

Independance and security

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2006

Transcript of a presentation given at MSF-Switzerland during the conference: Is Independance still relevant in humanitarian action ?, Geneva, December 5, 2006.

Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

The *Centre de reflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) was created by Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999. Its objective is to encourage debate and critical reflexion on the humanitarian practices of the association.

The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

Independence and security

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In a discussion on the dilemma that may arise between independence and security, naturally what first comes to mind are the very concrete experiences of humanitarian teams in the field and above all the physical danger they face in actual situations or in other words during the course of their aid operations.

I do think that it is clear to everyone that MSF is an independent organization that jealously guards its independence. Nevertheless, what is asserted in public debate about a specific international political agenda such as integration and cohesion, merits being questioned if we want to better understand the nature of the dilemma we face in the field.

4. Independence should not be taken for granted

We are not independent just because we say we are. The mere fact that we can admit that shows, first of all, we possess the essential quality of lucidity. The advantage in being as clear and transparent as possible when we present our aims to our counterparts in the field is self-explanatory. However, it is not always very realistic to want to be seen for what we are or perhaps more exactly what we think are. Let us consider discussions we commonly have about MSF in our own circles, whether they involve our families, presentations made to a student body or even our donors. Here I am more specifically referring to the situation in France. It is not uncommon that our counterparts express their surprise that the French Government does not provide most or even part of our funding. Moreover, they can not always understand why, as a matter of principle, we have to refuse this funding. If Western countries have so little understanding for what seems to be a necessary condition for our independence, we can well imagine that our position is not any more obvious in societies where humanitarian operations do not benefit from the same level of media coverage and where the concept of a NON governmental organization is, to say the least, abstract.

Moreover, when we approach the inhabitants of a country in crisis with the aim of undertaking an aid intervention, we, first of all, target these efforts to "populations", "victims" or more or less "vulnerable" beneficiaries. This involves just so many categories or representatives that do little justice to the complexity of social relations and multiple identity groupings (families, clans as well as religious, local and regional groupings...) that reflect the way the inhabitants of these countries define themselves. Likewise, they will not necessarily perceive us as independent aid workers. Furthermore, whether or not they believe in our independence, is not necessarily an issue to them when it comes to forming an opinion about us. We should moreover, not forget that local perceptions are also forged by an often longstanding history of relations that the countries where we operate have had with the West in general terms. A good number of these countries were former colonies. For the inhabitants of decolonized countries, taking the Congo as a case in point, humanitarian organizations can, without a doubt, rekindle the memory of missionaries that preceded or accompanied colonizing powers. Here, from my perspective this is not at all about making NGOs party to a new colonial imperialism. I dare to venture this analogy, because not all missionaries were indeed that. Many of them considered themselves to be independent or at least independent of colonial powers and often despite themselves, in certain situations, they became the instruments of conquests or support for domination of these colonizing powers. The dilemmas that they faced were not all that far from our own.

Be that as it may, the burden from past experiences, terms of reference, distinctive symbols of the societies where we work should encourage us to take a cautious stand when it comes to our expectations about the way we want to be perceived. All the more as these local perceptions take into account all of the outside actors who, and sometimes unwillingly, are deployed at the same time as we are and in the same areas. But is it possible to demonstrate, in the eyes of the local populations, their leaders and the warring parties, our independence from all of these actors?

International actions defined as humanitarian imply today an increasingly growing number of actors. Furthermore, while we often hear expressions such as “international community”, the “humanitarian community” or “aid community”, these expressions apply to very heterogeneous groups. The international forces are composed of national bodies with very different institutional cultures especially in their conception of the use of force just like as in their relations with the civilian populations. With regard to NGOs, what separates them is often greater than what unites them and this is dependent on whether NGOs are religious (evangelist, Islamic...) or secular, what their cultural or ideological terms of reference are and the nature of their activities.

Moreover, this multiplicity of actors must lead us to question the established fact underlying the focus of this panel, in other words the fact that the access of NGOs would become increasingly precarious and even compromised. In fact, for about the last ten years, there have never been so many NGOs at so many different sites. While Iraq, just like some regions of Afghanistan seem for many among us to be out of reach, one should not conceal the reality of the exponential growth that the aid sector has known in all of its different forms. In this regard, it would seem useful to recall that the nostalgia that many have for the Golden Age of humanitarian aid in the 1980s too easily obliterates the fact that NGOs were very few in numbers at that time—but it is perhaps exactly about that very point that there is nostalgia – and that the deployment of aid is more prevalent in refugee camps than in the theater of conflicts. If we compare the number of incidents that have occurred to expatriates present on the Afghan territory today, the current insecurity is without a doubt not proportionally greater than it was at the time of our predecessors who also were the target of imprisonment, kidnapping and assassinations.

Let us return to our discussion on the issue of independence: Who do we have to distance ourselves from, among these multiple actors? Who do we have to make it known to that we are independent? And by whom? The evangelizing NGOs, especially Christian ones in a context where Islam is the dominant religion, can seem to a NGO such as MSF to be just as compromising as Western armies. Next, faced with fighters such as the “neo-Taliban” who are currently fighting against Coalition Forces and that the Kabul Government, we should take into consideration the political interest that these actors have or do not have concerning the recognition of our independence. Their discourse about the defense of the purity of Islam, coupled with intimidating practices to rally the local population to their cause does not easily lend itself to a distinction between “good” and “bad” foreigners. Furthermore, it would be appropriate at this point to recall the experience of Western NGOs in Afghanistan under Soviet occupation. Despite the fact that some Afghani resistance parties accepted us and escorted us at that time, this was definitely not done in recognition of our independence, but due to the expectation of gaining support for their cause; not only through our aid action and testimony, but especially as they saw us as channels for possibly achieving the support of Western powers against the Soviet enemy.

On the other hand, other groups such as Jamiat-i-Islami, were very hostile to us considering us to be heretical organizations not much different than this invader that they intended to chase out of Islamic territory. Regarding the hostility that the Taliban have towards us, we must not minimize the role played by their recollection of NGOs especially French ones that are closely associated--today we would say "embedded" -- with the Panshiri Party that is so influential in the current government.

This reminder should lead us to the third issue related to the notion of independence, as we are attempting to present it in the field. The work of humanitarian NGOs does indeed not take place in a vacuum. We are compelled to negotiate with a certain number of actors, including Western armies, as well as “rebellious” armed groups, factions, governments or local authorities that are more or less legitimate, in order to have access to the civil populations that we intend to assist. We should therefore acknowledge in a pragmatic way that we are in fact dependent on these interactions to successfully carry out our activities. This is why, rather than talking about independence to describe our position in the relations of force and domination that characterizes our areas of operation, it seems to me more realistic to talk about the ongoing attempt to balance our dependencies. Attempting to achieve this balance means trying to avoid becoming trapped because of the compromises that we end up having to carry out with the different political and military actors in a given context. This compromise should neither impose on us the choice of the population to be assisted nor the nature of the assistance to be undertaken.

2. The pursuit of independence as a condition of assistance

These comments on concrete conditions for exercising independence that are required for action in the field, as well as the limited control that we have over the way we are perceived, does not at all call for renouncing this principle. In a very pragmatic manner, the pursuit for independence remains the condition for the purpose and quality of our action.

First of all, to be independent, for ourselves, entails putting ourselves in a position to fully assume the responsibility of the actions that we undertake and not to blame others for our failures or any of our possible deficiencies. This responsibility that we have towards the population that we are assisting implies, first of all, that our activity does not backfire against their beneficiaries, that the assistance that we are contributing is not used for other purposes that would run counter to its purpose. The first of the independences is the one that we give ourselves in the assessment of our actions and of their consequences. In fact it is a critical independence as much with regard to the political environment that we are immersed in as well as concerning our own practices.

Subsequently, in the specific context of peacekeeping or peace-enforcement, defending our independence consists of evoking this obvious fact, too often concealed, that the restoration of peace is a political process and very often a violent process. Imposing peace when this goal implies the deployment of military forces, leads in many cases to going to war to impose a peace. This peace may be synonymous with greater stability and increased protection for the civilian population, yet, that does not always turn out, in principle, to be an absolute Good whose pursuit must be everyone’s concern. Peace is not necessarily a just peace and it can produce new forms of domination, just like it may only be a transitory period before the resumption of a conflict. Here it is useful to recall that, if a war breaks out, in particular, a civil war—which nowadays is the most frequent situation in which we are operating— this infers that tensions in political or social relations of a society can not be resolved peacefully. The capacity for outside intervention to restore a socio-political order and a governmental system acceptable to all, especially by those that took up arms to challenge the previous regime, is open to doubt. The restoration of peace is a long and uncertain process. The humanitarian position advocated by MSF is to back away from this peace assumption.

It is not up to us to judge whether or not a given peace is a just peace. Neither are we to judge whether the political decisions taken to obtain the restoration of peace, including recourse to military force, are legitimate or not. On the other hand, these political objectives run counter to an impartial distribution of assistance to populations and it is for this reason that in certain cases, the logic specific to humanitarian action can be in contradiction with the political logic for the restoration of peace. In Liberia, at the beginning of the 1990s, ECOMOG, the regional African

force, that was entrusted with the United Nations mandate to maintain peace in this country, had however very quickly reinterpreted its mandate in terms of armed opposition to NPFL, a rebel group headed by Charles Taylor. For the ECOMOG, backed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, imposing peace implied weakening by any means Taylor's army and consequently banning access to humanitarian NGOs in the zones that Taylor's army controlled. The civilian population that had the misfortune of being on the wrong side of the Front Line was thus deprived of aid in the name of the pursuit of peace.

In light of these past events, I would like to briefly touch on the topic of coordination. The coordination agenda is presented in a manner that appears to be depoliticized and to comply with the challenge of effective international action. It is however and once again in the name of peace, a political agenda whose focus is also the leadership of this international action. In other words this is all about which organization will coordinate the others. It is understandable that the United Nations has the intention of reinforcing order among its various components. However, a situation whereby non-governmental humanitarian organizations allow themselves to be coordinated is in reality an act of subordination. This is a situation we are against, a fortiori in the name of political objectives that are not our own and in terms of what we feel is necessary to maintain a critical distance.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that in the name of the establishment of peace and democracy that the UN, like most of its member States, calls for coordination that would reflect the necessary community of views and objectives for all of the actors. Nevertheless, the very principle of democracy presupposes the balance of power, the institution of counter-powers and freedom of expression. Likewise, "community", the term coined nowadays and that I previously referred to and that applies just as much to international actors as to local populations (which should be assisted according to a "community" approach which no one would disagree with!) also tends to discredit or to eliminate any divergence of opinion and any plurality of interests that however all life in society is entitled to.

The alternative between independence and security (the pursuit of one does not necessarily imply giving up the other!) seems to me to fall under the same implicit logic of subordination necessary for the common Good. By announcing the creation of *Provincial Reconstruction Teams* to Western NGOs in Kabul in November 2003, didn't the American Army initially propose to coordinate reconstruction aid at the same time while assuring the safety of humanitarian teams?

3. Independence in exchange for security: a false alternative

The alternative between independence and security has never been as clear-cut as the supporters of integration would like one to believe, and moreover, is very often misleading. Following the assassination of five MSF staff members in the province of Badghis and MSF's withdrawal from Afghanistan, Cheryl Benard, Director of Research at the RAND Corporation and close to the Bush administration had called upon MSF to show realism in light of new geopolitical realities where the independence of humanitarian work no longer had its place. In an article published in the Wall Street Journal, she stated that MSF should request more international military units for Afghanistan and seek greater cooperation with them, or resign themselves to giving up all humanitarian aid, not only in Afghanistan, but soon in most conflicts in the 21st century. Considering the death-toll among the American Army and other international military forces in Iraq, just as in Southern Afghanistan, it is justifiable to question the efficiency of the protection provided us by being embedded with the Coalition convoys.

Furthermore, the greater security attained today through armed protection is often dearly paid for by greater insecurity in the short or mid-term. In the early years of the Civil War in Somalia, the progressive recourse of all NGOs to armed guards from the various rival factions of Mogadiscio rapidly placed us at the heart of violent clashes. In some cases, our security incidents were even provoked by our own armed guards that were trying to hike up their fees.

However, above and beyond, the degree of security that we can expect from rapprochement with the armed forces, the aid protection issue can not be raised without questioning the degree of protection that the supposed beneficiaries of humanitarian action may or may not benefit from, in return. In this regard, the experience from the War in Bosnia should remain engraved in the memory of humanitarian workers, just as it undoubtedly is for a good number of Blue Helmets that were sent to the field in the beginning of the 1990s. Entrusted with a mandate that gave them the responsibility to protect humanitarian aid operations, but not authorizing them to use their arms to protect the civilian populations, they found themselves in an unbearable and traumatizing situation of being merely witness to violence and massacres against a disarmed population. Most Bosnians still have a strong resentment against humanitarians as well as the Blue Helmets that they see as accomplices, through negligence or through interest, to the crimes committed against them by the Serb Army.

Lastly, to be "present", and provided with security measures in order to stay on, does not automatically make us efficient. In Kabul, Kandahar, just like as in Iraq, the presence of many NGOs is limited to the confined space of their offices, converted into bunkers from where they delegate to others the task of providing assistance. This approach may have its advantages, but the concerned NGOs can no longer evaluate the impact of their assistance and adverse consequences that may arise. The situation of great insecurity for humanitarians, provoked mainly by targeted attacks, are moreover not necessarily situations where aid represents a required response to a vital emergency. The danger looming over the heads of humanitarian teams was admittedly the primary reason for MSF's departure from Iraqi Kurdistan in 1993 (following the assassination of a staff member of Handicap International) and from Afghanistan in 2004. These departures nevertheless occurred outside any medical emergency at a time when we were showing more ambivalence about a reconstruction process that expected NGOs to manage the operation of a new public health system in the country. Operating under such conditions falls under health policy and development of medical infrastructures and no longer falls under humanitarian aid.

Although this is not a standard rule, we have nevertheless observed that under certain situations, a humanitarian emergency situation (epidemics, natural disasters or famine) may be the opportune time to successfully renegotiate access that was previously impossible. This was the case of Aceh after the Tsunami, just like in Kashmir after the earthquake of October 2005. On the contrary, and it is nothing new that conflict engagement phases and offensive periods (whether this involves bombings or troop movements on the ground) rarely leave room for humanitarian action. MSF has recently made this experience, during the first months of the resumption of conflict in Sri Lanka as of the summer of 2006. It is only when conflict stabilizes, when the strength ratio changes, that negotiations about access become possible again and that humanitarian aid can be deployed under acceptable conditions.

Choosing between independence and security can thus mean arbitrating between a principle and presence while forgetting that one and the other do not make sense if our action in the field does not make sense either. Much more than any statement about our independence, it is above all the quality and the efficiency of the health care and the assistance that we provide and their appropriateness in terms of the real and immediate needs of a population that will assure the legitimacy of our action in the field. Concerning security measures for us, they will turn against us, or we will be bitterly criticized for them, if they give priority to the maintenance of our presence

over the very concrete improvement of the survival conditions of those that we state we want to help. There are limits to what our humanitarian action can do that neither our independence, nor a reinforcement of our security will allow us to go beyond. For this reason, I would like to conclude by saying that in addition to the essential requirement of lucidity that I mentioned in the introduction of this presentation, one should also add a dose of humility.