

A clash of principles?

Humanitarian action and the search for stability in Pakistan

Key messages

- Political and military interests have tended to override humanitarian considerations in the emergency response to the crisis in Pakistan occasioned by government offensives against the Taliban. This is likely to become an even greater issue as people return home and recovery and efforts to promote stability get underway.
- The international response to the displacement crisis has been slow and lacking in influence, and has failed to adequately meet the needs of people outside of displacement camps. Humanitarians have not spoken out against the conduct of hostilities and the politicisation of the emergency response.
- Aid agencies are faced with the dilemma of engaging with and supporting government efforts to promote stability or maintaining a principled approach. Their added value in promoting stability is not clear and their influence over these processes is likely to be mixed. A principled approach will be limiting in terms of influencing domestic policy and gaining access. Resolving or managing these dilemmas will require strategic decision-making based on context analysis and strong leadership.
- Irrespective of the approach adopted, advocacy has a significant role to play in ensuring adherence to IHL in the conduct of hostilities, that there is sufficient humanitarian funding and that efforts to promote stability ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are met, and that political and security considerations do not override the humanitarian imperative.

Pakistan's military offensives against Taliban insurgents in the west of the country have generated a population exodus on a scale unmatched since the founding of the state in 1947. Yet despite the scale of the crisis, with millions of people displaced, reports in June 2009 suggest that the international community's response has been 'unacceptably slow and insufficient'.¹ Operating in an environment of relatively strong state sovereignty and national capacity, efforts by international agencies have been far outstripped by the local Pakistani response. The limited role of international humanitarian assistance in this crisis is due to its lack of capacity and influence, exacerbated by controversy around the way in which humanitarian aid is perceived.

Senior Pakistani politicians, international governments and many aid actors regard assistance as contributing to broader efforts to promote stability, both in the region and

beyond. Indeed, many commentators see Pakistan's future stability as inextricably linked to success, both in the current military offensive against the Taliban and in its handling of the resulting displacement crisis. In May, Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani stated that aid for the displaced would 'help in ensuring that the militants don't exploit the vulnerability of the displaced population. We have to win the hearts and minds of the people'.² Donors and some aid agencies likewise link assistance and security; according to the head of UNHCR, international support 'is not only a matter of solidarity, it's a matter of enlightened self interest ... not doing so [will] risk increased factors of instability'.³

This linkage of security and assistance poses important dilemmas for aid agencies committed to core principles of humanitarian action (neutrality, impartiality and independence). Efforts to

¹ Oxfam International, *Too Little, Too Slow: Why More Must Be Done To Assist Pakistan's Displaced Millions*, 16 June 2009.

² 'Pakistan's Allies Promise \$224 Million for Displaced', *Washington Post*, 21 May 2009.

³ 'UN Refugee Chief Says Pakistan Aid in Donor "Self Interest"', Alertnet, 15 June 2009, http://www.alertnet.org/db/an_art/19216/2009/05/15-150212-1.htm.

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promote stability go beyond the traditional humanitarian mandate, and its concern with saving lives and alleviating suffering. In the current crisis in Pakistan, supporting stabilisation efforts inevitably entails coordination, if not alignment, with the national government and its international allies. This has implications not only for agencies' principles, but also for the degree of acceptance and access agencies can expect within affected communities.

This HPG Policy Brief explores the role of principled humanitarian action in relation to the response to the current crisis in Pakistan. Drawing on secondary documentation and interviews with key informants in July 2009, it asks whether aid agencies should restrict themselves to a relatively limited role in an effort to ensure principled humanitarian action, or whether they should compromise their principles in an effort to achieve greater humanitarian outcomes within broader political and security agendas.

Different conflict perspectives

A range of inter-related factors are driving the current conflict in Pakistan, including a war between radical and moderate Islam, a crisis of governance between Pakistan's centre and periphery, Pashtun nationalism, a class war against Pakistan's politically dominant feudal interests and the expansion of regional and transnational terrorist and security threats.⁴ The relative importance of each factor, and therefore the necessary response, differs among key actors.

Pakistani officials regard the conflict as largely an internal concern, and have downplayed the scale of the crisis. Although the government has been engaged in rounds of fighting with the Taliban since 2001, as late as February 2009, it was still offering political concessions to militant groups, including a ceasefire and the introduction of Sharia law in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Only when the Taliban continued attacks in NWFP's more central Swat district and encroached into Buner, just 100km from the capital Islamabad, did the government escalate its response, launching a major offensive in late April. The Pakistani armed forces lack the capacity to conduct sophisticated counter-insurgency operations, and are engaging instead in a conventional strategy of heavy bombardment and head-on engagement. The conflict has resulted in considerable human suffering, displacement and damage to civilian property, with charges of violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL).⁵ However, despite these methods – and those of the

⁴ J. White, *Pakistan's Islamist Frontier: Islamic Politics and US Policy in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*, Centre on Faith and International Affairs, Religion and Security Monograph Series, 2008.

⁵ Human Rights Watch 'Pakistan: Allow Time for Civilian Evacuations, Army, Taliban Should Minimize Civilian Suffering', 2009.

Taliban – the terminology adopted by the Pakistani establishment has deliberately avoided references to 'armed conflict', reflecting its interest to downplay the scale of the crisis and deny the applicability of IHL, which places limits on how warfare is conducted.

Civilian sympathy towards and support for the conflict is precarious. Although the establishment of Sharia law in the NWFP garnered popular support in the region, it quickly became clear that life under Taliban control was brutal and uncompromising, quickly reversing public opinion. For most Pakistanis, the Taliban is anathema to their cultural, religious and political beliefs, and at the onset of military operations both the government and the armed forces enjoyed broad popular support. This support, however, is contingent on a quick and decisive end to the conflict, and on the manner in which hostilities are conducted. The risk for the government is that, the longer this offensive continues, the more likely it is to lose popular support.

In contrast to the Pakistani government, international actors, particularly Western governments, have linked the conflict to wider geopolitical issues, including stability in Afghanistan, global counter-terrorism and security in South Asia. They have been largely supportive of the Pakistani army's counter-insurgency efforts, and there has been little public discussion of how hostilities are being conducted. Indeed, the US is pushing for broader action, and has criticised Pakistan for its failure to respond to Taliban attacks on NATO forces in Afghanistan and the terrorist attacks in India at the end of 2008.

Although the ICRC has indicated that IHL is applicable in this conflict, the majority of international organisations, despite raising concerns in private, have been silent on this issue, concentrating instead on its humanitarian consequences.⁶ It has been left to human rights groups to speak out against the conduct of hostilities and the lack of independent access to conflict areas.

Challenges to the principles of humanitarian action in the immediate response

At least 500,000 people were displaced in 2008, mainly from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) on the border with Afghanistan. A further 1.4 million poured out of NWFP in the first three weeks of May 2009. By mid-July, Pakistan's National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) put the total at just over 2m, although unofficial figures are as high as 3.5m. Up to 80% of the displaced were taken in by relatives, friends and even strangers. Others have sought refuge in schools, leaving only a small minority to depend on the support offered in approximately 30 official camps, mainly in NWFP.

⁶ ICRC, 'Afghanistan/Pakistan: Put the Humanitarian Factor on the Agenda', 2009.

The response has been led by Pashtun communities in NWFP. Themselves impoverished, many have been pushed to breaking-point by their efforts to assist those displaced by the conflict. There has been little official support for host communities beyond some food and non-food items and government cash grants. However, not all local actors are motivated purely by humanitarian purposes. The outskirts of official camps reportedly resemble humanitarian bazaars, with a wide variety of political and religious groups providing assistance in return for membership or support. As was the case in the response to the South Asia earthquake in 2005, the charitable wings of prominent religious parties, as well as banned *jihadi* groups, have been active in the response, viewing it as an opportunity to gain influence over vulnerable populations.⁷

The government was initially slow in responding to the displacement crisis as political and military considerations were prioritised over humanitarian imperatives. Aid officials in Pakistan claim that insufficient assistance was made available to those displaced from that FATA before May 2009 because of the lack of political leverage of IDPs from this traditionally marginalised and remote region, as well the government's attempts to downplay the scale of the crisis. The lack of government preparedness for what many view as a predictable mass influx in Swat was reportedly due in part to the desire not to signal the imminent operation to militants and an absence of an adequate civilian complement to the military operation.⁸

A major response finally got underway in May 2009, when an independent commando division of the Pakistan Army, the Special Services Group (SSG), took over responsibility. Although the SSG is ostensibly answerable to the provincial government, the appointment of a senior military figure, General Nadeem Ahmed, as the head of the SSG confirms the extent of the military's influence over relief efforts at both federal and provincial levels. Despite positive reports on the effectiveness of the military in the provision of relief, in particular to camp-based populations, the involvement of a party to the conflict in the design and implementation of the humanitarian response has had obvious implications for impartiality and neutrality. For instance, although the government pledged to give each displaced family a cash grant of approximately \$300, many have been excluded, reportedly for reasons of financial, cultural and political expediency.

Assistance from the international community has been insignificant in comparison to the strong local

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan's IDP Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities*, Asia Briefing 93 (Islamabad/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2009).

⁸ T. Ali, *A Stabilisation Programme for Pakistan*, HPG Working Paper, draft, 12 July 2009.

response. The rate and scale of displacement; the scattering of displaced populations among host families and in spontaneous settlements; access difficulties due to insecurity and the role of the military in the relief effort have all contributed to this slow and weak response. As a result, international aid agencies have focused on providing assistance to camp-based populations. This geographically limited response has made it still more difficult to achieve a comprehensive analysis of the context, its different actors and their interests – all factors central to ensuring that the humanitarian imperative is met in this complex operating environment.

International funding for the response has been delayed and insufficient, and the cluster approach has been strongly criticised for conflict of interest, with lead UN agencies being responsible for both coordination and funding decisions. Reports indicate that the water, sanitation and health sectors have performed better than others, in particular in assisting communities outside camps; but concerns have been raised about the protection and early recovery clusters, both of which are critical in this context. OFDA has been praised for the speed, scale and nature of its support, which bypassed the UN cluster bottleneck and funded operational agencies directly. DFID initially disbursed entirely through the clusters, but later adopted a more flexible approach when difficulties became apparent. However, operational agencies also indicated that donors have also been slow to challenge government policy due to their overall support to the Pakistani counter-insurgency effort, as well as lack of influence.

The government's preponderant role in the response has meant that international humanitarian actors have been reluctant to challenge its policies and approach, leading to claims of an absence of independent, neutral and impartial action. One of the reasons cited for the lack of assistance to those displaced prior to the Swat offensive in April was UN reluctance to confront the government and acknowledge the scale of the problem, allegedly in an effort to maintain positive relations to facilitate future operations.⁹ Traditionally weak in Pakistan, the UN has focused primarily on development initiatives. The adoption of the 'One UN Approach' in Pakistan reportedly meant that the UN had little capacity or willingness to assert influence over the humanitarian response in its early stages, although NGOs indicate that the designation of a stand-alone UN Humanitarian Coordinator and steps to strengthen OCHA have both helped. However, a continuing issue of concern has been the exclusion from assistance of unregistered displaced people, with UN agencies reluctant to challenge the government's approach to registration.

⁹ Refugees International, *Invisible People, Visible Consequences*, 2009 www.refugeesinternational.org.

The report of the Pakistan Inter-Cluster Diagnostic mission in July was scathing in its review of the clusters, suggesting that little had been learned since the response to the 2005 earthquake.¹⁰ Amongst other measures, the review recommended that funding and coordination efforts should be split and a Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator appointed in Peshawar. The review also called for the mapping of federal and provincial government agencies involved in the response. Although there are strong programmatic arguments for government involvement in the clusters, to avoid duplication and facilitate impact, there was little discussion of the implications of the Pakistani military's heavy involvement in coordination mechanisms. The lack of strategic discussion of the implications of a party to the conflict taking a leading role in the response and coordination has made it difficult for humanitarians to address some of the more obvious drawbacks in not adhering to the principles of humanitarian action.

Return, recovery and stabilisation

The preceding analysis highlights how humanitarians have struggled to take a principled approach in relation to the conduct of hostilities and in the response to the immediate crisis. This is likely to prove still more difficult in the transition to return and recovery, as efforts to provide humanitarian assistance converge with government and international efforts to promote stability.

The government is keen to show that conflict areas are 'clear' of Taliban militants and stable and safe for return. The government needs to demonstrate victory in order to maintain popular confidence within Pakistan, and to reduce the incentive for broader international engagement. An organised voluntary returns process officially began on 13 July, but there are concerns that military and political interests are being prioritised over the safety and other needs of returnees. Reports suggest that the government is coercing return, for instance by cutting off power supplies to camps. While many displaced people are anxious to return – and indeed have made their way home independently of government-supplied transport – others have refused to return due to continuing difficulties in obtaining government cash assistance. Furthermore, despite claims that areas are 'clear' of the Taliban, return buses have been escorted by helicopter gunships and armed police and reportedly subjected to numerous security checkpoints as they travelled through areas still under curfew. Aid actors' concerns that return may be premature appear to be substantiated by reports that returnees have been killed by the Taliban or displaced again.¹¹

¹⁰ OCHA, *Inter-Cluster Diagnostic Mission to Pakistan*, draft report, July 2009.

¹¹ International Rescue Committee, 'Pakistan Crisis "Far from Over" As Some Displaced Return Home', Press Release, 17 July 2009.

This concern to demonstrate that the emergency is over reflects the government's interest in downplaying the scale and nature of the crisis and limiting its international dimensions. The government is highly sensitive about international 'stabilisation' agendas (see Box 1), reportedly due to concerns that 'stabilisation' will involve international reconstruction efforts similar to those undertaken in Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite the readiness of the international community to support stabilisation in the region, with \$5.3 billion pledged in April, the absence of a coherent strategy on the part of the government has meant that the bulk of these funds remained uncommitted by mid-July. By the end of July, a government 'development, reconstruction and rehabilitation' strategy was being prepared, for presentation at a donor pledging conference planned for early September 2009. The strategy, which emphasises the rehabilitation of infrastructure and macro-economic support, has three phases. The first, early recovery, incorporates the facilitation of return and the resumption of basic services. Reconstruction and rehabilitation involves the permanent reconstruction of private and public property, as well as livelihoods and business support. The third phase, economic development, will depend on the outcome of a post-conflict assessment, but the July

Box 1: International approaches to promoting stability

Whilst stabilisation efforts have traditionally been associated with military-led operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, there has been a shift in emphasis towards civilian efforts including the provision of basic services, governance, reconciliation and rule of law. This is based on the premise that stabilisation cannot be achieved with military action alone, but also requires a combination of humanitarian, early recovery, security, development and political interventions to support social, economic and political transition. Donor governments and the UN increasingly recognise the need for more 'coherent' action, particularly between humanitarian, development, security and political actors.

The US describes stability operations as military missions and activities conducted to maintain or re-establish a safe and secure environment, provide essential governmental services, reconstruct infrastructure and deliver humanitarian relief. The UK emphasises external, joint military and civilian support, with a focus on the legitimacy and capability of the state and tangible benefits to the population, to underpin confidence in the state and the political process.

proposals include initiatives covering human development, economic growth, governance and security and law and order.

The government's primary focus on physical infrastructure and economic investment is in stark contrast to the preoccupations of the international community. Many donors see the crisis as an opportunity for more comprehensive engagement in an effort to promote stability, in particular to sustain legitimate government and curtail transnational threats. Stabilisation efforts are being led by the 'Friends of Pakistan' group, which includes the US, the UK and the UN. The US has adopted a joint 'Af-Pak' (Afghanistan and Pakistan) strategy in order to address the insurgency and protect its national security interests. The strategy includes engagement with the government and the military and intelligence communities; enhancing civilian and democratic governance including through the provision of services and support in 'cleared areas' in FATA and NWFP; and increasing assistance including direct budget support, development aid and help with counter-insurgency work.¹² The UK has not published its plans in relation to Pakistan, but has indicated that it sees the current crisis as an opportunity to address the causes of instability and militancy, complementing military operations with a strong 'hearts and minds' component, including issues such as rule of law, governance and security-sector reform. A review of stabilisation opportunities undertaken by UNDP/WFP early in 2009 took a similar approach.¹³

How the strategies of these 'Friends of Pakistan' take shape in practice will depend on the degree to which the Pakistani government accepts international involvement in its development, reconstruction and rehabilitation plans. This is likely to become clearer at the pledging conference in September. While some donors see current plans as an improvement on earlier infrastructural approaches, there is concern that they continue to fall short of comprehensive governance and judicial reform.

The shift in focus to recovery and stabilisation raises questions regarding the role of international aid actors in whatever strategy emerges. The need to maintain greater distance from the government during this phase was recognised by some interviewees, who claimed that, although humanitarian agencies have generally not questioned the government's actions during the conflict and the displacement phase, as the situation stabilises this

pragmatic position becomes less justifiable. By mid-July there were indications that a number of NGOs were beginning to publicly challenge government practice on returns.¹⁴ Many agencies have expressed concerns about the long-term implications of being seen to work with the military, and by extension supporting the aims of the Pakistani state when it is a party to the conflict. Others raised concerns about being associated too closely with international counter-insurgency or stabilisation efforts, stating that, in conflict-affected areas, international assistance was already regarded as inextricably linked to Western interests ('you bomb our villages and then build hospitals'). Several agencies have reduced their visibility, including not using flags or logos to identify themselves as international aid actors and removing labelling from food packages, so that they are not viewed as Western goods.

Maintaining this distance is likely to prove difficult in practice as any recovery phase will involve greater, rather than less, engagement with the government. Experience from the earthquake response suggests that the military is likely to retain a strong role in the reconstruction phase. Furthermore, there is a history of tight control of international access to politically sensitive regions in Pakistan. Whilst some agencies have taken principled positions against government practice on returns, others have been more reticent. NGOs were highly critical of what they saw as reluctance on the part of the UN Country Team to challenge the government's return policies. Government instructions that people in return areas cannot grow maize because it provides cover for militants have not been questioned by key UN agencies, either on the basis that the injunction implies a lack of safety in return areas or because it is against the best interests of returnees. There are already signs that the government is favouring NGOs and UN agencies that are more supportive of its work; restrictions on access have been imposed on agencies that are seeking to adhere to the principles and have refused to solely provide assistance to those registered by the government.

It is also likely that much of the funding that will become available will be linked to national and international counter-insurgency efforts. USAID has indicated that assistance will target locations on the basis of political, as well as social, indicators. While DFID and other donors have indicated that they will continue to support longer-term development that is not overtly linked to stabilisation goals, experience in other contexts has shown that security and political interests tend to be prioritised. This raises

¹² US State Department, *White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group's Report on US Policy Toward Afghanistan and Pakistan*, March 2009.

¹³ WFP and UNDP, *Developing a Strategic Approach for UN Assistance in FATA and NWFP*, 2009.

¹⁴ See, for example, World Vision, 'Pakistan: Rights of the Displaced Key Concern as Return Gains Momentum', Press Release, 17 July 2009, and International Rescue Committee, 'Pakistan Crisis "Far from Over"'

the question of how humanitarian organisations should engage with this agenda. Should they ensure principled engagement with the state and other actors, even though this could mean limiting their access and involvement, or should they take a pragmatic approach that embraces stabilisation efforts as a means to meet the needs of conflict-affected populations and promote their longer-term welfare?

Principles and the utility of humanitarian action

The question of whether agencies should support stabilisation efforts as a means to achieve humanitarian outcomes has two dimensions: first, the added value or utility of aid organisations in stabilisation efforts generally, and specifically in Pakistan; and second, the degree to which aid organisations can influence efforts to promote stability in order to meet the needs of conflict-affected populations and ensure that the humanitarian imperative is being met.

The extent to which humanitarian action can promote stability in general is contested. Stabilisation experts claim that humanitarian organisations have an important role to play: basic services or community area development can help address some of the socio-economic causes of conflict and indirectly support government legitimacy. There is much debate, however, on the exact link between development and security, with some claiming that there is little empirical evidence to support assumptions that assistance in Afghanistan, for instance, has helped to win ‘hearts and minds’ and improve security.¹⁵

The degree to which humanitarian action can add value to the stability effort *in Pakistan* relates to agencies’ access to, and acceptance in, communities. As outlined above, those agencies supportive of government recovery or stabilisation efforts are likely to encounter fewer bureaucratic impediments and thus gain more access, but this access may be undermined by insecurity in areas of return and the possibility that tensions will re-emerge. Access may also be undermined by a lack of acceptance among warring parties and communities. The Taliban see international humanitarian agencies as part of a broader Western agenda and are likely to be hostile, and communities are reportedly already rejecting assistance from international agencies due to fears for their personal safety. This suggests that local aid agencies and other actors may be better placed given their relative capacity, the important roles

they have played in the response to date and their knowledge of the political terrain.

The other side of this question is the degree to which efforts to promote stability can be used as a platform for achieving humanitarian outcomes. A resumption of services and the provision of health and education are central tenets of the Pakistani government’s approach. Given the likelihood of significant international funding, there is considerable potential for lives to be saved and suffering alleviated. However, assistance is likely to prioritise areas where militancy and extremism are most acute, contravening the principle of aid provision on the basis of need. There are fundamental differences between the humanitarian imperative to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and using assistance to meet security and political objectives. In order to ensure that humanitarian outcomes are achieved, agencies will need to make a convincing case to the Pakistani government and its donors that excluding vulnerable groups will undermine efforts to promote stability in the long term.

Agencies can also potentially support greater humanitarian outcomes and stability through advocacy on the conduct of hostilities, and by ensuring that civilians are protected in line with IHL. Development assistance to FATA and NWFP, and the way in which the government handles the displacement crisis, are both seen as important factors in the stability of these regions. However, this ‘prevention’ and ‘response’ approach to stabilisation neglects another important dimension, namely the ways in which people are treated *during* the fighting. This will have important implications for how they perceive the government afterwards, and the degree to which they are willing to allow it to fulfil its fundamental governance functions on their behalf.

The alternative for agencies is to remain detached from stabilisation efforts and provide assistance on the basis of principled engagement alone. However, this too raises important difficulties. The extent to which the principles of humanitarian action can facilitate access to populations depends on the willingness of the parties to the conflict to respect broader humanitarian principles: the idea that there are limits to the way in which hostilities are conducted and that there is a right for humanitarian agencies to offer assistance and promote protection to those in need.¹⁶ Respect for these principles is often contingent on the perceived usefulness of humanitarian agencies to warring parties. In the Pakistani context, principled action is not seen to be useful, either to the government or the Taliban, and therefore agencies

¹⁵ A. Wilder, *Using Reconstruction Assistance To “Win Hearts and Minds” in the War on Terror: The Case of Afghanistan*, ISA’s 49th Annual Convention, Bridging Multiple Divides.

¹⁶ N. Leader, *The Politics of Principle: The Principles of Humanitarian Action in Practice*, HPG Report 2 (London: ODI, 2000).

are likely to be limited in their ability to influence domestic policy and gain access. Furthermore, remaining outside of state structures is problematic in a context where there is a strong and capable state, albeit one with evident shortcomings. Donor support is also unlikely to be made available for parallel assistance programmes as people begin returning home.

Conclusion

The centrality of counter-insurgency in Pakistan raises difficult dilemmas for international humanitarian agencies. Civil–military guidelines accept that coordination with the military is justifiable in ‘exceptional circumstances’ where it will have positive humanitarian outcomes.¹⁷ The current crisis in Pakistan represents one example, given the incapacity of the civilian government to respond to a crisis of this magnitude. However, the lack of strategic discussion of the negative implications of this approach for humanitarian outcomes is concerning, as are indications that national security and political interests have trumped humanitarian considerations. An IASC global working group on humanitarian space is undertaking a review of civil–military relations and humanitarian space in a number of different contexts. There is an urgent need for in-depth analysis of this issue in relation to Pakistan.

However, this is not just a matter of civilian–military relations and how to coordinate action. It goes to the heart of what humanitarian action means in this context, and how to most effectively achieve humanitarian outcomes. The way in which humanitarians engage with the government of Pakistan necessarily raises questions around their role in national and international counter-insurgency and stabilisation efforts.

Adopting a principled approach and distancing oneself from government policy carries the risk of further reducing the influence of international humanitarian assistance in achieving humanitarian outcomes. Those agencies without independent funding are likely to find it difficult to secure money for programmes that remain outside state structures. Meanwhile, the control that the Pakistani government exercises over access means that agencies choosing not to engage with the government may find it more difficult to reach communities. Although the ICRC has enjoyed greater acceptance in communities than other international organisations, its unique role as guardian of IHL means that it has the benefit of being both distinctive and useful to the warring

parties. Other agencies will struggle to similarly differentiate themselves from counter-insurgency efforts, both in perception and in practice. This is likely to have implications for agencies’ security. This limited role may be justified, however, given the lack of influence international aid agencies have enjoyed to date and the substantial role that local communities and other local actors have played in the response, albeit with different principles and interests.

Engaging with stabilisation is also problematic as the exact relationship between humanitarian assistance and ‘stabilisation’ efforts is not yet clear. There appears to be some potential that humanitarian outcomes can be achieved through programmes aimed at promoting stability, but this is not guaranteed and will depend on a range of factors, including the specific programme, its overall goals and its intended beneficiaries. There are no easy guidelines to assist agencies in determining which programmes offer the greatest potential. Programmes aimed at meeting basic needs, rather than for instance enhancing governance, are more likely to converge with humanitarian objectives, and humanitarian actors will be more effective and thus more influential in these activities.

Despite the importance of these decisions, there is currently a dearth of discussion around the role of principles and the implications of engaging with stabilisation efforts. Agencies need to consider these dilemmas and ensure that they are aware of the implications of their respective positions. This requires strategic decision-making based on context analysis and strong leadership, both by individual aid agencies and by the UN. In this regard, it is critically important that the UN’s humanitarian function is strengthened in order to improve leadership and understanding and knowledge of the context. Issues undermining humanitarian outcomes need further assessment, including monitoring of returns and gaps in the current response. The potential appointment of a deputy UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Peshawar is a positive first step, but there is also a need for the UN Country Team to take a much stronger stance on government policies and practices that undermine humanitarian outcomes.

Irrespective of the approach adopted in relation to principles, all humanitarian agencies can play a critical advocacy role given the scale of needs and the degree to which political and security considerations are prioritised over humanitarian imperatives. Humanitarians should continue to remind warring parties of their responsibilities towards civilians during hostilities. Donors should be strongly encouraged to maintain sufficient levels of funding to meet humanitarian objectives in line

¹⁷ IASC, *Civil–military Relationship in Complex Emergencies – An IASC Reference Paper*, 2004, <http://ochaonline.un.org/mcdu/guidelines>.

with their commitments to the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative. Those engaged in stabilisation activities should make every effort to influence recovery and stabilisation agendas so that they offer the greatest potential to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. As operational agencies have limited

influence on these issues, working in coordination with donors may be the most effective means to get messages across. Current tensions between donors, the UN and NGOs on issues related to funding and coordination must also be overcome to allow for more strategic action.