be the result of a private firm's presence in a crisis, or a conscious choice in relation to their core business, at times in order to capitalise on opportunities which may arise from, or subsequent to, a crisis. Hence, they may not pursue humanitarian action as an objective in its own right, but engage in activities similar to traditional humanitarianism as a business decision or charitable gesture, or a combination of the two. These actors may not present the same challenges as other private sector actors discussed below, but nonetheless add to the already crowded spectrum of actors with whom INGOs must co-exist, and whose approaches to operational security INGOs must understand.

Other elements of the private sector are now widely engaged in the provision of assistance through models familiar to INGOs. Some respondents felt it was important to distinguish between private firms – viewed as mere implementers of donor aid programmes, or contracted providers of assistance – and principled and self-propelled (albeit externally funded), humanitarian organisations. However some key informants also noted that many NGOs have long straddled that line, something which may provide some of the explanation for their wariness of profit-seeking enterprises.

Numerous respondents cited having encountered a disingenuous approach to – if not outright disregard for – humanitarian principles by some private sector actors,

including cases in which for-profit contractors had managed to register with host governments as NGOs. Some see this as a result of a myopic focus on project-specific deliverables without regard to the broader implications of the actions involved (a behaviour not unknown amongst INGOs), such as the use of armed security and what has been perceived by some as an intentionally opaque presentation of the nature of their organisations.<sup>79</sup> Some respondents viewed the presence of private sector actors as a significant factor driving certain INGOs to distance themselves from the broader 'aid community', and to pursue acceptance strategies based on differentiation.

### Deterrence and the use of armed protection

The use of armed protection is among the most controversial and extreme forms of protection and deterrence, measures which pose a counter-threat – a difficult fit with the humanitarian ethos – in order to discourage targeting.

While the use of armed protection has become the unwelcome norm in certain contexts, even amongst the most staunchly independent and acceptance-driven organizations, it remains a measure of last resort in most contexts, and one which undoubtedly carries as well as confronts risks.

One of the risks armed protection carries is the relationships with armed actors such protection necessitates. Becoming dependent on an armed actor for protection, regardless of their origin or relationship to other actors in a given context, undoubtedly affects an organisation's independence, and can have complicated and often negative effects on how an organisation is perceived by others, and how NGOs in general may be perceived.

### Other sides of the private sector

In addition to the issues described above, it is also worth noting that private sector actors may not always be welcomed by local populations, and that they may contribute to instability in crisis contexts. Some respondents felt that there are certain actors, such as the extractive industries, that have similar security concerns to humanitarian actors and are willing to maintain dialogue with humanitarian organisations. However the

<sup>75</sup> From the humanitarian perspective, 'private sector' has been used to refer to 'that part of the economy that is owned and controlled by individuals and organisations through private ownership'. HFP (2013); see also Kent and Burke (2011), pp. 19-22.

<sup>76</sup> Kent and Burke (2011), p. 19; See also HFP (2013); Bailey (2014).

<sup>77</sup> See Collinson and Duffield (2013), pp. 19-22.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> See also Collinson and Elhawary (2012), p. 22.



security approaches of the two often differ significantly, particularly with regard to the pursuit of acceptance. Large multi-nationals usually have very close links to local governments, who themselves are often belligerents in fragile contexts, and may ensure access for firms through force rather than acceptance.

Some NGOs are willing to reach out to the private sector to build security-focused relationships, even if these are discreet. Others repel all contact to avoid any undue associations that could potentially taint perceptions of their independence. In general, well-informed humanitarian organisations are thought to know who the potentially relevant actors are, but will approach them only as necessary. Such security matters are often addressed in private in order to avoid potentially negative perceptions and the disclosure of sensitive information in public.

As local, regional, and global competition for resources grows, and elements of the private sector take greater risks to access fragile contexts, how INGOs co-exist with actors from the private sector will become increasingly relevant for their operational security.

### Militaries

In recent decades, military interventions carried out in the name of ‘humanitarianism’ or the protection of civilians have left many NGOs wary of engaging with domestic and foreign militaries. INGOs commonly fear their neutrality will be compromised and therefore try to avoid putting themselves at risk by associating with military forces.

In some contexts, such as Afghanistan, a ‘comprehensive approach’ to state building has become the norm, with development and humanitarian work alongside, or as an extension of military operations. Some respondents saw this as the end of humanitarian INGO independence. Even those who are not willing to engage with such approaches are often inescapably associated with them in countries where Western militaries are present.

The anti-Western sentiment fostered by the divisive politics and conflicts of the Global War on Terror era has left many humanitarian organisations – not always unwittingly – on the side of primarily US-led interventions. In general, when conflicts involve foreign militaries with the ostensible aim of protecting civilians, the conflation of actors and objectives can be

exacerbated.<sup>80</sup> These situations are therefore ‘likely to create an amalgam between humanitarian and military action in the eyes of the state against which the battle is being waged’.<sup>81</sup>

Many have also noted a marked decrease in respect for the neutrality of certain NGO facilities, particularly medical facilities, both by non-state armed groups as well as foreign and domestic militaries.<sup>82</sup> This is at times to serve overt military aims – such as tracking wounded combatants or civilians in medical facilities – but also serves as an act of reprisal, seeking to target humanitarian workers specifically or simply as easy proxies for the broader international community.

### INGO coordination with the UN and UN integrated missions

Coordination between NGOs and the UN is also critical. Perceived by many as dysfunctional,<sup>83</sup> the relationship has received greater attention in recent years.<sup>84</sup> The Saving Lives Together (SLT) framework<sup>85</sup> was intended to improve security-related coordination, but a 2010 Christian Aid study reported that awareness of the framework at field level remains poor, and implementation minimal.<sup>86</sup> It also noted that in some contexts INGOs prefer NGO-only security coordination mechanisms, and remain wary of collaborating with the UN.<sup>87</sup>

‘Due to divergent mandates and threat profiles, humanitarian NGOs tend to adopt softer approaches to security, which are not always compatible with protection and deterrence strategies pursued by the UN. NGOs need to be seen as independent entities adhering to humanitarian principles in order to be accepted within local communities and in complex environments by the various groups holding power and having control over violence levels. Open collaboration with the UN on security issues could severely affect programme implementation as well as staff security.’

*Micheni, K. and Kuhanendran, J. (2010), p. 11*

A number of respondents voiced concerns surrounding UN integrated missions and the role of UN peacekeeping forces in humanitarian action. Such integrated UN approaches are seen as jeopardising the

<sup>80</sup> Collinson and Duffield have commented that the reactions of aid actors in such circumstances may simply compound the problem: ‘aid actors have become key participants in militarised international interventions and, as such, have simultaneously militarised themselves so as to remain operational in these contexts.’ p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> Bernard (2011), p. 894.

<sup>82</sup> See generally: ICRC (2011); Human Rights Watch (2011).

<sup>83</sup> Sloddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012) reported an inconsistent flow of security information and information on host state relations between NGOs and the UN, p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> See Micheni and Kuhanendran (2010); Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010).

<sup>85</sup> UN IASC (2011).

<sup>86</sup> Micheni, K. and Kuhanendran, J. (2010), p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

independence of individual organisations who partner with particular UN agencies, as they are then unavoidably tethered to other UN entities and objectives, including those concerned with politics and security.<sup>88</sup> Key informants also voiced significant concerns that these issues present a broad and durable challenge to the credibility of humanitarian organisations and principles. However, Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau have suggested that they may still be preferable to the dysfunctional alternative: 'It is better to have integrated UN missions with strong political mandates, even accepting that this may in some instances compromise the purity of humanitarian action, than to revert to a situation where humanitarian action is a substitute for political solutions'.<sup>89</sup>

'NGOs often highlight concern with a perceived lack of partiality in the UN's position to act as a mediator with the host state, in particular where the UN is considered to be supportive of the government despite evidence of human rights abuses and a failure to uphold IHL.'

*Stoddard, Harmer, and Hughes (2012), p. 10*

### The roles of national and international staff

It might be thought that if an organisation (regardless of its origin or funding) can find necessary capacity, individual or organisational, for humanitarian activities locally or regionally, it should be less dependent on Western internationals, and its operations less affected by associated security concerns. National staff also bring invaluable contextual, cultural and linguistic understanding to organisations in support of more assured operational security.

However the use of national staff comes with its own risks.<sup>90</sup> Nationals from other regions or even villages within a country can, for instance, be considered as 'foreign' as internationals. Ethnic, religious, economic, clan or other differences, as well as their positions of relative power as part of the aid economy, can create very significant security challenges for individuals, their kin and their organisations. For many humanitarian organisations, the perceived impartiality of experienced international staff, derived from both their detachment from a context and their experience with the organisation's approach to its principles, is an important determinant when placing international staff, and one that can potentially bolster operational security.

Many respondents felt that the pool of skilled and experienced national staff still remains too small in most fragile contexts. This pool should grow as (I)NGO operations persist and individuals gain skills and experience. However as crises render situations less hospitable, many skilled nationals can and do seek opportunities elsewhere, including as expatriated staff within humanitarian organisations. This is only one driver of the expanding role of non-Western expatriated staff within most INGOs. In many contexts, expatriates of certain nationalities or ethnicities are exposed to greatly differing security risks. The deployment of expatriates based on their nationality is sometimes a strategic choice made by INGOs, given that in effect it is sometimes an operational necessity for acceptance by other actors.

Organisations will probably be forced to continue to weigh the risks to individual staff members and the organisation against the need for specific competencies, albeit considering a wider range of factors and having a wider range of capable staff available. However, allowing an organisation's staffing to be influenced by the dynamics of a context can present challenges to an organisation's independence, and in the extreme, force it to choose staff based on gender, nationality, ethnicity, or other criteria.

Another important result of this crowded landscape is the increasing competition for local staff with other actors, humanitarian or otherwise. Most NGOs cannot compete in terms of salary or job security, particularly with the UN and private sector organisations. Consequently, the quality of the staff that is retained and the institutional memory of an organisation can be impacted negatively, which can have important implications for operational security.

### Local and transnational armed groups and criminal networks

The presence of militant and other armed groups, and criminal organisations or networks, is far more directly detrimental for the security of humanitarian actors. These groups have become increasingly fragmented in many fragile contexts, and many reject outright the perceived intervention of foreign actors.<sup>91</sup> Paradoxically, many depend on their links – or at least promote their solidarity – with foreign militant movements. Some respondents felt that there was little if anything that could be done to mitigate the risks posed by these groups, particularly the risk of kidnapping. As a consequence, their presence has led to an increased

<sup>88</sup> Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Collinson and Duffield have observed that with 'many organisations having failed to invest in more systematic approaches to context analysis, a common default position is instead to claim reliance on the supposedly superior situational knowledge of national and local staff'. p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> Bernard (2011), p. 893.

number of contexts becoming off-limits to Western INGOs.

Through such armed groups, grievances from one context can now manifest themselves in others. INGOs operating in contexts with lower perceived levels of risk can become the 'low-hanging fruit' for groups which operate across contexts. Monitoring the risks posed by such groups across contexts will almost certainly become an ever-greater challenge for INGOs.

Even in contexts where such actors do not completely reject the presence of foreign or Western organisations, engaging in dialogue with them can often be impeded by host governments. Local governments may deny or downplay the existence of criminal and armed groups given the threat that acknowledgement of and interaction with these groups poses to the competence of the state. In some circumstances, any links are perceived to confer legitimacy, or have the potential to expose the conduct of the government in a conflict.

### 4.3 Diverse interpretations of humanitarian principles

As noted above, the increasing diversity of actors, and the persistently diverse interpretations of humanitarian principles amongst traditional humanitarian actors greatly complicates the 'security through acceptance' model historically used by NGOs. Though humanitarian principles have been codified in various respects,<sup>92</sup> their interpretation and application has always been, and remains, diverse, ambiguous<sup>93</sup> and contentious.<sup>94</sup> This is unlikely to change. As one key informant noted, revisiting traditional humanitarian principles is as unlikely to happen as achieving consensus on their interpretation and application.

This said, and regardless of whom is engaging in the debate, it is not the rhetoric of humanitarian principles that is most relevant for operational security, but the interpretation and application of the principles in humanitarian operations. Even then, it is perceptions of their interpretation and application which may be of most relevance for operational security.<sup>95</sup> Many key informants saw an inescapable trade-off between principles and practicality, with the former being compromised in exchange for operational freedom.

Despite the illusion that there was once a golden age of humanitarian space and access, there is now a growing recognition that humanitarian space does not 'simply' exist and thus it cannot be claimed. Whatever its parameters, humanitarian space must be developed and earned through engagement with the full range of actors, humanitarian or otherwise.<sup>96</sup>

#### Erosion or dilution of principles from within the traditional humanitarian sector

Both traditional and non-traditional actors have made questionable choices that have impacted the perceived legitimacy of international humanitarian action. Egeland et al. noted that while 'calling for respect for humanitarian principles, in the recent past many organisations have also willingly compromised a principled approach in their own conduct through close alignment with political and military activities and actors'.<sup>97</sup>

'The undermining of humanitarian principles presents more than merely theoretical or legal problems; it creates practical impediments to access, acceptance, and security for humanitarian operations.'

*Egeland et al (2011), p. 48*

Few organisations seem willing to concede their culpability in the misuse or distortion of humanitarian principles.<sup>98</sup> In this respect, respondents cited a detachment between headquarters and field levels about the idea and role of humanitarian principles. At headquarters, traditional humanitarian principles seemed to be essential and well understood,<sup>99</sup> or at least used as rhetoric; at field level, however, they are often poorly understood or circumvented for the sake of operational goals. This disparity can further undermine the credibility and understanding of humanitarian principles – both inside and outside the humanitarian sector.

<sup>92</sup> See ICRC (1965); IFRC (1994); UN GA Res 46/182 (1991).

<sup>93</sup> Kent, Armstrong and Obrecht (2013), p. 11.

<sup>94</sup> See generally: Macdonald, I. and Valenza, A. (2012); Daccord (2013); Hubert and Brassard-Boudreau (2010).

<sup>95</sup> Macdonald and Valenza (2012) have noted that the 'perception of being a principled humanitarian actor can reinforce acceptance.' p. 9.

<sup>96</sup> See generally: Collinson and Elhawary (2012).

<sup>97</sup> Egeland et al. (2011), p. 4; see also Labbe (2012), p. 22.

<sup>98</sup> See Saillard (2013).

<sup>99</sup> Macdonald and Valenza have noted that 'Increased awareness of the risks humanitarian actors face and the chronic insecurity of the environments in which they operate, combined with the recognition by many agencies of the need to strengthen staff understanding of security policies and protocols, have led the principles to be increasingly integrated into security management, including guidance on acceptance strategies'. p. 6.



'In South East Asia, neutrality and impartiality have been seen as secondary to the principle of non-interference. In China, where the notion of the state as guarantor of the welfare of its people is grounded in Confucian tradition, the independence of humanitarian agencies from governments is not considered to be necessary, desirable, or possible. And in Latin America, support for those affected by conflict, extreme poverty and disaster has often been guided by a solidarity that precludes neutrality and impartiality.'

*Fiori (2013), p.5*

There are undoubtedly organisations which are less effective, or less principled, in humanitarian action than others. This is particularly evident in their approach to other actors and to their own operational security. Many respondents felt this had a disproportionately negative impact on other INGOs, and often tainted the overall image of the sector. Numerous key informants felt that some organisations were willing to knowingly cut corners on security management in order to access certain contexts and funds. This is seen to be done through the downplaying of security risks to donors, and potentially within the organisations themselves, as well through a lack of proper risk management and preparedness.

### **Expanding the range of actors under the mantle of 'humanitarian'**

Many of the new or emerging actors discussed earlier have no obligation, nor perhaps any inclination, to conform to the boundaries of the traditional humanitarian system. Indeed, they can, and often do, define 'humanitarian' in their own terms, not feeling obliged to follow the structures created by traditional actors. Accordingly, some respondents reported that many host governments are not sensitive to – or interested in – the challenges inherent to delivering assistance in compliance with fundamental humanitarian principles. Other informants believed that non-Western orientations regard humanitarian principles as overly theoretical and as a result think it impossible to apply them – particularly the principle of neutrality – practically. This could be partially attributed to the traditional assertion that principles are inviolable, which some feel fails to concede the existence of a more nuanced reality which demands that principles must be interpreted and applied on a case-by-case basis.

### **(Mis)use of the term 'humanitarian'**

In the past two decades the term 'humanitarian' has been stretched and contorted to cover everything up to and including military intervention, in the name of protecting civilians and enforcing humanitarian access. While many humanitarian NGOs decry this usage and the distortion of their ethos, some forget that in certain cases humanitarian organisations have been complicit in military interventions in the name of humanitarianism.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the concept of the 'Responsibility to Protect' has intensified widespread doubts about the motivation or purpose of actions labelled as 'humanitarian'.<sup>101</sup>

Numerous key informants felt that certain organisations had taken part in broader efforts to stabilise conflicts without adequately considering the risks to the wider humanitarian community given the threat posed to independent and neutral humanitarian action. As Bernard notes, such an approach may not only be 'questionable in terms of principles and perception, but it may also turn out to be inefficient, if it fails to win active and sustainable support from the population'.<sup>102</sup> A focus on security from international NGOs, whether warranted or not, can also arouse the suspicions of host governments, or provide a convenient excuse for accusations of non-humanitarian activities or interests.

These factors, individually and combined, have no doubt increased the challenges for INGOs seeking to define themselves as humanitarian actors, to defend the traditional interpretations of humanitarian principles, and to distinguish themselves from actors with other, often conflicting ambitions. This conflation of identities and objectives undoubtedly influences ideas around perception and acceptance and by extension, operational security.

### **Expanding the range of activities (multi-mandate organisations)**

Some key informants felt that the increased security risks faced by all INGOs in many contexts were in part driven by the conflation of what is viewed as traditional humanitarian action – the provision of water, food, shelter, and medical relief – with other activities including protection, advocacy, and other human rights-related work. Such activities are often viewed as inherently more political than the provision of relief. Along with the expansion of what falls under the category of humanitarian action,<sup>103</sup> the proliferation of multi-mandate organisations with concurrent development and humanitarian programming in the

<sup>100</sup> See Reiff (2002).

<sup>101</sup> Bernard (2011), p. 894.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Khan and Cunningham have also noted that the expansion of humanitarian action has made it 'much more likely to encroach on what states regard as their exclusive affairs' (p. 5140), potentially exacerbating tensions with host governments which, as discussed above, can have considerable impact for operational security.

same context (or the outright dissolution of the long-held concept of the development-humanitarian divide) is also felt to have not only complicated efforts to communicate the ambitions and identity of many actors, but also issues around negotiating access and security. One respondent noted that many prominent INGOs have moved from focusing on specific types of assistance to a broader range of activities, often less effectively. Hence, these organisations may struggle to explain their identity and aims, and to demonstrate their value – all essential for building acceptance.

#### **Contexts/actors who consider principles irrelevant (militants, kidnap threats)**

The proliferation of actors to whom humanitarian principles are irrelevant is perhaps a more critical factor affecting INGO operational security. Armed, terrorist, criminal and hybrid groups now operate across many fragile states, with little connection to local contexts. Often, though not always, the absence of the rule of law is a key determinant of both the presence of these groups and their ability to operate and pose a threat to INGOs. The presence of such actors in many fragile states and the proliferation of profit-driven kidnapping are among the best demonstrations of the limits of the acceptance-based approach to security in certain contexts, as well as perhaps the limitations of all but the strongest forms of protection or deterrence.

#### **4.4 Growing international significance and scrutiny of humanitarian crises**

‘During the last twenty years, humanitarian action has ceased being a simple epiphenomenon of international relations. It has gained real influence. It has also become a support for the projectionist will of certain states, including some emerging countries. Its future will depend on the evolution of crises and of political and military actors, but also on its own ability to enhance its quality, its principles, and in particular its independence vis-à-vis donors and recipients.’

Bernard (2011), p. 897

Humanitarian crises no longer play out on the margins of international relations. While many crises still fail to attract the humanitarian, political, or media attention they deserve, others, particularly dramatic and large-scale natural disasters and conflicts, are now subject to previously unknown levels of political, military and media attention.

While on one hand increased international attention to humanitarian crises and fragile states can lead to a better prepared, funded, staffed, and more accountable humanitarian sector, it can exacerbate many of the complications within and divisions across the humanitarian landscape, undermine the principles of humanitarian action, and distort the realities of humanitarian action. Again, perceptions (sometimes different from reality) of the principles and actions of humanitarian actors may determine their acceptance and security as much as their actual actions and intentions.

A recent editorial in *The Lancet* highlighted the disfiguring effects international scrutiny can have when crises are ‘viewed through the distorted lens of politics, economics, religion, and history in that some lives are judged more important than others’, resulting in ‘an implicit hierarchy of crisis situations further influenced by artificial criteria’.<sup>104</sup>

‘The years since the end of the Cold War have often been characterised as a period of increased politicisation of humanitarian action, with Western states more actively and explicitly seeking to recruit humanitarian agencies in their drive to spread liberal democracy and stabilise “fragile states”, and with the merging of security and development.’

Fiori (2013), p.13

The politicisation of crises and increasing scrutiny of humanitarian actors, at global, national and local levels, has made it more difficult for humanitarian NGOs to maintain their independence and crucially, has influenced perceptions of their independence by other actors who play a role in INGO security. This is in part a result of the high stakes of operating in fragile states, but it is also a product of the phenomenal growth of the humanitarian sector and the influence it has accumulated. Debate on the future of humanitarian action has extended beyond the introspective and cloistered deliberations of the past.

As the scale, complexity, and awareness of humanitarian crises continue to grow, governments also increasingly understand the impact of crises on societies. Governments progressively recognise that incompetently managed crises undermine their authority, both domestically and internationally, and can therefore present a threat to their very survival.<sup>105</sup>

The significance now given to humanitarian crises not only weighs increasingly heavily on affected

<sup>104</sup> The Lancet (2010).  
<sup>105</sup> Kent (2011), p. 950.

governments, but also on the broader range of humanitarian and political actors, including neighbouring and donor governments, as well as international organisations. Such high stakes left some respondents with the impression that some organisations are focused on chasing the next emergency in order to be there first, plant the proverbial flag, and reap the programmatic and organisational benefits of public and private emergency funding.

### **Increasingly overt politicisation and instrumentalisation of aid**

The political dimensions of humanitarian action are by no means a new or emergent phenomenon, but in the eyes of many, the depth and complexity of political involvement in current crises is unprecedented – and only likely to grow. Kent notes that the ‘instrumentalisation of humanitarian assistance, where assistance is used in an almost surreptitious way to achieve “non-humanitarian objectives”, will become more overtly calculated and political’.<sup>106</sup> It is not only the politicisation of individual actors, but also the range of politically motivated actors involved in humanitarian response that is likely to affect crises in the future, requiring greater attention from INGOs to manage their independence, perceptions, and security. However, such a range of actors could also present opportunities for INGOs, where they require political will not available through traditional channels to mitigate the influence of other actors who may negatively impact their security.

### **Increasing focus on fragile contexts**

Fragile and conflict-affected states have a particular claim on the broader aid community’s attention as they face severe development challenges: weak institutional capacity and governance, political instability, and, often, on-going violence or the legacy of past violence. Though there has been growing donor interest in the complex issues of fragile states for some time, the impact of this attention has thus far been modest,<sup>1</sup> and perhaps over concentrated in countries with limited capacity to absorb funding.<sup>2</sup> The most recent incarnation, the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States<sup>3</sup> signed by the G7+ group, which includes 19 fragile and conflict-affected states, shows promise as a framework for post-conflict transition processes, but has yet to be sufficiently implemented to bear results.

<sup>1</sup> ODI (2011)

<sup>2</sup> Foresti, Denne and Metcalfe (2011)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.g7plus.org/new-deal-document/>

### **Growing competition, pressure to act and risk tolerance**

According to some respondents, the mounting focus on crises, as accentuated by the recent and on-going conflicts in the Arab world, is driving INGOs to heighten their risk thresholds without the appropriate capacity to assess and manage attendant security risks. This can be motivated by pressure from donors, competition between organisations to be seen to be as close as possible to the heart of the crisis or even a lack of understanding of the risks and the inability to keep pace with rapid contextual changes.

In the same vein, key informants also noted that there are too many bidders for certain contracts in highly insecure countries. The ambitions of donors in these countries can result in highly lucrative contracts, which can be an effective means of keeping an organisation afloat. Many respondents also cited a general belief that if an organisation states that the risks in a given context are too high there will always be another organisation ready to step up and deem the risk acceptable in order to win the grant.

Some also cited that donors were exerting more control over decisions about with whom INGOs could or should work in highly politicised contexts – a development which clearly has the potential to hamper the independence and perceived neutrality of an organisation.

### **The evolving role of donors**

Many respondents also cited the broad changes that have crept into donor-INGO relations in relation to operational security. INGOs are increasingly viewed as having become predominantly service providers in programmes largely designed by donors, with traditional grants for programmes conceived by INGOs themselves increasingly rare. As a result many INGOs and other organisations are now seen as mere implementing partners as opposed to their traditional self-perception of being the drivers of humanitarian action. Additionally, donors – as well as others, including affected communities – monitor and evaluate programmes more actively. Certainly, greater transparency increasingly enhanced by new technology and the expected commensurate increase in effectiveness is not undesirable. However the growing scrutiny (and in some cases direction) from donors can greatly influence operational choices and potentially compromise independence, impartiality and, by extension, security.

## Security Budgets

The increase in dedicated security personnel, as well as the availability and quality of security training for other personnel, is of course heavily dependent on funding. While many respondents cited an increase in available funding for security, most felt that it remained insufficient, as well as vulnerable when budgets are tight (it is seen by some as a trade-off with other operational priorities), particularly for implementing major organisation-wide changes to security policy, or for responding to critical incidents. It is worth noting that some respondents felt that the cuts to humanitarian aid and subsequent sudden downscaling of activities in certain contexts has compounded security risks in certain contexts, as it leaves NGOs unable to fulfil what are seen as commitments to communities, and undermines claims of solidarity and the broader impartiality of the aid system.

While in the past costs such as communications equipment, training, and protective measures consumed the bulk of security budgets, relatively new services, such as private security providers, armed escorts, and analysis were demanding more financial resources, which many do not feel they have access to. However, it was noted by numerous respondents that some donors are now more aware of the realities of managing security for NGOs in fragile states, and are not only willing to provide the resources necessary, but also accept the challenges of operating in such environments and allow for most flexible programme plans as a result.

While some respondents noted that certain bilateral donors are now willing to fund security-related costs and want security plans included in project proposals, this is seen as the exception rather than the rule. Some organisations are thought to include generic and vague security plans in order to satisfy such requirements without inviting what they feel to be undue scrutiny or making the project appear unviable due to insecurity. Others are seen as reluctant to include security costs in project proposals in order to avoid costs which could be interpreted as indirectly linked to project activities. Some respondents felt that the lack of involvement of security personnel in the proposal process and the inexperience of security personnel with donor relations and proposal writing were hindrances to the integration of security risk management into programme design.

<sup>107</sup> Pantuliano, Mackintosh and Elhawary (2011), p. 11; see also Mackintosh and Duplat (2013).

<sup>108</sup> Pantuliano, Mackintosh and Elhawary (2011), p. 12.

## Criminalisation of aid

Humanitarian INGOs have always needed to cultivate relations and acceptance with armed groups, including those often deemed terrorists, such as Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Various governments and institutions have banned contact or 'material support' to such groups, which can limit the reach of well-intentioned and genuinely humanitarian assistance. Pantuliano, Mackintosh, and Elhawary have found that 'the range of regulatory measures that have been introduced are raising operating costs, slowing down administrative functions, curtailing funding, undermining partnerships, preventing access and altering the quality and coordination of assistance. Islamic charities have been most severely affected, but the impact has been felt across the humanitarian sector'.<sup>107</sup>

Not only can this deny assistance to populations within contexts that armed groups influence or control, but many felt that it had created a culture of undue caution in some organisations. Indeed, organisations are seen by some as very concerned with the potential programmatic and organisational risks of falling foul of counter-terrorist legislation. Some respondents consider this serves only to heighten the affiliation between Western governments and humanitarian organisations in the eyes of such groups. This has the potential to compound security risks not only in the directly affected contexts, but in linked or other accessible and lawless contexts as well. Pantuliano, Mackintosh, and Elhawary have cautioned that

Rigid and over-zealous application of counter-terrorism laws to humanitarian action in conflict not only limits its reach in that context, but undermines the independence and neutrality of humanitarian organisations in general, and could become an additional factor in the unravelling of the legitimacy and acceptance of humanitarian response in many of the world's worst humanitarian crises.<sup>108</sup>

## Media scrutiny

In many high-profile crises the humanitarian sector has been collectively blamed for aspects of lacklustre humanitarian preparation, response, or coordination. As with many issues, the media are quick to seize on the negative and sensational, without giving adequate consideration to the finer points of the context and actions of specific organisations. Such broad challenges of the 'aid industry', often heavily echoed, do register and affect public perceptions. However, some respondents felt that the media were not a key determinant in their security, which was still far more

dependent on local networks, actions, and perception. However, as access and contributions to the media by local populations increase, the current gap between the media and local perceptions may be slowly closed.

‘Large aid agencies and humanitarian organisations are often highly competitive with each other. Polluted by the internal power politics and the unsavoury characteristics seen in many big corporations, large aid agencies can be obsessed with raising money through their own appeal efforts. Media coverage as an end in itself is too often an aim of their activities. Marketing and branding have too high a profile. Perhaps worst of all, relief efforts in the field are sometimes competitive with little collaboration between agencies, including smaller, grass-roots charities that may have better networks in affected counties and so are well placed to immediately implement emergency relief.’

*The Lancet, 2010*

Indeed the very nature of humanitarian action, which must act regardless of the past or politics of a context, makes it susceptible to criticism. It is not hard to see why continually spending money on the same actors and same responses in crises that are often perceived as intractable, fails to sell well in the media.

Media attention and media distortion was also felt by some interviewees to drive donor behaviour in many contexts. In turn, government and private donors may drive NGO behaviour, sometime resulting in ill-considered increases in risk thresholds. Some felt that organisations have been unwilling to admit to the public the challenges of access and security in high-profile crises, fearing that they may be perceived as unable to act – and therefore become a less-preferred destination for donations.

Likewise, the role of the media in shaping humanitarian responses was also considered by many respondents as a factor that complicates community relations and acceptance strategies. Some respondents mentioned that crisis-affected populations sometimes questioned humanitarian organisations’ claims of solidarity and impartiality when confronted with their perceived ties to Western-led media, who are seen to influence programmatic decisions. This is seen by some to sour relations. It is resented when organisations – in their communications with the Western public, as well as with the communities they intend to serve – disregard (perhaps unintentionally) the fact that communities and

their neighbours almost always provide the first line of assistance in a crisis.

#### 4.5 The rapid evolution of science and technology

As noted earlier, new and near-ubiquitous technologies have dramatically changed the way all organisations, including humanitarian INGOs, governments and non-state actors work and relate to each other and importantly, how local communities relate to such actors and the wider world. Schofield and Johnson have observed that ‘new technologies have provided the most impact upon situational analysis and understanding, followed by resource mobilization and finally the delivery of those resources’.<sup>109</sup>

‘Unmanned aerial vehicles, including drones, cybernetics and space, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and 3D printing present a vision of possibilities that are profoundly transformative, and yet their social, socio-economic and political consequences are redolent with uncertainty. For humanitarian NGOs, the inter-action between an ever-increasing range of technologies and natural hazards will pose ever more challenging strategic and operational issues.’

*Kent et al (2013), p.18*

Even in the far reaches of fragile states engulfed in humanitarian crises, it is increasingly difficult to isolate any aspect of society from forces that act and fluctuate at a global level. This interconnectedness and interdependence has not had the homogenising effect some predicted. In fact, it has often stoked impulses towards individuality, localism, and nationalism, factors that can frustrate the international humanitarian system as it has traditionally functioned. Many respondents, while acknowledging these changes, felt that security remains at its core a local issue, handled (both before and after incidents) with local actors.

New technologies such as geo-localisation and satellite imagery can be used to track population movements, measure the scale of disasters, and evaluate reports of atrocities. Such technologies, as well as those which can be implemented to better identify, monitor, and provide assistance to populations in need have the potential to create greater efficiencies in the provision of assistance. Likewise, they can increase transparency and the subsequent accountability of humanitarian organisations. Making organisations accountable to

<sup>109</sup> Schofield and Johnson, p. 6.



beneficiaries and donors in this way offers promise for gaining greater credibility and acceptance. Technology may also offer opportunities to counter the growing detachment from populations in crisis driven by the trend toward bunkerisation and remote management. The use of remote sensing, social media, and advances in imaging and mapping, may allow actors to maintain a form of virtual presence in crises.<sup>110</sup>

The central relationship in international humanitarian action, between a community in crisis and those who seek to provide assistance, typically Western INGOs, has historically been deeply imbalanced. Often the lone purveyors of assistance beyond a community's own response, and with their own ambitions and approaches, humanitarian INGOs have long held a great deal of sway, intentionally or unintentionally, over the fate of communities as a result of their critical role as the link to external resources and attention. This is no longer the case. Crisis-affected communities, even in fragile states, can now often articulate their own needs.<sup>111</sup> Local, national, or regional organisations, both existing and ad hoc, can organise the provision of assistance far more readily than ever before. This can also benefit INGOs, as communities who play a role in driving responses better protect those who assist them.<sup>112</sup>

New technologies can also be used for tracking staff and vehicles as part of risk management measures. While science and technology offer great opportunities for humanitarian actors and their security, their integration into humanitarian operations also presents numerous and significant risks.<sup>113</sup>

### **New threats from new technology**

New technologies, as well as the wider availability of existing technologies, exacerbate long-standing threats and pose new threats to INGOs in fragile contexts.

The spread of drone warfare has presented humanitarian INGOs with new challenges. Not only have they escalated conflicts in a number of contexts, but they also allow actors, still predominately the United States, to potentially act far more widely than ever before, greatly increasing the unpredictability of the associated risks. Crucially, drone warfare also presents challenges in terms of negotiating with belligerents. When parties to a conflict are acting from afar, contact to negotiate access and security and to maintain channels of communication must be approached in fundamentally different ways from situations when both parties are in the same geographical space. However, this is not

dissimilar to how INGOs must maintain links with other disparate actors, particularly transnational militant and/or criminal networks, as well as diasporas. The opacity which surrounds drone warfare may also make targeted armed actors less willing to engage with any external actors, including INGOs, out of fear of their collusion in drone strikes. However, drones also have the potential to be used by INGOs for monitoring their own operations, staff, and movements, and in programming and contextual assessments.

Other less common threats also have the potential to affect INGO security. Cyber-attacks and other electronic failures – either directly targeting INGOs or indirectly affecting them – could pose threats to INGO security, particularly if they weaken the ability of an organisation to mitigate other risks. Chemical and biological weapons are also very significant threats to INGOs, particularly in conflict situations, and few organisations are adequately prepared to mitigate this risk.

The growing availability of small arms and other more conventional weapons poses a significant threat to INGOs, particularly as they lead to the escalation of conflict in new areas. The massive dispersal of weapons, conflict and lawlessness across parts of north Africa and the Sahel following the Libyan civil war is a clear demonstration of how quickly one context can impact others, both drawing in and forcing out humanitarian actors. This can, and will probably continue to contribute to the rapid fluctuation of risk levels in a greater number of contexts, leaving some beyond levels at which INGOs can safely operate.

### **Communications technology**

The rapid advancement of communications technology has undoubtedly been one of the major drivers of change across the humanitarian landscape, decentralising the sector and facilitating new forms of cooperation.<sup>114</sup> Like any technology, it can potentially benefit as well as hinder the security of humanitarian INGOs. Actors who pose threats to INGOs can make use of modern communications technology to enable the pursuit of their objectives just as easily as humanitarian INGOs. Militant groups have proven very tech-savvy, not only for projecting their opinions, influencing perceptions and enabling their operations, but also for tracking the activities of others, including INGOs and their staff. One respondent noted that militants in Afghanistan are said to check individuals' mobile phones for foreign or suspicious numbers, and the IFRC has noted the security risks of using mobile phones to collect privacy-related information for needs assessments, particularly in conflict situations.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 28.

<sup>111</sup> UN OCHA (2013), p. 13.

<sup>112</sup> IFRC (2013), p. 125.

<sup>113</sup> See Kent (2011), p. 944.

<sup>114</sup> UN OCHA (2013), p. 16.

<sup>115</sup> IFRC (2013), p. 121.

While modern communications technology has undoubtedly greatly assisted humanitarian INGOs, some respondents felt that over-dependence was creating security risks. More reliable and independent communications technology, such as the wide availability of mobile phones and internet connections, can work to the detriment of face-to-face interaction with local communities and actors – some of whom may pose a threat to organisations. As noted by key informants, while the proliferation of modern communications has facilitated access to a greater number of more diverse sources of information, it has not necessarily led to significant changes in the availability or quantity of information relevant for risk management.

Some respondents also felt that organisations are either unaware of the pervasiveness of government monitoring of their electronic communications, or aware but unwilling to properly adapt their approaches to information management and transparency to avoid the potential for ensuing security risks.<sup>116</sup> Others noted that INGOs have long been dependent on insecure means of communication, particularly radios, and suggested that they should not change their approach to communications transparency and security on the assumption that more recent electronic communications technology is more secure.

Given the sensitive nature of the information involved, the reluctance of many organisations to share any specific or attributable information is understandable.<sup>117</sup> However, this may increase the risk of self-reinforcing information or anecdotes (or otherwise unintentionally closed loops of information), potentially allowing risks to be significantly overstated or misjudged. This highlights the importance of trusted sources and triangulating security information.

Numerous respondents cited the high turnover of expatriate humanitarian staff as a significant drain on institutional memory. New technology may make tackling this long-standing and systemic shortcoming easier by facilitating better information management. Nevertheless, this also has potential to divert attention from traditional and locally accessible sources of information, redirecting the focus towards online information sharing networks, news outlets, and other anonymous sources.

## Role of (non-traditional) media and control of the humanitarian narrative

Perhaps more immediately relevant for operational security is the ability of anyone at all to publicise NGO activities, accurately or otherwise. New media have 'rendered the repercussions of misreporting ever more serious'.<sup>118</sup> NGOs will have to learn to deal with communities (and other actors) who can say whatever they like about humanitarian organisations, their activities and resulting effects, with unprecedented reach and speed. In this respect the IFRC has observed that technology 'has also multiplied the use of narratives of suffering to draw attention to humanitarian crisis, without equivalent focus on the ethics and practical security risks of publicizing victims' images and stories'.<sup>119</sup> As Kent et al. have noted, 'the widespread availability of social networking and mobile capacity shapes the local and global arenas in which NGOs must negotiate their credibility and legitimacy',<sup>120</sup> something which undoubtedly plays a major role in influencing perceptions, acceptance, and security.

However, some felt that while most large NGOs now effectively monitor new and social media as well as traditional media, this was done from a communications perspective. While not separable from security in many circumstances, monitoring of new and social media was not sufficiently focused on potential threats or shared with those with security responsibilities within the organisation.

'While the positive impact of social networking cannot be denied, its proponents' contention that it is an irresistible force for democracy fail to see that more and more governments are able to interfere with [and] exploit [it] for their own purposes.'

*Kent et al. (2013), p. 18*

Some respondents noted that the ease of communication between field-based staff and headquarters can have an undesirable effect in that it can divert the attention of the organisation away from the host population and towards its own internal departments. The pull of internal communication and coordination may compound the inward focus that already plagues many organisations as a result of their scale, leaving them less time to focus on the local relationships that are critical for security management.

<sup>116</sup> See also IFRC (2013), p. 142.

<sup>117</sup> Micheni and Kuhanendran have also noted that in some contexts, 'NGOs are wary of sharing information, stemming from a desire maintain independence, neutrality and, above all, access to populations'. p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> IFRC (2013), p. 142.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>120</sup> Kent, Armstrong and Obrecht (2013), p. 18.

Similar risks exist with respect to coordination amongst different humanitarian organisations.

### Coordination

The benefits of modern communications technology for coordination amongst humanitarian organisations is evident, but may go beyond the immediately obvious. Communication technologies and systems not only enable more efficient information sharing and, in principle, coordination, but can also remove non-technical barriers between organisations by untying information from its perceived owners and freeing organisations from the responsibility for ownership of such information. This could prove particularly relevant for security-related information, which many organisations have often proved reluctant to share should they be held accountable for its dissemination. When the flow of information is uncontrollable and attribution becomes impossible, these concerns may become irrelevant.

### Effect on transparency

It can be expected that any actor, including the local community in all but the most remote or isolated contexts, has the opportunity to scrutinise an organisation's public profile. This includes not only what the organisation itself has published, but any available external opinions as well, regardless of the source or their accuracy. This is a profound change from a time when organisations were able to largely shape how they were presented to host communities, and contexts could be approached in isolation from one another. While this may complicate the management of perceptions – and, by extension, risk mitigation – it should also be seen as an opportunity to reinforce an organisation's identity and principles.

Traditionally, INGO relationships with the host community and with its donors, both governmental and public, were generally distinct, and could be managed separately. Now the INGO is no longer by default the dominant link between crisis-affected communities and the wider world. Communities, directly and through their own diasporas, networks, and other actors, can now gather and disseminate information on their own situation as well as on humanitarian organisations and their activities, with anyone, anywhere.

The AWSR noted that in 'both governments and non-governmental organisations there is a tendency to approach security issues with insularity and a reluctance to share information, which further complicated the

security relationship'.<sup>121</sup> Given the inherent sensitivities of personal and political security-related information, this is unlikely to change. However, the practicability of this stance is being challenged by new technology and new ways of communicating. NGOs and governments alike no longer have the control they once wielded over information, and whoever gains access to security-related information, almost regardless of their location, potentially has the ability to share it with the world. Discretion, particularly regarding dramatic incidents, will not be easy to maintain.

### Challenges and opportunities in crisis management

Numerous respondents also cited the management of security crises as an area that is likely to continue to be changed by new technology. These new technologies both facilitate and complicate crisis management. Communications technology can enable more efficient management of a crisis, but it can also assist those who are behind or seek to benefit from the same crisis. Past approaches to crisis management, which relied heavily on the control of sensitive information, are ill-suited to the age of social media. One respondent noted in this respect that sensitive information inadvertently made public via social media played an important role in facilitating the kidnapping of humanitarian workers in two recent cases.

### Technology, transparency, and threats

Novel communications technologies, the impact of which we cannot foresee, may have the potential to be powerful tools for augmenting traditional approaches. Nevertheless, they should not marginalise the well tested methods of building acceptance and contextual understanding. Twitter cannot replace face to face meetings and should not be approached without consideration of its weaknesses.

New technologies have the potential to increase the effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency of humanitarian action. If harnessed appropriately, they can facilitate greater acceptance, access, and security through better programming. This said, technology can also bring about new and more complex threats.<sup>122</sup> More (and often inaccurate) information about humanitarian organisations, including sensitive information on staff and beneficiaries will be at risk of misuse or manipulation by malicious actors. Technology will also help to facilitate the weapons trade, making more, and often new, weapons available to more actors.

<sup>121</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 9.

<sup>122</sup> Ferris (2011), p. 923.





# Thinking about operational security in the future

The factors and trends presented here are only a selection of those now driving change across the humanitarian landscape. Nonetheless, they highlight how humanitarian action is rapidly evolving and can illustrate some, though certainly not all, of the operational security challenges humanitarian INGOs may face the coming decade.

Some aspects of how these factors might affect operational security for humanitarian actors are foreseeable, while others are not. As much as these factors themselves may be driving change across the humanitarian landscape, how humanitarian organisations understand and engage with these transformative factors in any given context will largely determine how they impact their security.

## 5.1 Key questions for the coming decade

The following section poses some of the key questions that INGOs should consider when thinking about their approaches to the potential operational security challenges of the coming decade. It also offers possible starting points for answering these questions, drawing on some of the key themes that have arisen in this report and the potential cumulative impact of the trends analysed. Answers to any of these or other questions about the future of operational security inevitably touch a number of common themes. They pose both challenges and opportunities, and will undoubtedly demand more specific consideration by given organisations in given security contexts, as ‘there are no legitimate perimeters to humanitarian action, valid at all times and in all situations’.<sup>123</sup>

With fragile and crisis-prone states increasingly exerting control over humanitarian INGOs and setting a precedent for many other states’ interaction with INGOs, how might this affect the independence and perception of humanitarian INGOs and their security?

The difficult and tenuous balance between the independence necessary for principled and effective humanitarian action and the unavoidable necessity of engagement with other actors, including states, is not new to humanitarians, and is only likely to become more complex. Host governments, like many other actors, are likely to become ever more confident and assertive in their engagement with the humanitarian sector. Therefore, proactive, constructive, and sustained strategic engagement with host governments will be crucial. As ostensibly principled and generally law-abiding in all but the most extreme circumstances, INGOs are unlikely to be able to evade the legal structures and other constraints – however dubious – imposed by host governments in many contexts. As Hehenkamp and Healy have noted, there ‘will continue to be many settings where the malignancy or neglect by state of civil society is the actual generator of the crisis’,<sup>124</sup> which will only continue to further complicate INGO relations with host governments. As a result, trying to engage with other actors who may have political leverage, such as neighbouring and donor states, is likely to be an increasingly important activity for humanitarians seeking to gain secure access to fragile contexts.

‘The UN’s head of security argues that much stronger working relations at the operational level are critical to improving host state relations and ultimately ensuring aid worker security.’

Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 11

<sup>123</sup> Allié (2011), p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> Hehenkamp and Healy (2013).

How might the persistent nationalism, localism, and often popular hostility towards foreign organisations, including INGOs, affect the perception of Western NGOs, and, by extension, their security?

In many highly volatile contexts, the Western origins and identities of many INGOs will remain an unshakable yoke. INGOs are likely to continue to struggle to dissociate themselves from the influences they are attached to, be they political, cultural, religious or otherwise. Sustained, coherent, and collective positioning and lobbying against the co-optation and denigration of humanitarianism by internal and external actors may remain the primary avenue for INGOs to reinforce their own identities and aims, as a counterweight. However, unless INGOs simultaneously demonstrate their commitment to strongly principled and transparent humanitarianism through their actions, the effects of such efforts on acceptance and security are likely to be minimal.

How can NGOs supplement locally-focused acceptance approaches in a way that will address risks driven by transnational forces and actors?

Western INGOs may increasingly have to accept that traditional acceptance-based approaches to security will be insufficient in fragile contexts where belligerents and transnational militant and criminal networks have no stake in the wellbeing of the communities in which they operate. Acceptance based strategies in themselves may not be insufficient, but the traditional assumption of an organisation's acceptance will not be sufficient in these contexts. In consequence, some organisations are pursuing a more pro-active (aggressive) acceptance strategy based on actions rather than principles. This also may mean that humanitarian organisations will simply be unable to work in such settings unless they increase their tolerance for risk. That said, communications technology can allow organisations to share critical security-related information across contexts, as well as across internal and external organisational boundaries. This can potentially facilitate greater understanding of more transient risks and their incorporation into local risk analyses.

'...the increasing decentralization and fragmentation of humanitarian response, further fuelling the sometimes rampant competition between agencies [...] has rendered traditional coordination mechanisms all but obsolete, replacing them more and more with local, flexible arrangements tailored to a specific context.'

*Daccord (2013)*

Where secure access proves impossible for Western INGOs, other organisations may be able to fill the gap. Local organisations – possibly with background support from Western or non-Western INGOs – may be more willing to consider alternative approaches to working in volatile areas. It may also be that their presence may be seen as less antagonistic to those who pose security threats in a given context.

As partnerships with local or national NGOs become increasingly common, often driven by security concerns, where might this lead for the future role of INGOs? Will they still be a necessary link between donors and communities? And how might they have to adapt their identities and approaches to building networks and acceptance in light of their new role?

Where they are able to demonstrate their contextual understanding and sensitivity and, crucially, their added value to all of the actors who might influence their security, including any local partners, INGOs should still be capable of playing a meaningful role. Elsewhere, their roles may be significantly different. They may perhaps act not as direct providers of humanitarian assistance, but as support systems, capacity builders and brokers of relationships. However, the role of truly independent and impartial actors, which in some cases almost necessarily means externally-led, is unlikely to be diminished in many fragile contexts.

As more actors crowd the aid landscape and the range of activities going on in a given context can stretch from humanitarian action to development, to human rights advocacy, and to peacekeeping and peace enforcement; what effect might this mixture of activities and ambitions have on humanitarian security in the future? Will more traditional humanitarian organisations increasingly disengage with or even isolate themselves from the broader and muddled humanitarian landscape in an attempt to reassert control over their own identities and, by extension, their security?

It has long been a challenge for the traditional humanitarian actors to coordinate amongst themselves. Learning to co-exist with a range of new actors has not and will not prove easy, and is likely to remain a major challenge for many facets of humanitarian operations. Building genuine partnerships which collaboratively build capacity is likely to be even more difficult. Working, or even co-existing, more effectively with an ever-increasing range of actors will almost certainly require proactive and strategic engagement from the traditional humanitarian sector. There is no guarantee that new actors will feel the need to seek inclusion in the structures of the traditional humanitarian system. On occasion, new actors have proceeded with their agenda and dealt with other actors on an ad hoc basis – an

approach not entirely dissimilar to how some independence-focused traditional organisations operate. Therefore, proactive and strategic engagement can and should be pursued even as its limitations are recognised. Fiori has suggested that ‘while it is not possible to forge an overarching consensus on the rules and mechanisms of the “humanitarian system”, or indeed on what it means to be “humanitarian”, there can be agreement and cooperation between different actors’.<sup>125</sup>

Greater polarisation within the humanitarian sector is also conceivable, with traditional, strictly humanitarian organisations further distancing themselves from the more complex and perhaps disordered space of multi-mandated organisations and others with broader aims and operations. However, as currently seen in some fragile and highly insecure crises, more traditional and strictly humanitarian organisations may be forced to engage in new forms of partnership in order to remain active and relevant. This may entail stretching the boundaries of their own approaches and may challenge their identities as direct providers of assistance.

How can humanitarian NGOs co-exist with an expanding range of private sector actors – both multinational and local, from private security to extractive industries – some involved in nominally ‘humanitarian’ action? What security risks might this expanded engagement with the private sector pose to INGOs?

INGOs are unlikely, and perhaps unwise, to completely isolate themselves from most private sector actors. As with any other actors, engagement in crises should be carefully considered and strategically managed. In particular, it is important to avoid adopting ill-informed and hypocritical positions toward the private sector, given that INGOs have long accepted that it may be necessary to do business with elements of the private sector that are otherwise involved in activities out of step with humanitarian values. INGOs should consider not only the risks and compromises that engagement with the private sector may bring, but also the efficiencies, cost savings, and innovations that may result from these arrangements. On occasion, private sector organisations can increase the impact of INGO operations without compromising INGO security, as for example with cash transfer programmes in partnership with financial institutions.

## NGO Security Forums

Context-specific security forums play an important role in coordinating security management across organisations. Such forums provide support, training, and analysis for their members, which are particularly valuable for smaller organisations who may not have the in-house experience or capacity in a given context to adequately evaluate threats and mitigate security risks. However, over-reliance on these forums becomes a problem when INGOs without a good understanding of security risk management abdicate responsibility for analysis and mitigation to the NGO security forum. The success of such forums is also hindered by the reluctance of organisations to share security incident-related information outside their own organisations, though this seen by some respondents to be waning. However, in the context of the current aid system, where organisations have incentives to both cooperate and to compete with each other, and where independence nominally remains a core principle for many, broad coordination remains, and will in all likelihood remain, elusive.

The effectiveness of NGO security forums is also hindered in some contexts by governments who do not welcome their presence, as their existence can be seen to promote an appearance of insecurity and allow NGOs to present unified and potentially stronger positions toward authorities (no states actively and formally engage with or provide security information to such security platforms). This is unlikely to change without either substantial and unprecedented accommodation on the part of host governments, or compromising the objectivity and relevance of such forums.

<sup>125</sup> Fiori (2013), p. 12.

With governments now increasingly aware of the risks and opportunities of humanitarian crises, both foreign and domestic, how might their efforts to direct the humanitarian response for their own ends affect the security of INGOs? Will this push humanitarian NGOs to take greater risks?

The political calculations and self-interest that drive many government actions in and around crises are unlikely to be overridden by principled humanitarian concerns. However, the increasing scrutiny of all involved – governments and INGOs included – will be facilitated by pervasive communications technology and the technological empowerment of the affected. This could lead to greater transparency, and allow for more frank debate over the instrumentalisation of aid and the political and organisational factors which influence operational and security-related decision-making. INGOs are actors for whom the humanitarian ethos and principles are meant to be paramount, and as such, they should embrace the transparency that technology facilitates. However, the privacy and safety of beneficiaries and staff, and the trust required of partners in sensitive contexts, should not be ignored. In this regard, any progress towards more transparent decision making and frank debate may encounter the following obstacles: organisational interests and risk aversion within large organisations; concerns over potential legal constraints stemming from organisations' duty of care towards staff and (potentially) partners; and the legal repercussions of counterterrorism legislation.

How will INGOs cope with the increased scrutiny of their operations now that the international and local media have far greater access and reach in crises? How will they adapt to the reality of virtually anyone anywhere having the potential to access any public information available on humanitarian NGOs? How does this change the relationship between humanitarian NGOs, communities and other actors that affect operational security? Is this an opportunity to enhance security through transparency?

The ubiquity and speed of modern communications does not necessarily change the fundamentals of building relationships and acceptance. It does however broaden the range of participants, making it a more onerous consultative process. That said, communications technology and greater transparency do represent options for greater efficiency and better leveraging of positive perceptions of INGO operations. Increased transparency therefore has the potential to benefit organisations whose principles and

programmes are well articulated, and whose results are tangible for host communities. In these circumstances, transparency can bolster acceptance strategies, and perhaps lead to more humble INGO behaviour – particularly towards the communities they serve, something that may be long overdue.

## 5.2 Conclusion

This report sought to explore and analyse how some of the factors driving change across the humanitarian landscape may affect the operational security of humanitarian INGOs in fragile contexts, how the sector may need to adapt in the face of such changes, and how prepared organisations are for the necessary changes.

Answering the latter question is the simplest: the near consensus opinion from those interviewed for this report is that the overall approach to operational security and risk management within the INGO community has not sufficiently adapted to the challenges of today's – let alone tomorrow's – humanitarian landscape. That said, it is unlikely that only the approach to operational security of such organisations which have struggled to evolve will suffer. The financial, bureaucratic, and legal constraints of the environment in which they operate may also play a major role in limiting their ability to adapt. Perhaps such rigidity will render some organisations unable to operate securely in fragile contexts. But the changes surrounding them may also force them to adapt, consciously or otherwise.

As explored above, these changes, amongst others, are likely to have complex and often profound effects on the humanitarian landscape. Humanitarians may find themselves in a more diverse, contested, and possibly chaotic landscape. Most importantly, the traditional elements of the humanitarian landscape are likely to find themselves less and less dominant,<sup>126</sup> and face the prospect of their notions of the universality of their approach being fundamentally upended.

### Contextual understanding and engagement

The necessity of contextual understanding for operational security should be taken for granted. However, the failures of INGO security strategies point to a lack of contextual understanding and engagement, which can in turn exclude or even weaken local actors.<sup>127</sup> Some respondents mentioned that security management has become too focused on reporting and documentation, often predominately a box-ticking exercise,<sup>128</sup> too onerous and too focused on the past,

<sup>126</sup> Fiori (2013), p. 12.

<sup>127</sup> Healy and Tiller, p. 1.

<sup>128</sup> 'A more systematised but also more bureaucratised approach to security has developed. This, along with increased insurance premiums, has contributed to bunkerisation and risk aversion, with consequent impacts on their relationship to local populations and their responsiveness.' Healy and Tiller, p. 4.

without enough attention paid to the possible futures of a given context.

The overall failure of the international community to foresee, let alone adequately prepare for the unrest and conflict that has swept across the Arab world in recent years, or the conflicts and displacement around the Sahel are evidence enough. However it is unrealistic to expect that anyone could accurately predict such drastic events and their humanitarian consequences, let alone prepare for all possible outcomes. At the same time, seemingly intractable conflicts with extensive histories will nonetheless continue to present new challenges. What might be expected, and is almost certainly necessary, is better anticipation of crises and flexible capacity to avert or respond to the ensuing suffering, as 'there is hardly any aspect of aid activity which is not hampered in one way or another by poor situational knowledge'.<sup>129</sup> Greater capacity to learn from crises in order to better adapt future responses is also essential.

Valuable approaches to contextual understanding and risk management can be gleaned from the private sector. This does not necessitate copying all related elements of private sector approaches to fragile states and crises, nor jeopardising the principles that underpin humanitarian action. Indeed, the latter is a real risk; as Bernard notes, the phenomenal growth of the humanitarian sector has left it 'a victim of its own growth, [where] one of the most pernicious risks for the humanitarian sector is that, by creating large-scale administration or by copying the multinationals, it will come to identify itself through its structure rather than its humanitarian mission'.<sup>130</sup>

It is also crucial that contextual understanding is shared and understood between organisations and not only internally. No humanitarian organisation's security is fully insulated from the actions of others. Therefore, improved common understanding of risk and exposure would help mitigate the unintentional transfer of risk.<sup>131</sup>

While some contexts have long been acknowledged as highly insecure and complex, with contextual understanding acknowledged as essential, this is not the case for all fragile or insecure contexts. Reasons cited by key informants include poorly documented contextual history, highly fluid political and security situations, and previously low levels of attention from governments or other actors to INGO activities.

### Dedicated security personnel within NGOs

One of the most obvious changes in approaches to operational security has been the growing number of dedicated security personnel. Though some respondents felt that the growing number of NGOs with dedicated security personnel, while a positive development, also led the management of some organisations to isolate security management from other aspects of broader strategic planning and programme design. A few also felt that dedicated security positions were among the first to be squeezed as budgets have tightened in recent years.

A few respondents also cited the military backgrounds of some NGO security staff as a hindrance to the incorporation of security management into overall longer-term planning, due to both the perceived difference in their approach to security (an inclination towards protection and deterrence over acceptance) and a perceived inability to speak the same language as NGO management when explaining their views.

These factors demonstrate how integrating operational security issues into broader strategic planning and how security strategic planning and sharing security responsibilities within an organisation are likely to remain key challenges in the future.

There is always the possibility that even with increased contextual understanding and transparent intentions Western INGOs will remain unacceptable to some actors in fragile contexts. In such cases, no acceptance strategy will suffice. It is not a new phenomenon that certain contexts are beyond the reach of traditional NGOs, but it is a hard pill to swallow when it illustrates the limitations of their humanitarian model. One of the benefits of a more diverse and fluid range of humanitarian organisations in the future could be the ability to understand and access otherwise inaccessible contexts<sup>132</sup> through new relationships and greater mutual appreciation of competences and interests.

<sup>129</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 16.

<sup>130</sup> Bernard (2011), p. 897.

<sup>131</sup> HPN (2010).

<sup>132</sup> See Binder and Ertlen (2013) for an analysis of Turkey's humanitarian assistance, including its presence in Somalia.



## Broader view of risk

Organisations must also become more anticipatory if they are to develop the ability to predict potential risks and do more than simply react. No organisation, INGO or otherwise, will ever be able to predict all of the potential security risks they may face in the future, but organisations must be willing to consider numerous possible futures or scenarios, some of which will never come to pass.

Organisations should also consider a broader view of risks, including security risks, and possible futures, which should be seen as an overarching or crosscutting aspect of all organisational planning, not as an isolated hurdle to be overcome. They already operate in 'an environment in which crisis drivers, triggers, and causation are not readily apparent, and where consequences are uncertain and solutions potentially evasive',<sup>133</sup> and must learn new approaches to assess and mitigate the risks of the future. Some respondents suggested that the incorporation of security risks into a broader assessment of risks to a given programme would allow such risks to be assessed in a more systematic, integrated and forward-thinking manner that forms part of overall programme strategy and design and avoids the perceived limitations of traditional security thinking.<sup>134</sup>

## Identity and action

The ever-growing involvement of local and national NGOs, other non-Western organizations, the private sector, and militaries has already and will continue to have a profound effect on the humanitarian landscape and the operational security of INGOs. These actors have different agendas and approaches to crises and humanitarian action, and humanitarian organisations will have no choice but to find ways to co-exist with them. The instability, violence, and politicisation of fragile states will make approaches to coexistence a challenge. Nevertheless, it is essential to understand a host government's will and capacity regarding INGO's operational security, and this understanding should contribute to security management plans.<sup>135</sup>

An organisation's ability to explain its identity, principles, motives, and plans in a consistent manner is crucial for building relationships with other actors, including those who can pose a potential threat. This may lead to some degree of acceptance, or simply better understanding and mitigation of risks. Arguably more important, is the ability of an organisation to demonstrate its principles and capacity through humanitarian action. Van Brabant

has noted that people 'are increasingly looking at consistency between practice and discourse'.<sup>136</sup> This is not only a matter of effective and transparent programming, but also of managing expectations and a degree of humility often lacking, or overshadowed by the rhetoric of humanitarian actors.

'Increased interaction is also likely to increase pressure on humanitarian response to define what they can and cannot provide. The extent of communities' desires may exceed their immediate life-saving needs, raising expectations beyond those that humanitarian responders can meet. This can have dangerous consequences. Expectation management has always been important; it will become more so in the network age.'

UN OCHA (2013), p.39

Equally important is that such strategies must be proactive and sustained, rather than only being produced as a reaction to serious incidents, both externally and internally. Within organisations counting tens of thousands of staff across scores of countries and delivering assistance in a variety of ways, internal clarity and consistency will continue to be a critical challenge.

Like other sectors, humanitarians have a professional language which can isolate them from individuals or groups unfamiliar with the typical thought-patterns or circles of the sector. Linguistic barriers make it hard for humanitarian organisations to make themselves understood – despite the supposed universality of the ideals which underpin them – and reinforce the perceived exclusivity of the traditional humanitarian sector. The latter is particularly problematic if the traditional elements of the sector are to evolve to (at the very least) co-exist with the diverse range of new actors engaged in overlapping, and at times incompatible, activities.

Acceptance should be considered essential. Regardless of the nature of an organisation's activities or identity, its ability to demonstrate impact will play a large role in maintaining acceptance and security. This requires concerted and consistent effort, and will undoubtedly become more important over time. The burden of proof lies with an organisation which must demonstrate its values to the host community and other actors, and show how its work warrants their confidence and acceptance.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Kent (2011), p. 955.

<sup>134</sup> See Kingston and Behn (2010), p. 16.

<sup>135</sup> Stoddard, Harmer and Hughes (2012), p. 13.

<sup>136</sup> Van Brabant (2010), p. 15.

<sup>137</sup> See Van Brabant (2010).

### Protection, 'bunkerisation', and proximity

Protective and deterrent measures and procedures have always been a part of security risk management, but have undoubtedly gained prominence in recent years, particularly in fragile contexts, as the 'quick and tangible path to security through protection and deterrence is undoubtedly seductive'.<sup>1</sup> However, there is also growing recognition of the risk of 'bunkerisation', where protective measures push organisations to a point where they significantly impede their ability to deliver effective programmes and distance themselves from those they seek to assist.<sup>2</sup>

As the threats to humanitarians have escalated, and the efficacy of acceptance-based strategies has waned, organizations have had to increase measures to protect against risks, in some subtle ways, and others more overt and controversial. In many insecure contexts, organisations now go to great lengths to attempt to control the level of their profile, from high, where their identities are thought to provide protection, to low, where their identity is thought to increase risk. These approaches are intrinsically linked to their level of acceptance and, critically, also to their proximity to the populations they aim to support, as well as those they do not, and by extension, to their ability to build and maintain relationships.

<sup>1</sup> Kingston & Behn

<sup>2</sup> Collinson and Duffield (2013), p. 3

<sup>3</sup> Healy and Tiller (2013), p. 4

One of the inherent challenges of acceptance will remain: it can only be gained through principled and effective humanitarian action, action which cannot be performed without some degree of acceptance. Perhaps initial acceptance, or at least tolerance, is possible by being granted the benefit of the doubt by host communities, but this has a short shelf-life. In highly politicised contexts where the international community – including, rightly or wrongly, humanitarians – are seen to have failed, acceptance is far harder to regain. An ever-lengthening history of international involvement will probably make acceptance harder to build and maintain for INGOs in the future. Even if acceptance can be maintained, it may be far from sufficient in fragile contexts where the actors that may pose the greatest

threat to humanitarian organisations have little interest in humanitarian principles, an organisation's reputation, and even the previous or potential impact of humanitarian action on the well-being of the local population.

'The belief that NGOs have an intrinsic right, based on their motivations, to access and to provide assistance, and the unique capacity to do so, or a comparative advantage, is outdated, and is unlikely to carry as much weight in the future.'

*Kent et al (2013), p. 27*

The humanitarian sector has been portrayed as 'a global network, bringing together different interests, ideas, principles and motivations' that at the point of a crisis 'intersects with other global networks – the media, the compassionate public, donor governments'.<sup>138</sup> The list can be expanded to include links, direct or indirect, with political and economic coalitions, military alliances, militant and/or criminal networks, and ethnic or religious groups. Regardless of the desirability or incongruity of such network inter-linkages, their existence is beyond the control of any involved.

There are undoubtedly elements of long-standing approaches to operational security in fragile contexts that will remain relevant and essential,<sup>139</sup> even as the humanitarian landscape continues to evolve. Relationships, networks, and quality programmes will remain essential. However, organisations that cannot adapt their approaches to a more complex humanitarian landscape are likely to find fewer and fewer contexts in which they can safely operate.

<sup>138</sup> Ramalingan and Barnett (2010), p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> Healy and Tiller (2013) have asserted that 'there is agreement that the traditional humanitarian approach will continue to be effective and valid, especially in complex conflict-affected places – ironically, the area in which large parts of the humanitarian system perform most poorly', p. 1.



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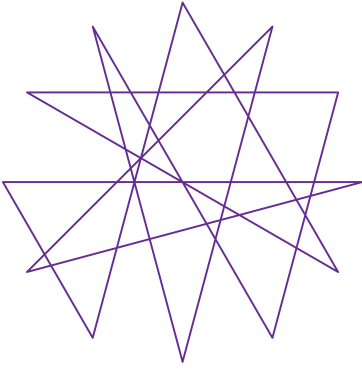
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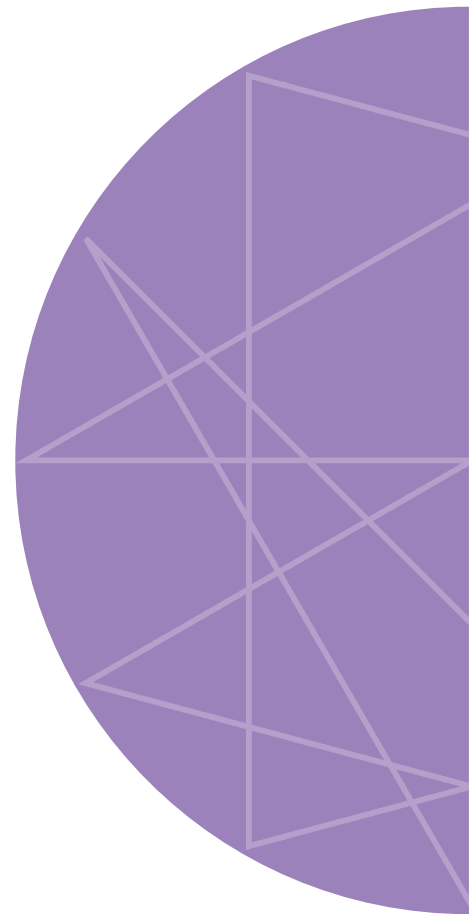


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