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Dispelling the Myth Between Humanitarian and Commercial Mine Action Activity by Ann Fitz-Gerald and Derrick J Neal, Cranfield University

Since the post World War years and even the more recent aftermath of the Cold War, the nature of peacekeeping, or peace-support operations, has changed dramatically. The change has involved the number and type of agencies concerned at each stage of an intervention and the numerous challenges they face in theatres. The responsibility is no longer left to and can no longer be fulfilled by a military force. A multitude of agencies takes on various tasks and becomes answerable to a number of different external and internal stakeholder interests.

The Nature of Conflict

Complex humanitarian emergency is a phrase that has been bandied around since the mid-1990s. It refers to smaller, more fragmented wars that take on many more characteristics than conventional conflicts. For example, a complex humanitarian emergency can develop from a natural or man-made disaster, such as the breakage of a dam, a disastrous flood, or a destructive hurricane or tornado. As events in the Balkans and the Horn of Africa have demonstrated quite vividly, these incidents can cause a huge displacement of people. In an environment of unstable borders, past civil problems, ethnic animosities and fragile state structures, these emergencies can transform into more complex and humanitarian disasters.

As the leading international authority for global peace and security, the United Nations is normally the first international organization to react to the problem. However, in many cases, before the problem becomes addressed in the U.N. General Assembly, NGOs have already been deployed. In more volatile circumstances where armed factions continue their violent campaigns, either a multinational military force or a small coalition of volunteers will be among the first to arrive. The military helps to secure the humanitarian space necessary to carry out first-level responsibilities, such as the management of refugee camps, the delivery of humanitarian aid and relief and the provision of facilities for medical assistance.

The United Nations and other bilateral donors will monitor the situation and establish priorities for the next phase of operations. When the firing has stopped and an interim peace agreement or cease-fire has been established, transitions will be made in theatre between front-line military troops and front-line aid development agencies, other military monitors, agencies and NGOs focused on development strategies and maintaining a secure and stable environment. It is during this phase that contracts are tendered by multilateral and bilateral donors for aid and reconstruction projects in areas damaged by the conflict.

During this time, the local environment has also undergone significant change. Levels of confidence and trust have gradually increased within the local groups, which provides the thrust necessary to support the ongoing peace process. Even groups that formally supported the groups and paramilitaries responsible for violence begin to accept the efforts of the international community and become increasingly ambivalent towards the previous *status quo*.

These local dynamics play a key role in the success of any humanitarian intervention. Involving local people, showing a clear interest in the future of their country and demonstrating a deep understanding of the grass roots activities, customs and norms will promote a sustainable peace. If the communities are ignored and the intervening agencies show no interest in rebuilding the pre-existing social structures that would help restore normality, the international community risks wasting substantial funding on futile strategies.

The Role of Commercial Companies

Commercial companies involved in humanitarian activities have combined more efficient business approaches with the diplomacy required to operate in unstable areas. The resulting combination adheres to the needs of the conflict communities and accommodates the agenda of the international donor community. The use of strategic management tools has introduced more cost-effective, value-added and results-based measures to the humanitarian arena whereas, in the past, this has not been a priority.

This statement does not mean that humanitarian operations of the recent past were inefficiently executed or were following any overarching strategy. It is more to say that recipients of donor funding are generally not equipped with the strategic approaches that can facilitate humanitarian progress. Recently, this situation has been exacerbated by two factors:

- The escalation in the number of humanitarian operations taking place at any given time combined with limited donor funding and

- As a result of a deeper understanding of humanitarian issues, current operations are more complex in nature than in past decades.
- While some NGOs strongly oppose the use of commercial companies in humanitarian theatres, others are beginning to realize the contributions they can make. [\[1\]](#)

For a global company operating in numerous regions replete with civil wars, collapsing infrastructures and autocratic regimes, the ease of deploying to these areas and the company's understanding of local customs, language and norms should not be overestimated. As long as the company's operations are approved and endorsed by the host countries, the commercial company's ability to rapidly deploy to these theatres should be used to provide incoming technical and logistical support to other agencies. Moreover, humanitarian agents should be more willing to use the extensive risk and threat analyses that commercial companies conduct in these areas. This application would facilitate a greater speed of reaction for all parties.

Emergency vs. Development

It is worth noting the changing needs within humanitarian situations. An operation may start as an international emergency and as such, agencies may take whatever measures are deemed necessary. However, as the situation progresses, the emphasis in skill requirements may move from technical to management. For example, the initial requirement may be centered on food delivery and logistics issues; however, once the initial crisis has been overcome, the key focus may move to management. Appropriate systems and processes should be in place to ensure:

- training in all parts of the supply chain,
- safe practice,
- provision of support in appropriate places, e.g., level and location of spare parts for vehicles,
- information systems development, and
- reporting structures.

All too often there are examples of international donations being in the wrong place at the wrong time or being wasted. Usually, when the international military forces are involved, the systems operate effectively; however, once local politics/power issues dominate the scene, a wide range of agencies have to coordinate activities before the problems begin.

Humanitarian Mine Action is a function that brings both NGOs and commercial companies into the same arena, usually within a developmental context. In most cases, bilaterally funded (single country) donor contracts are normally awarded to an NGO or commercial company from that country in order to build a national capacity for mine action. In light of an earlier point regarding the need for general management skills in the humanitarian aid arena, this point becomes even more critical within the demining context. In view of the potentially dangerous nature of demining, particular emphasis must be placed on the establishment of quality standards in terms of both clearance and management processes.

Multilateral contracts tendered by agencies such as the European Commission's Humanitarian Office (ECHO), who may respond to emergency situations, or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), who is responsible for the development of sustainable mine action programs, are awarded to the organization that offers the best experience and price for the work. It may be necessary for the applicant to register with an official registration list within the donor organization. ECHO, for example, requires the majority of its applicants to be registered under its "Framework Partnership Agreement," which outlines the terms and conditions of ECHO-funded projects.

Increasingly, there is a blurred distinction developing between the processes NGOs go through before and during the execution of a contract and those of commercial companies, i.e., donors are asking for more accountability from NGOs. With Humanitarian Mine Action programs, the work brings together both types of organizations in theatres like Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia and Mozambique. The United Nations Mine Action Services (UNMAS), which funds the Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC) in Pristina, requires that all mine action organizations to attend weekly meetings to share information and improve transparency. NGOs like HALO Trust and Mines Advisory Group (MAG) sit as equals at the table with commercial companies like Defence Systems Limited (DSL), European Landmine Solutions (ELS), MineTech and the International Demining Action Centre (IDAC).

Despite these coordination efforts, misunderstandings about the role of commercial companies in humanitarian arenas persist. This has to do with the distorted definition of commercial, as opposed to humanitarian, contracts. There is a gross misperception that a commercial company operating in a humanitarian environment should be labeled as a commercial contractor as opposed to a humanitarian contractor. However, any contracts awarded by humanitarian donors, other national governments or development agencies are given to humanitarian agents, whether or not they are an NGO or a commercial company.

Commercial contractors, on the other hand, are indigenous companies or multinational companies acting independently from any international humanitarian agenda. In mine action, commercial contracts can be developed in partnership with

international funding through the host government or through existing commercially funded structures. Without too much regard for the humanitarian agenda, these companies, at times, can pose risks for humanitarian contractors. The exclusion of humanitarian contractors from the coordination groups and the information track also places them at a disadvantage. The drive for profit and the requirement to meet deadlines encourages these companies to work in adverse weather, which can be exceptionally dangerous in the mine action field. Common characteristics of these contracts, such as payment by square meters cleared and unrealistic time constraints, place the commercial contractors under increasing pressure to meet deadlines. Days lost due to bad weather and other unforeseen circumstances are not accommodated in the form of contract extensions. These flawed contractual arrangements are increasingly being exposed.

This is not to say that commercial companies contracted by international humanitarian organizations do not fulfil its own objectives to provide shareholder value and meet the requirements of the overall corporate mission. However, to the standard global company, shareholder value is seen as the greater shareholder wealth created by catering to the broader base of business and non-business stakeholders. In this context, an effective commercial company serving in a humanitarian capacity will cater to the needs of the donors, the host government, the local communities, the broader humanitarian community and its corporate shareholders. The growth in demand for mine action programs, combined with increasing donor fatigue, requires input from the corporate world.

Companies like DSL have used donor funding in conjunction with their own financial strength to develop well informed and safe mine action programs that engage local capacity and re-empower local society. Furthermore, it has provided extensive support to NGOs engaged in mine awareness and victim assistance activities, many of which have subsequently changed their traditional views of commercial companies as a result.

The application of corporate strategic management tools to measure performance, cost-effectiveness, value-added contributions and the success and failure of humanitarian interventions measured against original strategic objectives is also important. The transient nature of NGO manpower combined with the lack of NGO "careerists" leaves middle managers at the field and head office levels without the strategic management tools necessary to make them fully accountable. The lack of strategic management resources at the donor level also adds to this problem and offers no results-based methodologies to which the recipients of donor funding can subscribe. This makes it difficult for the NGOs to measure the effectiveness of their programs and often leaves them lacking the funding and means to execute effective exit strategies.

While management shortfall applies to all spheres of humanitarian aid activity and indeed at all levels within aid delivery systems, some very positive initiatives have been developed. UNDP, working with the Department for International Development (DFID), has been particularly active in the demining arena in developing management training programs for a range of staff levels within mine action centers (MACs). A key part of this relates to the need for strategic thinking on the part of MACs in order to ensure that stakeholder expectations are met. However, if limited donor funds are to be used effectively within emergency and/or development programs, the management training initiatives need to be embraced by others, including donors, NGOs and the commercial organizations. The aim must be to develop local capacity both to perform the tasks and also to manage them. It is also critical for success that those involved have a clear understanding of both the language and practice of good management if organizations are to avoid stumbling from one crisis to another.

Conclusion

Within the sphere of humanitarian aid, most situations move rapidly from an emergency response/needs to a position where management skills become an essential factor. This situation is particularly relevant in the evolution to development status where organizations such as UNDP are involved. The argument is made for all players, from international donors through NGOs to local suppliers of services, to have a common management language if actions are to be coordinated and operated effectively. The initiative developed by UNDP within the demining arena is a good first step in this process and one that could benefit many of the other areas within humanitarian aid. Additionally, a case can be made for a greater use of commercial organisations in the delivery of aid.

Perhaps, in the future, more efforts will be made to lower the barriers between commercial companies that have proven themselves to be legitimate humanitarian players and NGOs. Both are treated the same way by funding organizations and are expected to submit bids that are cost-effective, backed by a acceptable level of experience and take a holistic approach to humanitarian problems by considering the broader stakeholder base. While corporate interests still support the existence of commercial companies pursuing humanitarian interests, they have much to offer to the other agencies and would benefit from a shared interest with them. The application of strategic management tools and techniques to measure the humanitarian performance in the broadest context is something from which NGOs and more loosely structured organizations could certainly learn. However, for this to succeed, NGOs must show a greater willingness to cooperate with commercial humanitarian agents on a level playing field in the future.

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[1] Based on extensive discussions with numerous NGOs operating in the Prizren and Pristina areas of Kosovo.