Protecting the Humanitarian Space in Conflicts

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In the name of humanity, aid must be allowed to flow to vulnerable people caught in conflict around the world.

Civilians and the vulnerable have the right to access relief in disasters and conflicts. For them to exercise this right, humanitarian workers must have unobstructed access and guaranteed conditions that allow them to do what they need to do.

However, attacks on humanitarian and medical workers in recent conflicts have shocked the world. These aid providers, who have special protected status under international humanitarian law, now have targets on their backs. The resulting obstruction or suspension of life-saving aid supplies and services has had devastating consequences for innocent civilians in urgent need of food and aid.

Restoring space for humanity

Humanitarian organisations exist to save lives and relieve suffering by bringing vital goods and services into areas affected by disaster or conflict.
Four principles that allow humanitarian organisations to protect civilians in time of war and armed conflict are derived from international humanitarian law enshrined in 1949’s Geneva Conventions and protocols added in 1977. These four principles are: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence. Virtually all countries have signed this treaty.

Humanity, the core principle of many humanitarian organisations, means that human suffering should be alleviated in a manner that respects and restores personal dignity, wherever it may occur. Neutrality means providing relief without bias or affiliation to any party in a conflict. Impartiality refers to providing aid without discrimination, prioritising the people who need it the most. Independence requires humanitarian actors to be autonomous, free from any political, economic or military agenda.

When these principles are maintained by aid organisations and respected by the warring parties, they collectively define the “humanitarian space”. Humanitarian organisations operate under the premise that they can provide and maintain this space for workers and the innocent civilians they are trying to help. Similarly, academic research in humanitarian operations generally assumes that this space exists to enable operations. When compromised, it severely constrains humanitarian operations and deprives innocent civilians of a lifeline.

As clear as it sounds in theory, achieving aid neutrality, impartiality and independence is much more challenging in practice. Security has become the primary concern in humanitarian operations. Never in recent history have so many aid workers been killed while trying to fulfil their mandate. This raises questions for both aid workers and researchers about whether and when it is relevant to assume that the humanitarian space is preserved and how (or even if) to maintain operations when it is not.

**Invasion of a non-negotiable space**

In natural disasters, the humanitarian space is typically maintained. Despite complicating factors and challenges, the goals of governing bodies and humanitarian organisations ultimately align towards helping the population affected by disaster.

On the other hand, maintaining the humanitarian space to provide life-saving aid is more complex in man-made disasters, as we have seen in recent
armed conflicts. The parties in conflict, motivated by agenda and ambitions that do not always align with humanitarian principles, ultimately define the boundaries of humanitarian operations. Unfortunately, this mostly means the humanitarian space is greatly compromised or nearly non-existent.

In Syria and Sudan, warring parties attacked civilian, medical and humanitarian infrastructure. In Yemen, all parties violated international humanitarian and human rights law, in addition to a Saudi-led coalition imposing a complete blockade of humanitarian aid to Yemen for years. In Ukraine, Russia has extensively attacked health care personnel and facilities.

In armed conflicts, maintaining the humanitarian space now often hinges on the political aims of the warring parties – be it keeping supplies for their own troops, distributing them to supporters or denying access all together.

**The impact of a distorted humanitarian space**

Due to heightened security concerns, humanitarian and medical organisations operating in conflict zones spend more time and resources extensively screening their personnel, equipping aid convoys with expensive security protection and securing depots.

As these attacks severely constrain and complicate their operations, they must go to great lengths to secure the humanitarian space. This may include negotiating and coordinating with warring parties to transport and distribute aid and medical services to civilian populations outside of active combat zones through humanitarian corridors and aid convoys.

When the humanitarian space is seriously compromised, aid-giving organisations are forced to develop expensive, inefficient and dangerous alternatives out of desperation. For example, while hundreds of trucks were waiting at Gaza’s border for safe passage to access people in need, the United States and other countries had to resort to airdropping aid above a refugee enclave, resulting in the deaths of civilians after parachutes failed to open. In addition, the US plan to build a floating aid pier off the coast of Gaza could put soldiers building this pier at risk.

In other words, there is a lot at stake.

**How research can make an impact**
In the past two decades, INSEAD’s [Humanitarian Research Group](https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/protecting-humanitarian-space-conflicts) (HRG) has studied logistical challenges in the humanitarian context in close collaboration with aid organisations and practitioners. While we have emphasised the importance of humanitarian space from the beginning, the humanitarian operations landscape today has drastically changed.

The scientific community studying disaster logistics tends to focus on natural disasters on the assumption that a safe and unconditional humanitarian space is always maintained. In reality, the instances and severity of humanitarian crises directly related to conflict are growing – while the humanitarian space is shrinking. There is an urgent need to study situations where security is the major challenge for humanitarian workers. Helping civilians in a distorted or non-existent humanitarian space requires agility and creativity to adapt to dynamically changing situations.

In the HRG, we will continue to study how to optimise the use of scarce resources in difficult circumstances, which is at the core of our discipline and the area where we can make the most useful contribution.

We have always known that learning to tackle these challenges is not only relevant to humanitarian aid, but also to business practice. The Covid-19 pandemic was a wake-up call for business. The challenges aid organisations frequently face, referred to as “extreme logistics”, could also quickly become the new normal in the business world. It follows that knowledge derived from research in the humanitarian context can also guide businesses struggling to adapt to extreme logistics.

In the meantime, the international community must speak with one voice to call for parties in any conflict to respect the humanitarian space. Providing this space should not be a political choice. Only then can humanitarian organisations do what is expected of them: provide relief and prevent the unnecessary death and suffering of innocent civilians. It is the right of all vulnerable people under armed conflict to receive aid.

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