

HPG Roundtable Meeting Series on Humanitarian Space

Meeting 4 - Politicisation and Securitisation of Aid: challenges to humanitarian space in Somalia

ODI/HPG and SOAS, Nairobi, 14th February 2011

Meeting Summary

Introduction

The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Department of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) organised a roundtable meeting to discuss challenges to humanitarian space in Somalia. This roundtable meeting is the fourth in a broader series organised by HPG that runs between October 2010 and March 2011. The meeting aimed to foster discussion on current challenges, particularly those related to the international community's counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency and state-building interventions in Somalia and the tensions that have emerged between these and principled humanitarian action. Given the sensitivities of the issues and to promote an open and honest discussion the meeting was held under Chatham House Rules. What follows is a summary of the discussion.

An Overview of Challenges Affecting Humanitarian Space

Somalia is one of the longest humanitarian crises in the world. This is the result of protracted armed conflict and various related natural disasters such as floods and drought. The fighting between 2006-2009 in South and Central Somalia, which reached a climax in Mogadishu in May 2009 exacerbated the humanitarian situation, with devastating effects on people's livelihoods and large scale population movements estimated at almost 1.5 million people.

Access for humanitarian organisations has always been a challenge since before the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, but particularly during the international interventions that have occurred over the past twenty years. This is due to both external and internal factors. A key external challenge is the nature of international interventions. This comes out in comparison of Operation Restore Hope (ORH) in 1992 and UNOSOM from 1993 to 1995. ORH was an external attempt to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of state collapse. Its mandate, authorised by the UN, was to mitigate, during a five month period, the diversion of relief aid and ensure its safe delivery to those in need. Although the mission encountered some difficulties, it succeeded in improving humanitarian access and stopped an outbreak of famine. The nature of intervention changed in 1993 with the arrival of UNOSOM, which had a humanitarian and political mandate. In addition to safeguarding the delivery of relief, it was tasked with supporting reconciliation and building the institutional capacity of the state in order to foster law, order and peace. The intervention created significant difficulties for humanitarian workers as the ability to adhere to the principles of neutrality and impartiality was compromised by the collision of humanitarian and political agendas. Many humanitarian organisations were dependent on UNOSOM for armed escorts and were seen to be taking sides by virtue of where they worked, who they worked with, the source of their funds, and the nationalities of their staff by various militia groups, eroding their acceptance.

The UN's decision to widen its mandate for intervention and attempts at state-building in the midst of armed conflict worsened many Somalis' distrust of international actors of any kind. ORH had arguably been more successful owing to its shorter and less ambitious mandate and the fact that it was squarely focused on a more realistic objective: that of supporting humanitarian assistance. The problems raised by the UNOSOM experience are mirrored in current problems faced in Somalia today, with the humanitarian enterprise continuing to be hamstrung by the international community's political agenda, while those involved in state building have argued that humanitarian actors are impeding the achievement of state-building and counterterrorism goals.

There is a contradiction in the humanitarian aid system, with the UN leading the humanitarian response and at the same time being a political organisation linked to Member States. This contradiction is exacerbated when the UN intervenes in ongoing armed conflict and donors try to play a humanitarian and political role. In practice, Member States prioritise political interventions such as state-building and counter-terrorism and seek to use humanitarian assistance to support these objectives, something that armed actors and local communities are well aware of.

Internal factors relate to the changing context on the ground. In recent years, the humanitarian community has been faced with new actors on the ground with different ideologies and forms of engagement. This is the case with al Shabaab, which controls most of the country and has placed significant restrictions on access by international humanitarian actors, including checkpoints and heavily taxing the delivery of assistance. They espouse the idea that most humanitarian organisations are spies or political tools for Western governments and this has contributed to intimidation and attacks on aid workers. The current international proscription of al Shabaab and other organisations on terrorist lists furthers these perceptions as humanitarians are prevented from engaging in local level negotiation to try to build trust and negotiate access.

This raises the question of how humanitarian organisations might separate themselves from stabilisation and related state-building, peace-building and counter-terrorism agendas. Compromising principles may be seen as a solution to securing or maintaining a certain level of access in the short term. For example, accepting armed escorts and protection from the peace-keeping mission might improve access in certain areas. Yet, these actions can set a precedence that is difficult to reverse in the future. In some places, where the peacekeeping mission is seen to be a party to the conflict, accepting its 'protection' could be tantamount to exposing an organisation's staff and programmes to unacceptable risk. It is important to find solutions that can ensure the ability of humanitarian organisations to operate in the medium and long term. Perceptions and image are central to this endeavour. This not only requires a disassociation with the West and their political agendas, but also ensuring high quality and timely programming and showing a broader commitment to Somalis, including those based outside of Somalia.

Operationally, this may involve refusing funding from donor governments, resisting donor insistence on branding and profile, not collaborating or commenting on the political agenda or peace-keeping mission (even on issues such as humanitarian corridors). It requires ensuring that programmes are run by well-trained and well-supported Somalis and accepting that they are capable of fulfilling roles normally given to ex-patriots. It also requires transparent and honest engagement with all actors to the conflict, including al Shabaab. This engagement needs to be consistent and may need to be rooted in local values and principles, as negotiating on the basis of foreign norms and standards can lead to hostility. For example, the language of neutrality can have negative connotations in Somalia as it is translated as 'not caring'. The use of the Quran or Somali customary law rather than the Geneva Conventions may also be a

more effective tool for advocating behavioural change that provides more protection to civilians. Knowing the best approach and identifying the right counterparts for negotiation requires improvements in political analysis. This analysis may identify actors outside the formal humanitarian sector, such as members of local communities, the Diaspora or the private sector, as more effective interlocutors. Yet, high-quality analysis is frequently lacking, partly due to the complexity of the issues but also because the humanitarian community often approaches Somalia with standard frameworks that limit their analytical lens. For example, al Shabaab is often assessed from a counter-terrorism perspective and not as a social movement, leading to a skewed analysis of their compositions, interests and motivations.

Humanitarian organisations also need to develop different strategies for different regions as the challenges are not homogenous, and whilst most organisations focus on the difficulties of accessing South -Central Somalia, there are other areas in which needs are considerable and access poor. There are also some sectors that are more challenged than others, such as the provision of food. This is partly due to the impact that the delivery of food has on the war economy. A solution may lie in supporting the food economy, which would involve supporting production or inputting large quantities of food into the economy without targeted distribution, which would need to involve development actors that are not conditioned by providing assistance according to need.

Safeguarding Humanitarian Space: what can we learn from the past?

The lack of trust between humanitarian organisations and important stakeholders in Somalia and the consequent lack of humanitarian space is not a recent phenomenon. It is something that has been developing over the last twenty years and there is a need to understand what some of the aspects of that legacy are. It is important to go back to the interventions in the early 1990s as their mandates and composition have influenced the way in which international actors are viewed by Somalis.

These interventions were initially preoccupied with supporting humanitarian needs, and when engagement was limited to this role – with state-building less of a priority – there was greater acceptance for these types of intervention. Yet, since 2001, there has been an international trend towards prioritising peace-building and state-building as a means to enhance international peace and security. This was the case in Somalia during the Ethiopian invasion of 2006, which eroded relations between Somalis and international actors. The intervention was seen as a cause of instability and the West was accused of having double standards with respect to human rights, with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Ethiopian forces immune to criticism despite evidence that they were heavily implicated in abuses. It is no surprise that there has been little discussion of the responsibility to protect in Somalia.

In this environment of distrust, it seems that stabilisation efforts have led to destabilisation in practice. The assumption that building the capacity of the state will improve stability (the approach of ‘if we build it they will come’) has not worked in Somalia, and mars current efforts at strengthening the TFG. This possibly suggests the need for a reduced mandate in Somalia. After 1995, when the international community politically disengaged from Somalia, endogenous forces in Somalia created some stability, particularly in Somaliland (where the process of political stabilisation began earlier, in 2001) and Puntland. The lesson is that peace can rarely be imposed from the outside and that there is a need to ensure an effective humanitarian response that might create the space for Somalis to resolve their problems.

The lack of trust has severely impacted the ability of humanitarian organisations to respond to needs. The number of NGOs in South-Central Somalia has significantly reduced since 1995 and there are questions about whether there is capacity to respond if humanitarian access opens up. Remote management has in most cases not sought to empower local staff to step up and take this responsibility. More needs to be done to support other forms of humanitarian

engagement. This includes strengthening and working with the Diaspora, which already plays an important (albeit limited) role in responding to needs. This should involve the provision of money, training and bringing back skilled personnel to work for NGOs. There is a rich pool of people from the Diaspora willing to return, including health and education professionals. There also needs to be an improvement in supporting national NGOs and a move away from the perception that they are less able or more politically compromised to carry out effective humanitarian action.

Improving trust also requires the international community to objectively monitor and enforce compliance of international human rights and humanitarian law. Meanwhile, humanitarians need to do more to disentangle themselves from the war economy, as they are already an integral part of the conflict dynamic, reflecting a failure over time to resist politicisation at this level. In fact, the longer agencies have been in Somalia, the more entrenched they tend to become in local conflict dynamics and this needs to be factored into attempts to build trust and acceptance. The key question and challenge is how to build up trust when it has been significantly eroded.

A review of international intervention in Somalia suggests a difficult relationship between humanitarian action and politics. Greater acceptance requires humanitarians to separate themselves from political engagement. This requires smart advocacy strategies and consistency as Somalis remember acts of double standards and will reject actors who appear inconsistent in their approaches or who undermine Somalis' sense of ownership over their future.

Operational Security Management: enhancing or hindering humanitarian space?

Effective operational security management can enhance humanitarian space as it allows for the delivery of assistance in insecure and volatile environments. This is well understood in the humanitarian community and, as a consequence, the last decade has seen greater investment and emphasis on improving security management. Most organisations have security managers and various tools and best practice have been developed and published. Current approaches emphasise the need to manage rather than avoid risk; it is about how to stay rather than when to leave. Security management has moved beyond identifying risks and subsequently limiting activities and is now about ensuring critical programmes can continue to be implemented.

The challenge is to ensure an adequate balance between security and programming. This is particularly important in Somalia where threats of violence, especially in South-Central, have been significant. This is related a lack of neutrality and impartiality in Somalia, which is proving increasingly elusive. However, there is an indication that the number of serious attacks against aid workers is declining. There were five separate incidents against aid workers in 2010 compared to fifty-one in 2008. The main reason for this decline is the contraction in the number of aid workers in Somalia, with most working though remote programming. This creates an additional challenge as agencies have to analyse threats from a distance.

Lessons from other contexts point to a number of factors that may help organisations to continue to operate effectively. These include focusing on highly localised activities with local staff and ensuring a low profile (no logos, staff without identifying papers and no conspicuous technology), as localisation enhances acceptance and a low profile reduces the risk of opportunistic attacks. Acceptance can be achieved. However, it requires a lot of time, an identifiable (if low-key) presence, and it needs to be rooted in high-quality and timely programming. It also requires direct engagement with local communities and dialogue with all stakeholders, including al Shabaab. This is being recognised in the humanitarian community, and the UN is moving away from a 'fortress mentality' and recognising that attention needs to be paid to perceptions.

A key question that needs to be addressed is when it becomes untenable to deliver services in hostile environments. To answer that question, risk assessments have been developed that take into account programme 'criticality' in terms of its importance for responding to urgent and/or extreme humanitarian needs. There is a move away from a one size fits all model, although more needs to be done to counter the standard reaction of shutting down in the face of an incident. In the case of extreme programme criticality, unconventional approaches need to be adopted that may be at odds with perceived good practice in security management. This can include extremely low profile engagement in which staff do not use protective equipment, do not carry satellite telephones and are outside the umbrella of institutional security management support. The level of acceptable risk increases and there is a need to ensure that it is not simply passed on to national staff. They need the same level of support including benefits such as hazard pay and equal access to counselling. This duty of care should extend to national staff and local implementing partners, who are often not given the training or the resources necessary to ensure their safety.

The limitation of the low profile approach is that it promotes small-scale programmes. It is difficult to adapt to large-scale delivery such as food aid, and therefore risks sidelining these responses and promoting an '*a la carte*' humanitarianism. So whilst low profile acceptance strategies are necessary, the humanitarian community should consistently strive for high profile acceptance. In Somalia, there is worrying lack of high profile acceptance and it possibly stems from the fact that the UN's political side and its governance functions both support the TFG and simultaneously strives to be a neutral and impartial humanitarian actor, an unfortunate contradiction in the eyes of many Somalis.

State-Building Policies and their Impact on Humanitarian Space

State-building in Somalia is underpinned by a peace process characterised by a power-sharing agreement rather than inclusive grass-roots peace-building. It is based on a short-term and tactical approach that does not seek to tackle the root causes of conflict, but instead prioritises counter-terrorism objectives. This has led to rent-seeking forms of governance, with the TFG, despite its behaviour, continuing to receive international assistance and support. This is a challenge for humanitarian space in Somalia. In a tactical approach, everything can be politicised or securitised, including humanitarian assistance, which is easily seen as a means to strengthen the state-building process.

This is symptomatic of the lack of a long-term strategic approach to state-building in Somalia. Humanitarian assistance, despite its inadequacies in this role, has become the substitute for government service provision and is seen as creating peace dividends. This goes to the heart of politicisation of humanitarianism: it has become the default form of engagement in chronic conflict environments. In this role, the respect for principles has diminished as humanitarian organisations are prohibited from engaging with all armed actors and assistance is used to legitimise the TFG. In this context, Good Humanitarian Donorship principles have taken a back seat, evident in UNSC Resolution 1916. Moreover, access to and control over humanitarian assistance has become not just a means of obtaining political power, but an explicit objective of gaining power. In a country that has been so heavily damaged by two decades of war, aid has become one of the most valuable prizes of political contestation. This discourages any form of compromise and power-sharing and leads to a winner-take-all mentality among many of the conflict actors.

Improvements to humanitarian space need to be embedded in political change in Somalia. This entails a strategic and long term state-building approach that moves away from tactics and quick wins. The TFG should be a transitional *facilitative* government that tackles fundamental questions about statehood in Somalia. Internal consensus is needed on an acceptable type of governance structure that can lead to peace. This is likely to involve a

'light footprint approach' from the international community which is focused on enhancing local incentives to promote good governance. This process must involve some sort of accountability and reconciliation process so as to address impunity for human rights violations over the past decades.

Humanitarian actors also need to ensure that they are not hindering the political process by reducing their impact on the war economy. This requires greater dialogue with 'gatekeepers' based on sound political analysis and clarity on the concept of humanitarian space. It is not always clear whose space is being talked about especially given the culture of resource entitlement in Somalia. This culture, based on the sharing of resources rather than the provision on the basis of need, is a significant impediment to negotiating humanitarian space.

Closing discussion

There is a need for greater clarity on the concept of humanitarian space and the questions of whose space are we referring to, who is an acceptable humanitarian actor and what activities are acceptable for local communities and other stakeholders. This links to the need to assess the multiple factors that impact humanitarian space. Whilst the politicisation of assistance is certainly an issue, it might be the economics of resource capture or the culture of resource entitlement that represents the greatest threat. Answers to these questions require engagement with stakeholders at different levels (international, national, regional, local) and will ultimately determine the parameters of an acceptance approach in Somalia.

This is likely to be based on empowering local NGOs, the Diaspora and national staff so as to ensure they are able to operate effectively and to desired and accepted standards. The challenge of providing food aid effectively depends on the ability of these actors to access those in need and to minimise risks of diversion. The localisation of the response will also require some re-thinking in terms of profile and branding of donors and international agencies.

Greater political awareness is central to gaining acceptance and humanitarians' local access puts them in a privileged position to gain the appropriate knowledge. This will require, however, significant investment in gathering information and engaging with key stakeholders across both time and space. Although there is a tendency to position humanitarian action 'outside' of politics, it is engagement with politics that will facilitate greater humanitarian space. However, the key is to consider what type of politics is required: there is a need for greater political space for Somalis to discuss their priorities, and is this seen as lacking in the current climate. Opening up humanitarian space will inevitably involve greater advocacy to end conditionalities and other political impediments that are hindering adherence to core principles of humanitarian action. For instance, in order for impartiality to be a meaningful principle in providing humanitarian assistance in Somalia, dialogue has to be opened up with local authorities, no matter who they are.