

Humanitarian space in a fragile state



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Circumstances in Burma highlight the difficulty of maintaining humanitarian space in so-called 'fragile states'.

The difficulties faced by humanitarian agencies in Burma are far from unique to that country. In Burma, Iraq, Darfur, Uganda, Chechnya and other countries, the space for humanitarian action is being increasingly restricted, due either to increasing violence against humanitarian aid workers or to increasingly hostile state regulation of the action of international agencies or, as in Burma, to a combination of both these factors. The strategies being adopted in response bear remarkable similarities in different settings. In particular, the increasing use of 'remote' approaches to operational intervention is striking.

In Burma, the lack of access to vulnerable populations has led to the development of cross-border interventions through networks of local staff, agents and partner organisations. In Iraq, insecurity and restrictions on the movements of international staff members have prompted agencies to develop operational strategies that depend upon local community organisations to undertake the planning and implementation of relief activities. In northern Uganda, Darfur and Chechnya, international agencies have adopted 'remote control' methods of intervention whereby relief operations are implemented by local teams who are coordinated from a 'safe' location at some distance from the actual site of intervention.

'Remote' interventions may appear to be the best and most pragmatic approach to fulfilling the humanitarian imperative under highly constrained circumstances. In addition, it could be said that, by drawing on and developing local capacities, these interventions can improve levels of local participation and ownership, and thereby lay the foundation for a sustainable

transition from relief to development while simultaneously sowing the seeds for a gradual democratic transformation of society.

Humanitarian action in Burma has become politicised to a remarkable degree as it is now bound up with the overarching agenda of the UN to promote deep-seated economic and political reform, which is seen as fundamental to addressing the 'root causes' of the humanitarian crisis. Thus the humanitarian has become almost indistinguishable from the political in what has been called the "UN cacophony" on Burma, whereby almost every issue area is placed firmly under the umbrella of democratisation.

With the developing norm of the Responsibility to Protect, it appears likely that such approaches will become more common. From Sudan to Somalia, and from Iraq to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the international community is increasingly seeking to link the humanitarian agenda with the need for state transformation and the development of good governance. But the potential dangers associated with seeking to link the political to the humanitarian are significant, and may have serious impacts upon humanitarian space itself if such linkages are seen to challenge the sovereign power of the state in question.

Humanitarian operations using local proxies might also put both beneficiaries and local staff in danger of violence or political persecution. And while the use of local civil society may be seen as an effective means of empowering local civil society and building a possible movement for change from the grassroots, under authoritarian conditions

such as those found in Burma such approaches may directly expose local civil society actors to oppression.

Such political interventions and innovative approaches to finding humanitarian space raise a number of challenging questions about the appropriateness of these forms of intervention when considered from legal, political or even humanitarian protection perspectives. Joining up research on rights and related issues across institutional (academic, advocacy, practitioner and policy) and geographical contexts would help strengthen international understanding of the human rights, development and engagement challenges facing the international community in Burma and elsewhere.

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This article draws upon discussions that took place during a workshop entitled 'Displacement and Humanitarianism: A Permanent Crisis in Burma?' that was hosted by the Refugee Studies Centre on 29 February 2008. A selection of papers from the workshop will be published, including in the RSC Working Paper Series.

The main presentations focused on regional powers, the role of the UN, protection and human rights, chronic emergency in eastern Burma, activities and debates relating to humanitarian assistance to IDPs, the role of cross-border approaches, and statelessness. The workshop was organised by Eva-Lotta Hedman (eva-lotta.hedman@qeh.ox.ac.uk), Senior Research Fellow at the RSC.

The analysis here is that of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the participants at the workshop.