

Policy Dialogue XVII Report
Mapping the Security Environment: Understanding the Perceptions
of Local Communities, Peace Support Operations, and Assistance Agencies
May 19, 2005

Overview

The discussion was the seventeenth in a series of six-monthly meetings convened by the Humanitarianism and War (H&W) Project of Tufts University. This one was hosted by the International Rescue Committee at its headquarters in midtown Manhattan. The sessions seek to encourage reflection on issues of humanitarian policy and programming.

The discussion used as a launching pad for discussion of a newly released report, *Mapping the Security Environment: Understanding the Perceptions Of Local Communities, Peace Support Operations, and Assistance Agencies*. (The 96-page document is available at the famine.tufts.edu). The more than two dozen participants included UN officials, government representatives, NGO and Red Cross movement staff, and several researchers and academics. The discussion, off-the-record to encourage candid exchange of views, was facilitated by Larry Minear and Antonio Donini. Abby Stoddard of the NYU Center for International Cooperation served as informal rapporteur.

Summary

The day began with a presentation of the major findings of the study by Minear and Donini. These included the following:

1. Perceptions of security differed significantly among the three sets of actors: local communities, peace support operations (i.e., international military forces), and assistance agencies. All of the 350 persons interviewed, whether individually or in focus groups, expressed concerns about security. The military contingents were preoccupied with “force protection,” the aid agencies with the safety needed to carry out their tasks of assistance and protection, and local communities with their own ability to function day-to-day.
2. That said, perceptions of security differed significantly within each of these three sets of actors. American troops serving in Afghanistan took a much more restrictive approach toward engaging the local population than did other military contingents, some of whom sought security in part *through* such engagement. Similarly, some UN aid agencies maintained their distance from local communities while some NGOs sought security by “blending in.”
3. Perceptions of security evolved over time. Local communities moved on from conflict and the need for physical security rather quickly to embrace a wider array of human security needs. Military actors were less agile and assistance agencies less agile still.

The morning session was devoted to clarifying competing understandings of security,

which, taken together, suggested a “multilayered” reality. Even though all actors were using the same term, they meant quite different things by it. Was a common definition even possible or useful?, the group wondered.

The group spent a fair amount of time on the ways in which security evolves in post-conflict situations. One participant spoke with passion about security being the “mess” left for humanitarians by the bigger political-military actors who come and go with little sense of local realities. “Humanitarians need to engage the big guys,” he concluded, on matters of security. Another participant noted that muscle-flexing by the big actors creates insecurity for humanitarians, who, in the case of Kosovo, had to take members of NATO nationalities off of their teams as a result of the insecurity that resulted.

These comments led to a discussion of the utility – and the dangers – of joint strategic planning between military and assistance agencies. Both sets of actors are in need of the information and expertise that the other possesses; yet the association can be risky for aid providers. Several participants spoke in favor of such collaboration – in fact, the report underscored the gratitude that local communities expressed for the security that military forces provide.

Others sounded a cautionary note. One human rights NGO noted that participation of beneficiaries in program design (including sensitivity to gender issues) distinguishes aid agency from military agency planning and programming. Another NGO objected to allowing local expectations of collaboration to push humanitarian agencies into working more closely with the military. Independence was central to the effectiveness of humanitarian agencies, irrespective of the views of local communities. In fact, the report was challenged for not examining the ways in which political interests (i.e. host or donor governments) abuse humanitarian organizations for their own purposes.

In short, the discussion group’s perceptions of the military’s contributions to security were on balance far less positive than those in the communities surveyed in the research. While the group recommended that more data be generated about the contributions of the military to security and that national governments in war-torn areas be drawn into the dialogue (as they were not in the study), the rapporteur pointed out that perceptions around the table were also so strong that the data were almost secondary to the debate.

The group expressed interest in the finding that local people did not make subtle distinctions between and among this aid provider and that one: they were more concerned with *what* was provided than with *who* provided it. Doesn’t longevity of service in a given area, asked one NGO, count for something? Longevity in a particular area, the team clarified, may well be important for the beneficiary community, but not necessarily for the wider population.

In an effort to unpack the perceptions gap, the discussion clarified that several factors may be at work. First, aid agencies may not be successfully communicating to local publics the nature of their purposes and activities. Second, perceptions of communities have their own logic and may not necessarily reflect realities. (In Afghanistan,

government criticism of NGOs as “thieves” clearly influenced broader public opinion.) Third, people may not really be concerned about what agency provides assistance as long as it is provided. (In Sierra Leone, communities were thankful for mosques built by the Pakistani UNAMSIL contingent, something no NGO would have tackled.)

While observing that some outside actors sought to remain distinct from, others to blend in with, the local scene, the report did not reach any conclusions about the comparative effectiveness of either strategy. Recent research was mentioned which correlated aid operations that were more integrated into local communities with *higher* levels of insecurity.

One person questioned whether evaluators in the course of a short visit -- the teams spent on average only about two weeks in each case study setting -- could do justice to dynamically evolving situations. The researchers acknowledged the legitimacy of the concern that the single snapshot taken might not be representative of complex realities, but pointed out that in this instance the research team members were familiar with the settings from previous visits..

The afternoon session focused on the implications of divergent perceptions of security for assistance agencies working in contested environments. There seemed to be a general perception in the group that security for assistance operations is worsening, although data to document this impression remains sketchy. (The Center for Humanitarian Cooperation is currently analyzing data covering incidents from recent years in 17 countries.)

A number of options for assistance agencies were suggested for discussion, each keyed to the respective sets of actors:

- A1 Nurture closer collaboration with selected military forces
- A2 Cultivate studied detachment from them

- B1 Nurture closer strategic collaboration among assistance agencies
- B2 Individual assistance agencies chart their own courses

- C1 Nurture closer collaboration with local communities
- C2 Cultivate studied detachment from local communities

A clear consensus did not emerge during the discussion in terms of which options were the ones preferred by the group as a whole. Several aid officials said that their philosophies and agency groundrules prohibited collaboration with military forces (A1), whereas several others said precisely the opposite: that such collaboration would clearly be a legitimate means toward the end of delivering protection and assistance.

As indicated in the morning session, there were both proponents and opponents of the information-sharing and planning aspects of A1. One participant drew from the involvement of the military in post-tsunami relief the conclusion that its presence and roles were increasingly accepted in the humanitarian arena, and might well be positive.

Another noted that to ensure the constructive contribution of the military, governments should be pressed to meet their commitments under the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative.

One NGO official tasked with maintaining staff security for his organization expressed the view that all options were and should remain open, with particular choices determined by the given situation. Given the disparity of views expressed, arriving at a consensus position for the humanitarian community as a whole (B1) would clearly be difficult.

Comment

As facilitators, we found the discussion noteworthy in several respects. The presence of fewer major practitioner agencies than in the past (a number had sent regrets) meant that the discussion had a less operational texture than usual. As a result, some of the challenges in the findings were not picked up on: for example, that aid agencies were less responsive to security needs, broadly understood, than their military counterparts. As researchers, we sensed a tension between the generally favorable findings of the data vis à vis the military and many of the views expressed by agencies around the table. We also noted the caution expressed by several participants that positive local perceptions of the contributions of military forces to security might become more guarded if the limited peace that has been achieved in the case study settings failed to be consolidated.

We also found the discussion useful in clarifying what the study is and is not. First, while it is about security and the varying perceptions thereof by different sets of actors, the research does not answer the question that concerns many aid agencies about why they are attacked or whether their particular approach to their humanitarian tasks has a bearing on their present vulnerability. Second, the study is not an evaluation of how military personnel or assistance agencies are viewed as functioning nor of the extent to which donor or host governments intentionally do or do not address human security agendas. The research does, however, point to the utility of more data-gathering and more probing dialogue on some of these wider issues.

Upcoming Sessions

We are considering a change in the policy dialogue series, effective this fall. The objective would remain to solicit input from practitioners on work in progress at the Famine Center and to share the findings and recommendations of such research. However, the issues would be drawn not just from the Humanitarianism and War Project but from other units within the Center. Moreover, rather than alternating between full-day sessions in New York in the spring and Washington in the fall, we would hold half-day meetings on successive days twice a year in New York and Washington.

With that in mind, we are exploring the possibility of a discussion on Tuesday Nov. 8 in Washington and Wednesday Nov. 9 in New York on the topic of regional approaches to the crisis in the southern and western Sudan and Uganda. More details will follow.

Larry Minear
Antonio Donini