NGO-Military Contact Group Conference 2015

CHALLENGE AND INNOVATION:
CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD
26 February 2015

Summary
The NGO-Military Contact Group (NMCG) Conferences provide a platform for civil-military relations and discussion of operational approaches and dilemmas. The distinguished speakers and audience members bring strong experience and analysis to the discussions. Dialogue on the day, particularly around operations in West Africa, Mali, and the Middle East, focussed on the practical. The conflict analysis and sharing of different perspectives on key strategic, scientific and political trends were particularly rich.

There were many themes and suggested ways forward that are relevant for the wider civil-military community. These can inform the World Humanitarian Summit and any future UK Government Strategic Defence and Security Review. The ultimate aim of NMCG is to improve the impact of humanitarian response on the ground for people caught up in crisis.

- No two humanitarian crises are the same. Each requires analysis of the crisis and actors, including a deep understanding of the role and capability of the sovereign state. It is equally important to examine the role of non-state armed groups who may be adapting and innovating all the time. What is best is a context-specific approach that reflects a comprehension of the range of actors and the issues involved, particularly conflict dynamics.
- There could be real benefits for the civil-military community in enhanced scientific-military-civilian humanitarian discussions about innovation, managing risk, and planning. The different approaches, timelines, expertise and perspectives can benefit from this cross-fertilisation of analysis. This may have to be conducted well away from sensitive contexts.
- Innovations must focus on addressing humanitarian needs and real-life problems, not just fitting a product to a situation. In order to be beneficial in humanitarian response, innovation should simplify complex problems. Field-testing technologies are important. Local community knowledge will also improve effectiveness.
- Successful organisations foster institutional and individual courage. Sometimes the right decision by courageous people will be truly life-saving. Innovation specialists and dialogue could also examine the responses of people when faced with new challenges or unconventional situations. The attributes of organisations which allow for this or facilitate this kind of approach could be shared.
- It would be useful to have more frank discussions about the capacity of UK and other militaries which may be deployed in response to biological threats or other major crises such as Ebola. While understanding some of this information is sensitive, there could be some shared analysis ahead of time with the humanitarian community in the face of serious or widespread public health threats, which would help humanitarian planning considerably.
- More efforts are needed to find ways to present a prioritised plan of UK and NATO trainings or simulations that could benefit from civilian humanitarian input. This would need to take into consideration realistic expectations of people’s availability, and recognise that education is more than just training.
- The civil-military community could choose one humanitarian response to be the subject of a joint review, considering civil-military relations and the impact on humanitarian outcomes. While recognising that each organisation involved will have its own procedures for evaluation and lessons-learning, there could be significant value in a shared approach.

Going forward, it is felt that informed and reality-based dialogue between military and civilian organisations is productive and useful to improve the delivery on our respective mandates. On some themes, such as response to large natural disasters, there may be a lot of common ground. There may indeed be real tangible benefits for populations on the ground, particularly in sharing information between the scientific and research sides of our organisations. However, some caution needs to be exercised as many practitioners are concerned that a blurring of the lines or confusion between military and civilian workers remains an important reason why threats against humanitarian workers continue to persist.
The Keynote and Expert interventions
From a UK military perspective, recent deployments – from the 2012 Olympics to the current deployment in West Africa – give much to be proud of in terms of response to situations deemed a threat to UK's strategic interests. Ready to remain active on the global stage, the UK Military has been reconfigured to be deployed in response to a wider range of international threats, in partnership with a range of allies and actors.

When speed is of the essence, bilateral military forces may be a better choice for protection. In the Central African Republic (CAR) the current humanitarian crisis is dramatic – 2.7 million people out of a population of 4.6 million require humanitarian assistance. But it could have been far worse; the feeling in Bangui is that without the rapid bilateral military intervention there would have been a much larger loss of life.

From a UN peacekeeping perspective, civil-military relations are critical when protection of civilians (POC) is defined as the top priority for the mission. This compels senior UN officials to focus on the worst threats to civilians. These are challenging discussions, where military and humanitarian actors have to work together to respond to needs in remote and dangerous parts of the world. There is a strong sense that no one organisation can do it alone.

The value of a UN Mission in complex emergencies is that it can achieve things that no other organisation can do, drawing on a great body of capacity, doctrine and guidance such as POC, human rights, security sector reform, transitional justice, etc.

In the opinion of an Expert Speaker, the UK Military contribution to protection and peacekeeping more widely is appreciated from the field. The assessed contributions, military and civilian secondees, and pre-deployment training have earned the UK a ‘fantastic reputation.’ A relatively small number of UK Military officers deployed to a UN Mission can have a disproportionate impact on the capability of that Mission.

Civil-Military interactions in state-centred humanitarian responses
The first panel focussed on contexts where the state maintains sovereign control and at least some mechanisms are in place to employ military and civilian assets in coordinated structures to best maximise the effectiveness of the response. Looking at the response in the Philippines and in West Africa to address the Ebola crisis, panelists were asked to consider what precedents are being set, and whether these are the right ones for current and future major crises.

There is likely in the future to be an increase in humanitarian disasters and also in the number of people who are displaced or otherwise affected by conflicts and disasters. Some number of these crises will require military involvement in order to have the most effective and timely response. But perhaps we still have a 20th century way of planning military involvement in humanitarian response, suggested one MOD colleague.

No two humanitarian responses are the same, so a template approach is not appropriate. Each response will have its own attributes, including the role and capability of the sovereign state. UK humanitarian responses therefore require planning, coordination, agility and imagination in order to get it right.

The Oslo perspective on civil military relations
The UK Government's humanitarian policy recognises humanitarian principles as being of central importance, and preserving the civilian nature of humanitarian response as the appropriate starting point. One way of looking at it is that responses should be ‘as civilian as possible, as military as necessary.’ Last resort does not mean last in time.

The Oslo guidelines stress the central role of States. However, it is not enough for DFID, the UN agencies and the humanitarian community to understand the Oslo guidelines; so must the deployed military forces. This is why DFID have invested in civil-military deployments to train MOD colleagues and others at the early stages of military deployment, for example in response to Haiyan.

Militaries can bring equipment, personnel, lifting capacity, ships, airplanes, helicopters – but also, something beyond equipment. In Sierra Leone, it was considered very helpful that the UK military brought elements of command, control and coordination to a crisis, as well as medical and logistical support. Militaries with
dedicated capacity for humanitarian response, such as Canada’s DART team\(^1\), can move very fast when facing a natural disaster.

It was suggested the civil-military community should choose one humanitarian response to be the subject of a joint review, considering civil-military relations and the impact on humanitarian outcomes. While recognising that each organisation involved will have its own procedures for evaluation and lessons-learning, there could be significant value in a shared approach.

**Other perspectives**

For UN OCHA, civil-military coordination is seen as a subset of overall humanitarian coordination. Some urge modesty in aspiration, and that appropriate exchange of information between civilian and military actors should be considered a success, the degree different to each context. The State has the primary authority to coordinate, with OCHA in a supporting role as requested. When the national authorities are victims themselves of the disaster, then OCHA might temporarily substitute for some coordination functions of the state. However, this should be time-bound and of short duration – similar to the guidelines given to foreign military forces involved in humanitarian relief.

Civil-military operating procedures, languages and organisational structures will never converge. A simple civil-military ‘adapter’, similar to what we need when we take a foreign computer into a new country, may be useful. This is the core of the discussion about inter-operability; it is not only about procedures but fundamentally about a shared understanding at some level.

**Different understandings of capacities can fail to address urgent needs**

From an NGO perspective, the call for states to deploy military assets in West Africa coming from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was dramatic. The organisation almost never calls for military engagement – the last time was during the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. However, MSF is very clear about their reasoning in the case of the West Africa Ebola outbreak. The nature of the disease was such that it demanded swift decision-making and deployment, as well as strict adherence to rigorous protocols for infection control.

MSF called for military deployments to West Africa partially because they assumed that the capacity existed in various militaries as part of preparations for biological, chemical or nuclear threats. That capacity that would need some adaptation, perhaps, but it was assumed to exist.

What MSF found was that the military were doing important and useful things but not working on the frontline of providing medical care – with the exception of a small number that were admitted to a treatment centre dedicated primarily to those working for international organisations supported by DFID.

The humanitarian community is left with mixed feelings. The militaries involved have provided important and useful support to the wider Ebola response, but there was a critical gap. A frank discussion would be beneficial about what capacity the UK and other militaries have that could be deployed in response to biological threats or other major crises such as Ebola. While understanding some of this information is very sensitive, there could be some shared analysis ahead of time with the humanitarian community in the face of serious or widespread public health threats which would help humanitarian organisations’ planning considerably.

Many civilian agencies would agree with an approach to relationships with the military, UK or otherwise, as follows: decisions be taken on a case-by-case basis, with the lightest touch possible, given the humanitarian needs, with a clear eye to local and global perceptions.

**The importance of civil-military training or education**

It is often cited that the military spends 95% of their time training, and 5% of their time deployed. The opposite is said of the NGOs – and 5% training may be an overly generous figure. Perhaps the civil-military community might consider military training on the reality of humanitarian deployments in a different way.

There are many requests to join exercises – the UN cited 120 invitations a year, including 15 official exercises. But is the invitation for a civilian to join a pre-drafted military exercise the best use of scarce humanitarian workers’ time? Or would it be more useful to prioritise a few exercises, and involve civilian experts in the early stages of designing these exercises? This could help with the education of a new generation of military colleagues who are likely to be deployed in similar situations.

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\(^1\) DART is the Canadian Government’s Disaster Assistance Response Team.
More efforts are needed to find ways to present a prioritised plan of UK and NATO trainings or simulations that could benefit from civilian humanitarian input. This would need to take into consideration realistic expectations of people’s availability, and a better understanding of the constraints and limitations of civil-military cooperation.

Education is more than just training. Training stand-alone from real-life experience is of limited use. Education is also learning about behaviours, cultures and approaches. A subset of civil-military practitioners looking at trainings and exercises could take a new approach to civilian engagement.

Not all civilian actors will be willing to participate in training. Some see it as a step too far beyond civil-military dialogue. In addition, the location of the dialogue or training is very important – in London, yes, but not in Helmand. It is important to be very clear in what an organisation will and will not be involved in.

The Taliban and others will read websites and will therefore know who’s engaging and how. Some civilian agencies remain concerned that external actors are confused between humanitarian organisations and military responses. It is felt that this continues to be a main reason why access and security are difficult for civilian aid workers. This is particularly acute in places such as Somalia, Yemen and Afghanistan.

Operations and dilemmas in conflict and fragile states
The second panel contrasted with the first to focus on operations in places where the state is contested, and armed groups may or may not have clear command and control.

The weak state defying any transition to post-conflict
It is important to consider the role of the State in the post-cold war, post 9/11, post Arab-Spring landscape. One compelling interpretation describes many States left in a feeble and enfeebled condition. Political systems once thought to be embryonic and transitioning to peace continue to demonstrate a profound fragility. The challenges remaining are not limited to humanitarian needs. There are security threats that go beyond moments of conflict.

It is equally important to examine the role of non-state armed groups (NSAGs). These are adapting, crossing borders and innovating in different circumstances. Many who started out on an ideological platform are now ‘territorialising’ and claiming land on behalf of these groups.

Those involved in UN or bilateral military deployments tasked to build capacity of States or armies have a difficult job. Attempts to rebuild the Malian army, for example, into one that is disciplined and acceptable, has had some progress but also mixed results. It is a fine balance to create an army that has effective control over operations but is not so dominant that there is a risk of them taking the law unto themselves. Understanding and complying with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is very important.

A more culturally-rooted approach to state-building can be successful. In Mali there are no functioning legal institutions. There are judges but no funds to pay for anything. It is an inert system. Social control mechanisms, centred around protecting a family from shame, may be more effective in this culture. Soft approaches to lowering the incidence of rapes committed by the Malian army have proven very effective.

Questioning international military intervention
There were diverse views about the efficacy of international military interventions for humanitarian rationale.

Perhaps the civil-military community should more often question what could be deemed ‘an uncontrolled proliferation of humanitarian military interventions.’

Colleagues who had deployed in the military operation in Mali and Central Africa Republic demonstrated a nuanced view of the situation. They describe Mali not as a failed state, but one with major challenges relating to governance in a context where the central government has limited control and reach over its territories, particularly the desert. With the breakup of the Malian army came space for terrorism to ‘graft itself’ onto Mali. The French involvement in Mali was specifically aimed at fighting Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, to give Malians a sense of security.

Civil military relations were important, particularly in the kinetic phases of the French deployment. The principles of necessity and proportionality helped avoid collateral damages whenever possible. Child soldiers detained by the forces were handed to UNICEF as soon as possible.

Another view put forward at the conference is that the civil-military community should more often question what could be deemed ‘an uncontrolled proliferation of humanitarian military interventions.’ The evidence of success from decades of intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and others is mixed. In addition, interventions are taking
a regional dimension, which can be problematic, such as Chad intervening in Niger, Egypt in Libya, and Saudi Arabia in Yemen.

**Understanding the tactics of armed groups requires constant vigilance**

Civilian humanitarian workers involved in Central Africa Republic testify to the proliferation of NSAGs, but also the confusion of multiple intervention forces. To have a good conflict analysis one must map international forces, national forces, local defence forces, rebellions and splits, etc. In addition, international forces in CAR at different times have included Rwandans, Burundians, Angolans, Mauritanians, and others. The nationalities and conduct of the intervening force can raise the risk to humanitarian staff if that nationality is shared. The situation evolves very quickly, and humanitarians need to build contacts, while managing constant changes.

Acceptance by the population is key. It is not enough to claim to be neutral and independent. Civilian humanitarian agencies need to demonstrate these principles, for example, by refusing armed escorts. Maintaining proximity with the people affected on the ground is a tactic that experienced humanitarians aim to keep, even at high risks.

In other situations, such as in the Middle East, there is an increasing use of mines and improvised explosive devices. These may be used against a national armed force, against an international armed force, or as terror tactics or punishment for civilians – such as displaced people trying to return to their homes. The use of booby traps and anti-personnel mines can be common.

This presents not just a risk to civilians, but can prevent the whole humanitarian community from gaining access. Front lines are moving; organisations that saw themselves as post-conflict may find themselves engulfed in active fighting or newly laid mines. In addition, the proliferation and stockpiling of small arms is a huge problem. In post-conflict or recurrent conflict situations, piles of them are left unguarded, insecure, obsolete but still dangerous. There was an exodus of arms after Libya that fuelled the conflict in Mali.

**Challenges of corruption**

Another problem faced by many actors in these fragile contexts is corruption. Civil-military dialogue has failed so far to meaningfully bring people together on the topic. We might have to ask – if we want to restore status quo in these fragile situations, what are we restoring? Corruption may be thriving under that calm. Corruption unaddressed can lead to rebellion or military coups. There are also problems of corruption within NSAGs themselves, as some turn to criminality.

**Looking forward: innovation in response**

Discussions on innovation are unfolding all the time in the military, academic circles, private sector and the humanitarian community. But before we praise innovation for innovation’s sake, it is important to remember that innovation in humanitarian action should come in response to a problem. The organisation or approach must address a real problem, and the right problem.

The UK 1998 Defence Review identified a need for the military to improve the way it analysed longer-term threats, which led to the founding of the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC). It has a remit to help the military think differently and challenge convention. This centre can provide analysis of strategic trends up to 2045 and beyond.

Civil-military dialogue could benefit from this approach. Partially this is because each group has access to just a partial truth. A joint analysis would lead to better predictions of how the different strategic trends could intersect and play out (for example, NSAGs, urbanisation, gender inequality, climate change, and the rise of the middle class in Latin America, Asia and Africa).

Technological progress may continue to be exponential, with paradigm-changing leaps regarding how we use, store and access information. Computing power will allow us to predict and model with far more accuracy different patterns and trends such as epidemics or migration. Robots or unmanned systems could become part of daily life in certain societies, integrated into work and personal life.

There is an obvious trend of greater connectedness of physical and virtual networks, which offers many advantages such as the ability to pool resources and deal collectively with risks and challenges. However, there are also risks implied by overdependence on any one network of technology, whether there are threats to one part of the system or the whole network.
Perception of governance, the military, and aspects of identity such as citizenship, could all be significantly different than they are today as a result of these trends. The pressure on governments to act in the face of natural disasters or conflict may be higher, but also much more difficult to do unilaterally or in isolation.

For civil-military relations, it may be helpful to understand how different organisations think about risk, innovation and planning for the future. Even if we will not have joint plans and there remain real challenges of sensitive or classified information, this could be valuable.

Civilian and academic agencies in France have been looking for what could be future ‘Black Swans’ and what can be prepared for. They have found in the recent past that the secondary effects of a disaster are often worse or more challenging than the first for example, the Japanese Earthquake/ Tsunami/ nuclear disaster.

**Field reality and community dialogue**

Innovation is a buzz-word at the moment. However, to be practically helpful in the world of humanitarian response, innovation should simplify complex problems. Field-testing technologies is important. The latest technology may not have the buy-in of beneficiaries and practitioners on the ground if it is not accepted and does not demonstrate improvement to the delivery of a humanitarian response.

Humanitarian aid is not a video game. It is clear we need science and technology but also the strong reality check that these should offer tangible effects on the ground. Experts proposed that we need more intensive conversations with scientific and strategic practitioners and also with affected communities. Approaches must incorporate local community voices and knowledge in order to be successful.

There has been paradigm-shifting innovation in recent years in humanitarian relief, such as the invention of Plumpy Nut (which allows malnutrition to be treated in a home or community environment) and the use of cash and mobile phone technologies to transfer money to beneficiaries.

**Innovation as an approach**

Innovation could also be described as improved ways of working, or organisations which allow good personnel room to think outside the box. For example, what information, structures or processes does an organisation need to then allow good staff to make the right decision, or to propose ways of working that haven’t been tried before?

In the face of new threats, successful organisations have to allow for institutional and individual courage. Sometimes the right decision by courageous people will be truly life-saving. Innovation specialists should also examine the responses of people when faced with new challenges or unconventional situations.

There are some real challenges around data. Both the civilian and military communities have different thresholds for what they would be willing to share, and what they see as a risk of sharing information. DFID is currently funding a project with UNICEF looking at digitisation of data and risk. OCHA has also put a good deal of work into recognising and managing risks related to information. But even across institutions such as Whitehall and the UN there are barriers to sharing information.

The UK Government has pushed a cross-Whitehall approach to conflict and fragile states, and they see this work as potentially innovative and game-changing. To address conflicts abroad as well as UK national security threats, this initiative takes a cross-disciplinary intersection of diplomacy, defence, capacity-building, development, science and humanitarian experts. However, what is perceived to be in the UK’s interest may diverge from the views from the host government or population.

Different perspectives and goals will remain. The military outlook is classically not about fighting inequality, but about maintaining dominance. This sits uneasily with civilian humanitarian practitioners, many of whom work for multi-mandate agencies who also have goals of addressing inequity.

One colleague suggested that the goal of a scientific-military-civilian dialogue could be to ‘understand complexity and turbulence, and become friends with the concepts.’ There is clearly a lot of research and development that originates in the military community that could provide real benefit to the humanitarian community and populations on the ground. Innovations in the civilian sector could also inform and inspire. However, what is being proposed is that the military should also be helpful in the world of humanitarian response.

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Background and tone
This was the third conference of the NMCG, hosted by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, in association with the British Red Cross. Attended by some 160 colleagues from a wide range of organisations and professions, the participant feedback was strong and highlighted that this event continues to be a relevant forum for discussion, networking and learning.

The tone for this conference was intended to be one of open-mindedness and goodwill, while recognising that there remain profoundly different points of view based on people’s affiliations and personal experiences. While there were not too many points of convergence, it was felt that the underlying assumption of NMCG remains valid: by better understanding the organisations and people involved in humanitarian response, we could possibly go some steps towards improving the impact of that response for those caught up in the crises.

The involvement of a UK Government Minister in this conference, and a range of colleagues from the FCO, DFID and MOD, demonstrates that there is widespread support across the UK Government and wider for civil-military dialogue. There will be challenges and opportunities ahead with the potential changes in the UK government, the World Humanitarian Summit and the next UK Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR).

About the NGO-Military Contact Group
The NMCG was established in 2000. It was an idea that emerged from a two-day conference between military actors and NGOs convened by Oxford Brookes University. The NMCG aims to improve and strengthen communication between NGOs, the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, the British Armed Forces and relevant government departments, such as the Department of International Development and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

The British Red Cross assumed the Chair of the NMCG in 2006. The NMCG has now expanded to over 70 regular members and has connections with the UN Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination Consultative Group. Over the years the NMCG has addressed some of the major humanitarian operations and dilemmas of our times, such as humanitarian space in Iraq, stabilisation operations in Afghanistan, civil-military coordination in Haiti, and civilian protection in Syria.

The NMCG meets quarterly to discuss current humanitarian operations, as well as sharing policy and doctrine, often in early stages of development. Every 2-3 years the NMCG hosts a wider conference on a relevant theme.

In 2011 the Conference theme was Civil-Military Relations in Natural Disasters: New Developments from the Field. There were specific panels bringing out experiences from Haiti and Pakistan. The final summary note of the conference and the keynote speech, delivered by Dr. Hugo Slim, have been influential in the literature of civil-military relations and humanitarian response more widely1. In 2009 the Conference theme was Stabilisation and Civil-Military Relations in Humanitarian Response, with a strong focus on Afghanistan2.

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This note was compiled by Amelia B. Kyazze, Chair of the NGO-Military Contact Group, with thanks to Sorcha O’Callaghan, Alexandra Benedict and Bethan Mathias. Any views expressed or errors contained herein are the author’s alone and do not reflect the official views of the British Red Cross or the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.