



**HERE-Geneva**  
closing the gap between policy and practice

‘ **THE ROLE OF**  
**MANDATES** ’

# **UNPACKING HUMANITARIANISM**

**APRIL 2020**

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This report synthesises the findings from HERE-Geneva's project looking into "The role of 'mandates' in humanitarian priority setting for international non-governmental organisations in situations of armed conflict". The project has been carried out by Marzia Montemurro and Karin Wendt, with guidance and advice from Ed Schenkenberg.

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*Unpacking Humanitarianism*

Authors: Marzia Montemurro & Karin Wendt

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### **HERE-Geneva**

Tourelle Emilio Luisoni, 4e etage

Rue Rothschild 20

1202 Geneva

Tel +41 22 731 13 19

[contact@here-geneva.org](mailto:contact@here-geneva.org)

[www.here-geneva.org](http://www.here-geneva.org)

## FOREWORD

Over the past three years, HERE-Geneva has taken an in-depth look at how eight organisations prioritise their responses to acute and ongoing humanitarian crises. This synthesis report draws from four detailed country case studies that provide analyses of humanitarian response and leadership in highly complex settings.

*Unpacking Humanitarianism* outlines a number of cross-cutting findings, among these: the vital importance of organisational and individual leadership approaches at country and global levels;

- the fact that rapidly changing contexts require hard strategic choices that are paired with adaptability and flexibility on the ground;
- the need for humanitarian and other players to focus on collective outcomes in these complex situations, not simply an individual organisation's operational delivery; and,
- the benefit of carefully considering how organisational thinking, action, and behaviour relates to the core humanitarian principles.

These are key issues for the humanitarian community as it struggles to respond to an increasingly complex and politicised world, where traditional labels and approaches often fail to alleviate large-scale suffering while building the resilience and capacity of communities and partners.

The study, although carried out before the current global COVID-19 pandemic, also has global relevance to the current crisis. Never before has coordinated action for crisis response and shared impact been more important. Indeed, the best national responses to COVID-19 have also demonstrated the importance of strategic leadership – making difficult choices based on sound, but changing information, and working with and for beneficiaries to address those most in need.

Such difficult questions are at the core of HERE-Geneva's mission and HERE's talented team will continue to pursue evidence of what truly makes the biggest difference for response.

Daniel Toole  
Chair, HERE Board of Trustees

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The humanitarian field is not homogenous. It is populated by a diverse set of actors that garner their *raison d'être* from a combination of historical or geographical roots, institutional characteristics, and personal backgrounds. Yet, in global humanitarian discourse, their collective objectives and actions are presented as the sum of technical sectoral differences. This is, however, an oversimplification of the reality, one that carries significant risks for the effectiveness of the humanitarian endeavour. The disproportionate focus in current policy processes on mastering and controlling the technical aspects of humanitarian action – the *what* – comes at the expense of reflecting on the rationale(s) behind each intervention – the *why*. The latter is key to understanding how different actors can best work together for an effective humanitarian response.

The research underpinning this report was undertaken as part of HERE's study looking into "The role of 'mandates' in humanitarian priority setting for international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in situations of armed conflict" (hereafter referred to as the Role of 'Mandates' Study). Building on in-depth text analysis and interviews with staff from eight different organisations (seven NGOs and the ICRC) at headquarters level and in Mali, Central African Republic, Myanmar, and Ethiopia, as well as on exchanges with non-participating organisations, UN agencies, donor governments and independent experts, the Role of 'Mandates' Study has sought to understand how different organisations set priorities and make strategic choices, and how these enable them to fulfil their goals in armed conflict.

The study set out to investigate the commonalities and differences of so-called 'single-' and 'dual-' or 'multi-mandate' organisations with regard to their approaches and activities in protracted situations of conflict, assuming there might be complementarity among them. 'Single-mandate' organisations are commonly understood to focus exclusively on saving lives and alleviating suffering. In

## NO MEANINGFUL CRITERIA FOR MANDATE-RELATED CATEGORIES EXIST EXTERNAL TO ANY SINGLE ORGANISATION.

contrast, 'dual'/'multi-mandate' organisations are seen to define their purposes more broadly so as to include both humanitarian response and development work. Viewing humanitarian NGOs in this way – as either 'single' or 'dual'/'multi-mandate' organisations – may appear to provide a simpler lens for understanding the implications of these divergent approaches and their contribution to humanitarian action as a whole.

However, HERE's research has demonstrated that such an analysis would be too simplistic to be of any conceptual or practical value. Organisations may self-identify as having a 'single', 'dual', or even 'multi' mandate, but the basis for this is intimately linked to their own organisational cultures and interpretations of what humanitarian action is. No meaningful criteria for mandate-related categories exist external to any single organisation, nor are such categories indicative of any specific organisational opportunities or limitations in complex environments.

What, then, do the different understandings of, and approaches to, humanitarian action imply?



**To build constructively on the complexity underlying humanitarian action, it is necessary to go beyond labels and understand the motivations of organisations.**

HERE's research shows that labels can be helpful in providing a generalised understanding of what it is that organisations do. However, given many of the terms used to describe humanitarian action are broad, such labels are not always meaningful. For instance, using 'life-saving' as a concept to define

humanitarian action does not translate into coherent operational guidance since organisations have vastly different understandings of the concept. Moreover, defining humanitarian action solely as short-term is no longer appropriate: in protracted situations, it is almost impossible, if not undesirable, to neatly categorise types of need temporally. More substantively, HERE's research has also revealed that organisations oscillate between an understanding of humanitarian action as an end in itself – to save lives and alleviate suffering – and as means to other goals – to contribute to state-building, for example. These two understandings of humanitarian action are not mutually exclusive, nor do they neatly correlate with 'single-' or 'dual'/'multi-mandate' identities. Rather the way organisations position themselves between these competing visions of humanitarian action fluctuates and changes.

Different understandings of the role and reach of humanitarian action has implications both internally, how organisations shape their programmes, and also externally in terms of how organisations manage relationships with their stakeholders, be they affected communities, host states or donors. Meaningful partnerships and inter-agency coordination are only possible when there is clarity around how different actors interpret humanitarian action and conceive of their purpose.

 **Working in armed conflict needs to be a conscious strategic choice.**

The choices organisations make operationally – where, when, and how to operate – will be reflective of choices made in terms of the structural set-up of the organisation and the ideological framework used to support them.

MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS AND INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION ARE ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN THERE IS CLARITY AROUND HOW DIFFERENT ACTORS INTERPRET HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND CONCEIVE OF THEIR PURPOSE.

Humanitarian organisations need to be clear about their rationales and comparative advantage. If they see their mandate as working in complex environments and situations of armed conflict, this choice needs to be accompanied by strategic thinking in terms of how best to do so. In this regard, two significant issues need to be considered:

1. *Leadership and organisational attributes matter.*

An organisation's opportunities and/or limitations during humanitarian response in armed conflict depends to a large extent on how that organisation's mission is interpreted by its leadership and how the organisation is set up to deliver on that mission. While a mandate provides a theoretical framework for action – particularly if it has a legal basis – it also confers a degree of flexibility, regardless of whether the organisation self-identifies as 'single- or 'dual'/'multi-mandate'. An organisation can therefore evolve and adapt depending on how its senior leadership interprets the role of the organisation in any given crisis and at any given time.

Organising around a mission entails choices and decisions. These can range from preferred operational modalities to more structural issues such as finance and human resources. Those organisations choosing to work in armed conflict need the leadership to ensure it possesses the right set of skills and the appropriate capacity. It also needs to consider whether an appropriate risk management approach is embedded in the organisational culture, what the ideal organisational size and structure might be, and how to find the right balance between having added value and addressing needs found in conflict settings.

2. *The approach to the core humanitarian principles matters*

A considerable degree of diversity can be found in the way the organisations interpret and apply humanitarian principles, how they understand the goals of humanitarian action, and how they set different priorities in situations of armed conflict. HERE's research has revealed two primary approaches: organisations that embed the humanitarian principles directly

into the articulation of their vision and mission, and organisations that approach the principles on more of an *ad hoc* basis, as one among several contextual guidance tools. While the latter tend to focus more on accountability to affected populations, self-reliance, and empowerment in their work, the former put a stronger emphasis on humanitarian access and protection – issues that are particularly significant when it comes to working in situations of armed conflict. It is noteworthy that the two categories are not distinct – an organisation that integrates the principles at the strategic level can also use them as pragmatic guidance tools. Moreover, these distinctions do not, as is commonly understood, coherently align with either ‘single’ or ‘dual’/‘multi’-mandate organisations.

If the choice is made to work in armed conflict, it is important to carefully consider the link between an organisation’s approach to the humanitarian principles, and the types of issues and activities on which it focuses. The extent to which the humanitarian principles are strategically embedded in the culture of an organisation can shape the extent to which it manages to uphold its purpose in certain environments.



**Policy discussions on collective outcomes need to be reframed to recognise complexity.**

In conflict environments, understanding comparative advantage not only involves responsive programming, but also requires a recognition of the other actors’ roles and mandates. Coordination among the humanitarian community is likely to work best when this becomes its primary aim. There are thin lines between coordination, complementarity, and competition.

Successive humanitarian reforms, sector-wide humanitarian policy processes, the nexus discourse, and UN-led coordination platforms have oversimplified the reality on the ground and little account for diversity in humanitarian action. As a result, they have missed the opportunity to build on comparative advantages and maximise complementarity. HERE’s research suggests the need to embrace complexity and dissect how decisions are being made by different humanitarian actors and why.

## THERE ARE THIN LINES BETWEEN COORDINATION, COMPLEMENTARITY, AND COMPETITION.

Comparative advantage is not specific to the differences between humanitarian, development, and peace actors, but should be more fully explored between humanitarian actors themselves. Organisations will make decisions and align investments based on the interpretation of their mandate and their individual vision of humanitarian action. Individual interpretations as to what being fit for purpose in delivering humanitarian response in conflict settings implies does not necessarily lead to greater collective outcomes.

The humanitarian ecosystem needs to work towards finding a balance between organisational diversity and collective direction. Too often, humanitarian coordination boils down to partitioning a cake based on available resources and organisational size. An effective humanitarian response requires inter-agency coordination which accommodates diversity, drawing on the complementarity of the added value of the actors involved. At the same time, it is crucial to find a collective way forward that provides enough of a framework to ensure that organisations work coherently.

Coordinating bodies and donors need to look at the motivations and goals of humanitarian actors – *why* – not simply *what* they aspire to do. Not only should they focus more on organisations’ strengths and added value, but they should push organisations to explain these strengths and to be clearer about their purpose and motivations when engaging with partners and stakeholders.

For humanitarian organisations, it is similarly important not only to consider *what* they do, but also to clearly acknowledge *why* they do it, and how they organise themselves to achieve their goal. An open and transparent discussion on the role and interpretation of the humanitarian principles and the way in which they are linked to the motivations of the organisation would appear imperative.

# ACRONYMS

<b>AAP</b>	Accountability to Affected Populations
<b>ACF</b>	Action contre la Faim
<b>BRCiS</b>	Building Resilient Communities in Somalia
<b>CAAP</b>	Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations
<b>CAR</b>	The Central African Republic
<b>CERF</b>	Central Emergency Response Fund
<b>CHS</b>	Core Humanitarian Standard
<b>DCA</b>	DanChurchAid
<b>ECHO</b>	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FTS</b>	Financial Tracking Service
<b>GA</b>	General Assembly
<b>HCT</b>	Humanitarian Country Team
<b>HERE</b>	Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre
<b>HQ</b>	Headquarters
<b>HRP</b>	Humanitarian Response Plan
<b>ICRC</b>	The International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>IFRC</b>	The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>IHL</b>	International Humanitarian Law
<b>INSO</b>	International NGO Safety Organisation
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>LRRD</b>	Linking Relief to Rehabilitation and Development
<b>MSF</b>	Médecins Sans Frontières
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NRC</b>	Norwegian Refugee Council
<b>NWOW</b>	New Way of Working
<b>OCBA</b>	Operational Centre Barcelona Athens
<b>OFDA</b>	US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>PoP</b>	Principles of Partnership
<b>RC</b>	Resident Coordinator
<b>RR</b>	Resident Representative
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCHR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene
<b>WHH</b>	Welthungerhilfe
<b>WHS</b>	World Humanitarian Summit

# 1 INTRODUCTION

While the humanitarian sector has grown exponentially over the past 10 to 15 years, the challenges faced by those operating in armed conflict remain. Some of the initiatives proposed to address this have been studied in detail, such as the needs-based funding gap (Poole, 2014), or the issue of securing access in volatile environments (SAVE, 2016). However, little attention has been given to operational mandates, and their role in informing and/or facilitating an organisation's capacity to respond during armed conflict. This paper focuses on the degree to which mandates are a factor in determining an organisation's activities in such situations. It has sought to understand how organisations set priorities and make strategic choices, and how these enable them to fulfil their goals in armed conflict.<sup>1</sup>

In strict legal terms, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) do not have mandates from which they derive their rights, responsibilities, and obligations. Throughout the course of the project, the term mandate has therefore been interpreted broadly to include an organisation's goal or mission.<sup>2</sup> Organisations delivering humanitarian response are generally grouped into two distinct categories, based on whether they define their purposes broadly – to include both humanitarian response and development work – or not. These approaches are frequently distinguished as 'single-' or 'dual-'/ 'multi-mandate'. This distinction has been the focus of an ideological debate on the virtues and vices of each of the two approaches. On one hand, proponents of a single-mandate approach argue that humanitarian work is most effective when carried out by organisations for whom that is their sole purpose, arguing that

## THIS RESEARCH SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND HOW ORGANISATIONS SET PRIORITIES AND MAKE STRATEGIC CHOICES.

other goals may detract from the priority of saving lives, and can endanger perceptions of impartiality and neutrality resulting in gaps in the response. Others have argued for a more integrated approach, suggesting humanitarian action is more sustainable when shaped in conjunction with, for example, community development, poverty reduction, livelihoods support, and peacebuilding.<sup>3</sup>

The research underpinning this report was undertaken as part of HERE's study looking into "The role of 'mandates' in humanitarian priority setting for international NGOs in situations of armed conflict" (hereafter referred to as the Role of 'Mandates' Study). The study set out to investigate the appropriateness of the distinction between 'single' and 'dual-'/ 'multi-mandate' organisations, and the practical opportunities and limitations that could arise from these different approaches. Seven NGOs participated in the study: Action contre la Faim (ACF), Concern Worldwide, DanChurchAid (DCA), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Médecins Sans Frontières-Spain (MSF), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and Welthungerhilfe (WHH). In addition, insight from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was gathered through interviews with ICRC staff, primarily at headquarters level.<sup>4</sup> These organisations have different origins, cultures, and organisational focuses.<sup>5</sup> Informally, together they represent a snapshot of the diversity that exists in the humanitarian ecosystem.

<sup>1</sup> Armed conflict is used here to refer to all situations of violence, and is not limited to its legal definition under international humanitarian law (IHL).

<sup>2</sup> As seven of the eight participating organisations do not have formal mandates, the term was referred to between inverted commas over the course of the project. For practical purposes, however, in this report we use mandates without inverted commas, understood in a broad sense.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see Wendt and Hiemstra, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the seven International NGOs, the ICRC has a formal mandate rooted in international humanitarian law.

<sup>5</sup> There are other types of actors that play a substantial role in the humanitarian ecosystem, including UN agencies. To limit the scope of the study and allow for feasibility, the focus has been on international NGOs and the ICRC. For more on this, see section 1.1.

The Role of ‘Mandates’ Study has addressed three main questions: (1) Is it helpful to talk about mandate distinctions? What does it mean? (2) In regard to humanitarian organisations’ capacity to work in situations of armed conflict, what opportunities and/or limitations arise from different mandates? (3) Where do these opportunities and/or limitations appear to allow for complementarity between organisations? Where do they engender competition or tensions, such as policy differences, incommensurable priorities, and different target groups?

Building on the answers to these questions, this paper delves into the reason behind limited progress in successive humanitarian reforms and longstanding gaps in humanitarian responses in particular in conflict settings. After an outline of the methodological approach behind the research, and a discussion of the context in which humanitarian actors operate in today, this paper will hone in on the very notion of humanitarian identity (section 2). It will raise the need to overcome a simple focus on what organisations do – both as a temporal notion or a substantive one – to consider the equally important questions of why organisations do what they do, how they do it, and for whom. The paper will then show how mandates, while providing for direction, leave space for interpretation and variation, pointing to the importance of how an organisation’s senior leadership understands the mandate (section 3), and how the organisation is set up to carry it out (section 4). Before providing some concluding remarks, the paper will offer a few thoughts on the notion of comparative advantage and the implications of organisational differences on the so-called humanitarian-development-peace nexus (section 5).

**BASED ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT DIVERSITY IS GOOD, THE AIM HAS BEEN TO CLARIFY WHETHER SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES AND/OR LIMITATIONS APPEAR TO ARISE FROM DIFFERENT ORGANISATIONAL MANDATES.**

## 1.1 Methodological approach

The intention of the Role of ‘Mandates’ Study has not been to answer the reductive – and arguably highly subjective – question of “which type of mandate is best?”. Rather, based on the assumption that diversity is good, the aim has been to clarify whether specific opportunities and/or limitations appear to arise from different organisational mandates, and to thereby understand if complementarities and comparative advantages can be leveraged, and if so how.<sup>6</sup>

The analytical framework behind the study was developed through an inductive approach, that has its roots in an in-depth literature review (Wendt and Hiemstra, 2016). The review demonstrated that any effort to type-cast a specific member of the ‘family’ of humanitarian organisations on the basis of its mandate requires the careful consideration of a variety of issues: legal-technical definitions, organisational history or ideology, and more substantive aspects linked to programmes and activities. For reasons of feasibility, the Role of ‘Mandates’ Study could only consider a restricted number of organisations. To ensure comparability, a decision was taken to look directly at the factors that influence an organisations’ own definition of its mandate, rather than attempting to group organisations by type or category of mandate. This approach also ensured an unbiased study: by refraining from categorising the participating organisations, it placed legal-technical, historical, substantive, and ideological influences on an equal footing in the analysis.

The organisations participating in the study were selected for two main reasons. Firstly, they together represent a range of sectors, as well as a variety of historical and ideological origins. Secondly, they showed interest in the research questions behind the study. While the latter point suggests a certain bias – all were interested in the question of mandates – it also means that the research was anchored in a real perceived need for answers. So as to allow for a methodologically sound yet feasible study, the Research Team decided to limit the variables and focus to those organisations operating outside the UN system.

<sup>6</sup> For more in-depth information on the background and methodology of the study see <http://here-geneva.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/HERE-Mandates-Study-Concept-Brief-Sep-2016.pdf> or contact the HERE Research Team.

While the UN system is a key actor in terms of normative frameworks, policy processes, and the coordination of aid, non-UN agencies – especially those with non-formal mandates – may have more flexibility in addressing needs in situations of armed conflict. Because of its legal mandate, the ICRC is, of course, a pivotal player when it comes to operating in such situations. To adequately frame the context in which the eight organisations operate, due consideration of the UN system has been made throughout the study.

The research has relied on the organisations' perceptions and representations of their mandate – seen as closely related to their mission, values, and roles – as well as the views of staff from non-participating organisations, UN agencies, donor governments and independent experts. In total, 261 people were interviewed, including 199 from the participating organisations' headquarters and their country offices in Mali, Central African Republic, Myanmar, and Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> The choice of case studies was informed both by practical (i.e., the ability of the Research Team to access staff of the participating organisations in each context) and analytical factors (i.e., the role of the host states). Secondary data was collected through a desk review, which included independent studies and research based on publicly-available documents, as well as documents provided by participating organisations. MAXQDA software was used for the qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary data. In order to limit bias in the qualitative analysis, the Research Team followed a two-step approach: after agreement on the overall coding table, the same researcher undertook a first-level analysis of all data; the approach used and the results obtained were then reviewed by the rest of the Research Team to ensure analytical consistency.

As a perceptions study, interviews have reflected the work of each organisation at a particular point in time. There is a risk that interviewees may have overstated their organisation's role and reach. However, the interviews were open and reflective, and the statements made in individual discussions were confirmed through cross-referencing.

## THERE HAS BEEN A TREND TO INCORPORATE HUMANITARIAN ACTION INTO WIDER POLITICAL AND SECURITY AGENDAS.

### 1.2 Being a humanitarian actor today

This paper would be incomplete without a brief overview of some of the key recent policy and operational trends that have been influential in shaping current thinking on humanitarian action. They are important to note both because respondents themselves framed their work against these factors, and because they have significant implications for the future of humanitarian action in armed conflict.

Held in May 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) largely sought to build on the commitments made in accordance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Starting from a shared recognition of the challenges facing humanity, the UN Secretary-General's priorities for the WHS contained in the Agenda for Humanity delineated five core responsibilities<sup>8</sup> to reduce human suffering. Dominant among them is the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Agenda's overarching aim of "leaving no one behind". Instead of focusing on how to deliver better humanitarian responses, the main thinking of the Agenda for Humanity is to frame humanitarian action as a set of activities that prevent human suffering, reduce risk, and lessen vulnerability on a global scale.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis implies a paradigm shift away from response to a clear preference for prevention and development. The embedding of humanitarian response in a developmental framework is nothing new and it is not the intention of this study to express judgement on the appropriateness of such an approach. The approach is rooted in the philosophy and conceptualisation of the work of many organisations active in the humanitarian domain, including several that have been the subject of this research. What matters, however, is to understand

<sup>7</sup> The interviews at HQ-level took place between late 2016 and early 2019. The research at field level was carried out in April/May 2018 (Mali); November/December 2018 (Central African Republic); July 2019 (Myanmar); and September 2019 (Ethiopia).

<sup>8</sup> These include: 1. Prevent and end conflicts; 2. Respect rules of war; 3. Leave no one behind; 4. Work differently to end need; 5. Invest in humanity. See <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org> for further details.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org>.

the implications (positive or negative) this approach has for humanitarian action in armed conflict, especially since it has received a formal blessing in global policy discussions. Some humanitarian practitioners have raised concerns that the growing pressure to align humanitarian action with developmental and other goals has resulted in an “emergency gap”, challenging the ability of humanitarian actors to deliver impartial assistance in conflict settings (de Castellarnau and Stoianova, 2018; Healy and Tiller, 2014).

Further to this, for many years, if not decades, there has been a trend to incorporate humanitarian action into wider political and security agendas. The instrumentalisation of humanitarian action has been well-documented (Donini, 2012; Duffield, 2001; Rieff, 2002) and has largely become a *fait accompli*. Moreover, counter-terrorism agendas have developed a lasting constraining impact on humanitarian funding and access. There has never been a golden age in terms of securing space based on the respect for humanitarian principles by all involved, but the notion of principled action is one that rings increasingly hollow.

In the policy domain, the approach to improving the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action has been a technocratic one, primarily focused on increasing efficiency. Which is why such concerns as data collection and data systems, need assessments, funding mechanisms, and cash programming have received disproportionate attention when compared with humanitarian access, protection, and agencies’ performance accountability (ALNAP, 2018), which arguably touch on political issues. The Grand Bargain, an agreement between a number of the world’s largest donors and agencies, launched during the WHS, was first and foremost meant to tackle the increasing gap between financial resources available and the escalating numbers of people in need from an efficiency perspective. While progress against the commitments of the Grand Bargain has been made (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2019), the fundamental issue remains. Within the humanitarian community there is a divergence on how to measure humanitarian effectiveness and quality, because of differing deeply rooted understandings around the goals of humanitarian action.

From an operational perspective, it is worth highlighting specific elements that characterise the space in which humanitarian actors operate

## IN THE POLICY DOMAIN, THE APPROACH TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION HAS BEEN A TECHNOCRATIC ONE, PRIMARILY FOCUSED ON INCREASING EFFICIENCY.

in armed conflicts today. The number of highly violent conflicts has steadily increased over the past few years, growing from 36 active conflicts in 2018 to 41 in 2019 (OCHA, 2019, p. 11) and significant portions of humanitarian budgets are reportedly being spent addressing conflict-related needs.<sup>10</sup> While protracted conflicts are not a new phenomenon historically, today’s conflicts are largely urban and affect middle-income countries as often as low-income countries (ICRC, 2016). The Syria crisis was consistently referred to by the respondents in the Role of ‘Mandates’ Study as a turning point in the operational approaches of their organisations, as it has provoked a rethinking of standards, local capacity, and resource requirements. Linked to this, deliberate attacks on medical facilities, humanitarian staff, and civilians have become an explicit strategy of warfare in several current conflicts.

Against this background, we have witnessed exponential growth in humanitarian needs. But this growth is not only the result of increased violence and brutality. It can also be traced back to an expansion in what is understood to be included in the humanitarian domain. To illustrate, the Sphere Minimum Standards – the sector’s benchmark for minimum levels of humanitarian assistance – since the 1990s defined five sectors as life-saving.<sup>11</sup> The fourth edition, published in 2018, not only saw these sectors updated, but also included fifteen issues that define vulnerability and operational contexts (Sphere Association, 2018, p. viii). Views on what constitutes ‘life-saving’ differ widely.<sup>12</sup> As a demonstration of the expansion of the humanitarian domain, the updated Handbook also saw the addition of six sets

<sup>10</sup> According to the Global Humanitarian Overview for 2020 (OCHA, 2019), for example, just two emergencies – Yemen, Syria and the Middle Eastern region – received 42% of all humanitarian funding for 2019. Similarly, 80% of WFP’s funding was going to areas affected by conflict. See also <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13027.doc.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Water supply and sanitation; nutrition; food aid; shelter and site planning; and health services (Sphere Association, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> See Section 2.1 for further details on the notion of “life-saving”.

of companion standards in areas as diverse as, for example, child protection, livestock, and economic recovery, which together with Sphere form the Humanitarian Standards Partnership.<sup>13</sup>

Due to the proliferation of standards, a Joint Standards Initiative was launched at the beginning of the last decade.<sup>14</sup> The launch of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) in 2014 provided renewed impetus towards greater accountability of humanitarian actors. The CHS verification processes assess the degree to which an organisation has successfully implemented the commitments of the Standard, identifying areas of strength, and also areas in need of improvement. Of the seven NGOs participating in this research, four are members of the CHS Alliance<sup>15</sup> – a network of both humanitarian and development organisations committed to implementing the CHS. While the CHS is referred to as the core standard, does it represent the whole or even the fundamentals of humanitarian action? The CHS may be an effective tool for defining best practice and intends to “describe the essential elements of principled, accountable, and high-quality humanitarian action” (CHS, 2014, p. 2). Its references to the humanitarian principles are limited, however, something highlighted as a shortcoming by one of the respondents in this research. Many emphasised that the CHS focus is accountability to affected people. Whatever the CHS claims to be, it has not resulted in a reduction of the ever-expanding number of standards and guidelines.<sup>16</sup>

While some may take the view that the abovementioned trends and developments are testament to the growing professionalisation and maturing of the sector, the question remains: are all humanitarian actors in agreement as to what we are working towards? And why does that matter?

## ARE ALL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS IN AGREEMENT AS TO WHAT WE ARE WORKING TOWARDS? AND WHY DOES THAT MATTER?

13 See <https://www.spherestandards.org/humanitarian-standards/standards-partnership/>.

14 For more details, see Austin and O’Neil, 2013.

15 Concern Worldwide, DanChurchAid, IRC, Welthungerhilfe. Action contre la Faim is a member but through their sister organisation in the UK.

16 See for example the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, the IASC Gender Handbook, the IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.

# 2 MANDATES AND IDENTITY

Critical to operating in armed conflict is the ability to explain one's identity and intentions. Much of this will derive from the organisation's mandate and mission statement. When asked the question, "do you have a mandate?", a large majority of respondents replied yes. Representatives from four of the organisations connected what they saw as their organisation's mandate to what they do, their operational focus: the mandate was described as relating to the alleviation of poverty; fighting hunger; working with displaced people; or helping people survive and recover in times of crisis. For respondents from the four other participating organisations, the operational focus was highlighted as well, but mainly in combination with an ideological framework. They saw their mandate as also including, for example, ensuring the dignity and rights of affected people or adhering to humanitarian principles. While the view of the organisational mandate or missions thus varied from organisation to organisation, it is noteworthy that there were clear patterns of similarity within each organisation. Generally speaking, the organisational vision or mission statements were well-known to respondents, who often also portrayed a personal conviction for the mission.

In global policy circles, despite the consistent reaffirmation of the importance of humanitarian principles as the basis for humanitarian identity, humanitarian policy processes and discussions have increasingly focused on only one of the dimensions of humanitarian identity: the *what*. The humanitarian identity is largely codified as the sum of technical sectoral attributes, with many highly-specialised organisations with a large degree of specificity operating under the broad church of humanitarianism. The Role of 'Mandates'

Study has however found that humanitarian actors are far from being homogenous. The sector is populated by a diversity of actors that garner their *raison d'être* from a combination of sources: institutional and historical roots, as well as personal backgrounds. If perceived from the perspective of sectoral differences, a diverse humanitarian ecosystem has inherent opportunities: humanitarian crises produce diverse sets of needs and diverse actors can adapt to address them more effectively. Diversity, however, also comes with potential confusion as to the concepts underpinning humanitarian work, such as the understanding of what is life-saving, the role the humanitarian principles play and how they are interpreted, or how to approach the centrality of protection. To communicate properly and allow for meaningful collaboration, we first need to take into account that the most basic question – i.e., what does humanitarian mean? – will yield very different answers depending on the interlocutor.

## 2.1 What does 'humanitarian' mean? Do we speak the same language?

When looking at the definition of humanitarian action in terms of the 'what', a source of confusion becomes evident. The research highlighted a general agreement on what humanitarian action is if focusing its definition primarily on temporal and substantive elements, especially when positioned in opposition to other modes of aid such as development. Generally speaking, there was a tendency among respondents from all participating organisations to use the temporal qualifiers of short- and long-term as shorthand for humanitarian versus development work. All focused on what their organisation does. Some highlighted the temporal aspect of their work, being both short- and longer-term, while

**HUMANITARIAN ACTORS ARE FAR FROM BEING HOMOGENOUS.**

others pointed to more substantive aspects, such as life-saving and emergency activities being undertaken alongside resiliency and development programmes.<sup>17</sup>

Framing humanitarian action in this way leads to both conceptual and policy-related dead ends. In the context of the current operational environment, using a solely temporal definition – equating humanitarian action to short-term engagement, and development to long-term investments – is not particularly helpful as humanitarian needs can persist over decades. As humanitarian organisations find themselves working more and more in protracted conflict settings, respondents generally recognised that it is difficult – if not impossible – to neatly categorise types of need. As a result, several of the organisations in this research oscillated between defining themselves as a humanitarian organisation or an organisation specialised in, or focused on, a specific technical domain. For example, instead of or in addition to defining itself as a humanitarian organisation, an organisation can define itself as a displacement organisation. This way, its work on durable solutions for displaced people will find conceptual anchorage, especially when it sees the term ‘humanitarian’ as work done in emergencies. Similarly, if a public health/medical identity overshadows the humanitarian identity, mortality and clinical indicators could well become the benchmarks against which an organisation assesses its response, even in contexts that are often not perceived as typical humanitarian environments. And if an organisation prioritises its poverty reduction identity using, for example, the human development index as a guide to inform where to intervene, it will find it harder to determine its criteria for entry into emergencies in middle-income countries.

Adding to this confusion, many humanitarian policy and financing discussions have also focused on the ‘what’ of humanitarian action. A certain degree of ambiguity in these discussions and documents allows for the flexibility to respond to complex crises, but this ambiguity becomes confusion when, for example, attempts are made to define ‘life-saving’. A funding mechanism like the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), which specifically targets life-saving interventions as part of its mandate, refrains from defining with any specificity those humanitarian interventions

### TEXT BOX 1 LIFE-SAVING IN MYANMAR

The position adopted by the Humanitarian Country Team in Myanmar in March 2019 identifies clear principles of engagement regarding future interventions in the displacement sites declared closed by the Government in Central Rakhine. In June 2019, the UN Resident Coordinator sent a letter to the Myanmar government, relaying a decision by the UN and its humanitarian partners to withhold support “beyond life-saving assistance” in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps deemed “closed” by the government, unless fundamental changes occur. The move was motivated by a wish to avoid complicity in a government policy of apartheid for Rohingya Muslims.

The definition of life-saving proved to be an ideological fault line within the humanitarian community: are some interventions more life-saving than others? Is it a matter of degree? Are life-saving interventions meant to simply keep people alive or also maintain their dignity? With regard to the positioning on the camp closures, the troubling result of the lack of agreement on these points is that no one was prepared to follow through on the common approach to disengagement, as all found their interventions to be life-saving.

The full Myanmar report can be found [here](#).

that are life-saving (CERF, 2019a). Such flexibility has *de facto* allowed CERF to bend its traditional approach to fund preventative programmes under a new anticipatory action stream (CERF, 2019b). The Role of ‘Mandates’ Study has shown that there are indeed two broadly different takes on the concept of life-saving. One focuses primarily on stopping people from dying, and translates into clearly defined technical criteria and response times. The other sees life-saving as inextricably linked with the concept of dignity – one which is, in turn, open to a range of interpretations. It could go so far as to categorise, for example, as one respondent put it, “distributing perfume to women in displaced camps” as a life-saving intervention.

When these two different approaches clash it may be hard to translate the life-saving concept into coherent operational guidance that is accepted by all actors, as in the case of the Humanitarian Country Team’s (HCT) position in Myanmar on the closure of the IDP camps in Rakhine State (see Text Box 1). This example

<sup>17</sup> More than 40% of respondents (specifically in the contexts of Mali and CAR, but also at headquarters level) also tended to conflate ‘emergency’ and ‘humanitarian’ work, contrasting it with more long-term development activities.

further highlights how humanitarian action as a concept can be equated with humanitarian assistance. The principle of humanity is strictly interpreted as providing assistance, which would appear to drive humanitarian actors to provide assistance regardless of the cost. Instead of questioning whether the chosen course of action is the right thing to do, the focus ends up being on doing things right. Each actor looks at its own activities and how best to carry them out, applying the notion of Do No Harm as a risk-mitigation strategy. While this may have merits if looking only at the activity itself, interpreting the humanitarian imperative in this way has the potential to undermine efforts around the centrality of protection to achieve real collective protection outcomes, as was seen in the case of Myanmar.

## 2.2 Finding legitimacy as humanitarian actors

If the concept ‘humanitarian’ can have as many different meanings as interlocutors, what does a legitimate humanitarian actor look like? And why does it matter? The question of legitimacy is intimately linked to that of accountability, and it shapes and defines an organisation’s relationship with its main stakeholders, as they have been understood by the respondents: 1) the people they are meant to serve; 2) the state who has primary responsibility for assisting and protecting affected people; 3) their donors; and 4) their peers. Prioritising legitimacy from the perspective of affected populations makes moral sense and is in line with increasing efforts towards accountability to them. The legal perspective, however, the one that establishes which organisations qualify to provide humanitarian services under international humanitarian law, and with what status, rights, and obligations, is of primary concern. It is the one that establishes the legitimacy of international NGOs in the eyes of the host states.

First and foremost, an organisation finds its legitimacy in specific mandates given to it by states under international law, as in the case of the ICRC, which enjoys a special position under IHL granting the agency specific responsibilities and rights.<sup>18</sup> NGOs may also be able to derive rights from IHL, but this is subject to interpretation and

18 The Geneva Conventions and Protocols also contain references to the other parts of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the International Federation and the national societies.

## THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY IS INTIMATELY LINKED TO THAT OF ACCOUNTABILITY, AND IT SHAPES AND DEFINES AN ORGANISATION'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS MAIN STAKEHOLDERS.

specific requirements. Arguably, there is a comprehensive IHL framework covering the activities of NGOs working in conflict situations (Barrat, 2014). Common article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 refers to “an impartial humanitarian body” which “may offer its services to the Parties to the conflict.” The notion of impartial humanitarian bodies/ organisations could be used along with six other types of organisations<sup>19</sup> found in IHL treaties for NGOs to benefit from customary rights<sup>20</sup> under IHL in both international and non-international armed conflicts, even without an express recognition by states.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, in the absence of a legal mandate, NGOs establish their legality by being law-abiding, both with government legislation and/ or specific IHL provisions, such as that on impartiality. Where applicable, NGOs could more consistently use IHL as a source for legitimacy vis-à-vis states. In politicised and volatile environments, as seen for example in Myanmar, having a legal humanitarian mandate from the international community can facilitate a certain interaction with government representatives in the face of restrictive government behaviour, “as it gives a legitimate reason to engage” (Montemurro and Wendt, 2019a, p. 13). Little is known, however, on whether and how much NGOs use references to IHL in their relations with parties to a conflict. In its absence, and in line with the literature (Slim, 2002), HERE’s research in Mali and Central African Republic has highlighted the fact that aid workers established instead a moral basis for their legitimacy – using references to humanitarian principles (in turn derived from IHL) as their overarching values.

With regard to access to affected populations, HERE’s research from the Central African

19 The ICRC, IFRC and National Societies, the medical and religious personnel, the “impartial humanitarian bodies,” and the “relief societies.”

20 In particular, four customary rights were granted to the various entities mentioned in IHL treaties: a right of initiative, to have access to protected persons, to provide relief to protected persons, and to be respected and protected.

21 For a full analysis of the status of NGOs under IHL, see Barrat, 2014.

Republic, Ethiopia, Mali, and Myanmar showed that staff from the participating organisations counted on a virtuous cycle of adherence to humanitarian principles and the quality of their humanitarian programmes. While visibility of programme outputs was an important element in CAR (Montemurro and Wendt, 2019b), in Mali the focus was on networks and quality outputs. This was both for organisations to prove their relevance to affected populations and to safeguard the reputation of their security coordinator, who would have the closest contact with armed groups (Montemurro and Wendt, 2018). When implementing programmes directly, the participating organisations have largely referred to the inclusion and participation of affected populations in programme design as a gauge to ensure their relevance and establish their legitimacy. While ‘participation’ has reportedly become an accepted norm in humanitarian action (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2019), there is little evidence of how it feeds concretely into programme design beyond the needs assessment stage. Moreover, the way impartiality underpins humanitarian responses strongly affects which populations are invited to participate in the design: the groups involved differ according to whether the principle of impartiality is used following sectoral and geographical considerations. For organisations working mostly through partners, trusted and long-term relationships with them is what feeds into their basis for legitimate action in any particular context. As highlighted by the staff of one of the participating organisations, however, the focus on partners may come at the expense of their own visibility. While this may not matter directly if the model of these organisations is to work through partners, the lack of visibility in the community could make it indirectly more difficult for the organisation to uphold the perceptions of its relevance.

With regard to donors and peer organisations, interviews at headquarters have shown that quality and accountability do also play a role at the global level in thinking about legitimacy. The commitments of the CHS, for example, were often highlighted by respondents as representing their organisation’s humanitarian identity. The research found that there is often an implicit belief that adherence to the CHS could be taken as a proxy for an organisation’s legitimacy as a *bona fide* humanitarian actor. Moreover, efforts have been made to convince donors to harmonise their due diligence requirements in accordance with the CHS commitments which could serve as criteria. As several donors’ due diligence

## QUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY DO ALSO PLAY A ROLE AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL IN THINKING ABOUT LEGITIMACY.

audits have become hugely lengthy and costly undertakings, this idea could create significant efficiencies. It also carries a risk. In itself the standard has not been vetted or assessed for its authority as representing or defining humanitarian action. In fact, as noted, there is significant confusion about what the CHS is. Therefore, if the CHS were ever to become the benchmark for collective humanitarian action underpinning coordination, such coordination would be between organisations that retain vastly different understandings of what humanitarian action actually is.

# 3 INTERPRETING MANDATES

The research behind this report set out to investigate whether specific opportunities and/or limitations appear to arise from different organisational mandates. However, it did not find conclusive evidence of direct links between an organisation's mandate or mission and specific opportunities and/or limitations. And in any case, basing such an analysis in a simple categorisation of 'single-' versus 'dual-'/-'multi-mandate' organisations would be too reductive to allow for useful conclusions. First, there is no simple way to categorise humanitarian organisations. A dichotomic picture of organisations does not adequately capture the nuances that exist between them. Viewing humanitarian NGOs as either 'single' or 'dual-'/-'multi-mandate' organisations depending on whether they display strictly humanitarian or broader objectives may appear to provide a simpler lens for understanding the implications of divergent approaches and their contribution to humanitarian action. Yet, such an analysis would be too simplistic to be of any practical value. Whether an organisation perceives itself or is perceived as being 'single' or 'multi-mandate' is not necessarily a predictor of specific opportunities and/or limitations in complex environments. The research suggests that the way in which organisations position themselves between two opposing visions of humanitarian action is more a matter of degree. As was seen among the participating

organisations, for example, it was possible to identify an organisation as being 'dual-' or 'multi-mandate', but it still saw the goal of humanitarian action as an end in itself, and not as subsidiary to other objectives, such as those related to development. Additionally, findings from the Role of 'Mandates' Study point to a number of factors – beyond the categorisation of being 'single-' or 'multi-mandate' – that influence how the participating organisations make decisions and establish priorities when operating in conflict environments. It is not the mission or mandate *per se* that informs the identity and therefore the actions of an organisation. It provides direction, but it leaves space for interpretation and variation depending how the senior leadership of an organisation understands it (section 3.1) and how they integrate key elements of a humanitarian identity such as the humanitarian principles (3.2).

## 3.1 The influence of leadership

Leadership and organisational structure are important in relation to an organisation's mandate. The Role of 'Mandates' Study has demonstrated that the leadership of an organisation has a significant influence on how the mandate is interpreted, regardless of whether the organisation self-identifies as being 'single-' or 'multi-mandate'. The priorities organisations establish operationally – where to operate, when, and how – will be reflective of the senior leadership's understanding of the mandate and the goal of humanitarian action. This, in turn, will have an impact on the choices made and the structural set-up of the organisation. As such, organisational culture and leadership are conceptually intertwined: leadership creates and changes cultures, but at the same time management and administration act within that culture (Schein, 2016).

WHETHER AN ORGANISATION PERCEIVES ITSELF OR IS PERCEIVED AS BEING 'SINGLE' OR 'MULTI-MANDATE' IS NOT NECESSARILY A PREDICTOR OF SPECIFIC OPPORTUNITIES AND/OR LIMITATIONS IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS.

With a change of CEO, one of the participating organisations, for example, rebalanced its priorities to focus more intently on the humanitarian component of their identity after decades of having worked in a more development framework. In order to ensure the right set of skills and the appropriate emergency capacity, a restructuring was essential. An emergency unit was created to report directly to the CEO while still working across geographical departments. When required, the emergency director would take over the strategy in a particular country and summon the necessary resources while planning for the longer-term engagement would be handed over to those working with a stronger development focus.

For the leadership of organisations that combine numerous ‘identities’ – be it by engaging in activities with different temporal and geographical scope, or by understanding humanitarian action differently according to the context – it is a major challenge to encourage and maintain operational coherence. Previous research has found that CEOs of humanitarian and development organisations perceive their environments in different ways, and exhibit different leadership characteristics (Hermann and Pagé, 2016). Feeling the time pressure of their work, leaders of humanitarian NGOs were seen to focus first and foremost on addressing the needs of those affected by crisis, choosing to communicate and act more informally, and to only collaborate with others if pushed. Development NGO leaders were, on the other hand, found to focus more on “respecting and working within the constraints of their positions”, taking a longer-term perspective of building coalitions, and achieving consensus (Hermann/Pagé 2016). The respondents in the Role of ‘Mandates’ Study who found that their organisation had a ‘dual’/‘multi’ identity – covering both humanitarian and development ambitions – largely pointed to the challenge of combining these two perspectives, expressing a discernible desire for a more coherent approach. However, organisations that self-identified as having a ‘single’ mandate also highlighted the difficulty of maintaining coherence in protracted settings, and in different contexts.

One critical issue resulting from the leadership interpreting an organisation’s mandate or mission in situations of armed conflict is risk and the degree to which a risk management approach is embedded in the organisational culture. For instance, for an organisation to be

## FOR AN ORGANISATION TO BE EQUIPPED TO WORK IN INSECURE SETTINGS, IT SHOULD BE WILLING TO ASSUME A SIGNIFICANT LEVEL OF RISK.

equipped to work in insecure settings, it should be willing to assume a significant level of risk. In recent years, risk has become a hot topic in humanitarian response, not least because many donor governments have been keen to push risk down the chain of aid provision to operational organisations. The Role of ‘Mandates’ Study showed how organisations – under the impetus of their leadership – took different views as to what their biggest risks were. While the types of risk articulated by respondents in this research were largely in line with findings from previous dedicated research on risk management among NGOs (Stoddard et al., 2016, 2019), the participating organisations were found to display different degrees of appreciation. Some had put greater emphasis on fiduciary risks linked to fraud and corruption, for example. When asked, others were especially concerned with reputational risks. This does include not only risks such as abuse and exploitation but also affiliations with political actors or the ability to keep market share. The appreciation of security risks at country level and the way to manage them is naturally part of a country director’s responsibility, within a broader organisational risk management approach. Even in the presence of common services, such as the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), which aim to provide greater consistency in the security approach of NGOs through an independent consolidated analysis of security information, the appreciation of the measures needed to tackle risks will ultimately be individually driven. As seen in Mali, for example, this may be linked to a number of factors: a different understanding of the context based on how long an individual has worked there, prior personal experience, or a personal appreciation of the institutional set-up (being fit for purpose) in that particular context. This will in turn entail different sets of restrictions in terms of staff movements and/or operational implementation across organisations.

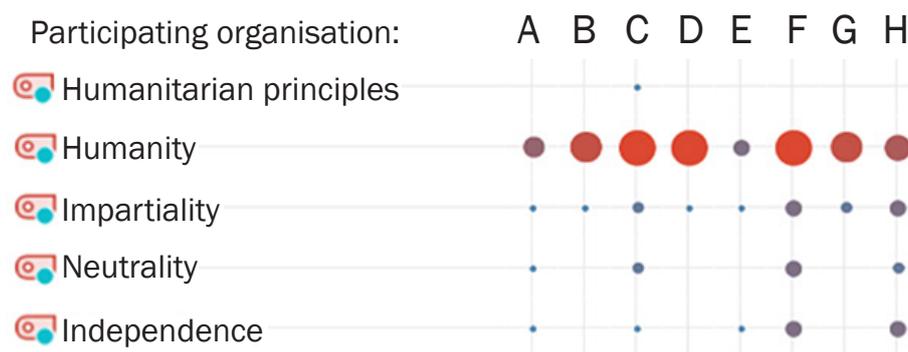


Figure 1: Overview of strategy documents analysis – Humanitarian principles

## 3.2 Integrating humanitarian principles

Besides the principle of humanity, the principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence are all essential qualifiers for humanitarian action. Despite the consistent reaffirmation of the importance of humanitarian principles as the basis for humanitarian identity, there are significant differences in how organisations interpret and use the principles (Schenkenberg and Wendt, 2017). The Role of ‘Mandates’ Study provides further evidence in this respect. It points to the different role that humanitarian principles play in informing overall strategic and context-based operational decisions. Looking at the data collected in Mali, Central African Republic, Myanmar, and Ethiopia and based on a review of strategy documents for all eight participating organisations, it is possible to discern two broad approaches. The first sees organisations adopting the humanitarian principles as strategic tools, embedding them directly into the articulation of the vision and mission of an organisation. The second is based on the use of the principles at a more contextual level. In this case, humanitarian principles are not necessarily seen as less important; rather they are mostly used to inform operational decision-making at the national/local level.

When it comes to working in situations of armed conflict, the different interpretations of the principles find their translation in how organisations make strategic choices. Figure 1 provides an overview of the results from the

review of strategy documents from the eight participating organisations (here labelled as A-H, in no particular order).<sup>22</sup> As can be seen, all organisations specifically highlight the principle of humanity in their strategies, albeit to different degrees. Significant reference to all the principles, including impartiality, neutrality, and independence, however, can only be found in documents of four of the eight organisations. These are the organisations that can be said to integrate the principles at the strategic level. Elevating humanitarian principles to this level means that an organisation will be set up so as to achieve a certain degree of impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Principles in this instance inform decision-making at the highest level. When principles are used as one among several guidance tools at the field level, they provide a useful framework for localised decision-making even though the organisations may not strictly be set up to ensure that principles are coherently and consistently integrated throughout the organisation. When comparing the data from the interviews with those organisations that integrated the principles at the strategic level and those who used them as contextual tools, it is possible to highlight a number of differences in terms of the overall values that staff members prioritise.

<sup>22</sup> The figure is based on text analysis using MAXQDA, coding for the specific use of the words “humanitarian principles”, “humanity”, “independence”, “impartiality” and “neutrality”, as well as content directly inferring principled humanitarian action. The three categories of documents that were looked at for all eight participating organisations, where available, were as follows: 1) the 2016, 2017, and 2018 Annual Reports; 2) Specific mission and values statements; 3) Strategic plan(s) pertaining to the years 2015 onwards. The figure visualises the frequency of single codes throughout all organisations: the bigger and redder the circle, the more frequently the code was used. The comparison is vertical, i.e. circles appear bigger if used more than other codes within documents from within a single NGO; the circles themselves are not reflective of a comparison with other organisations.

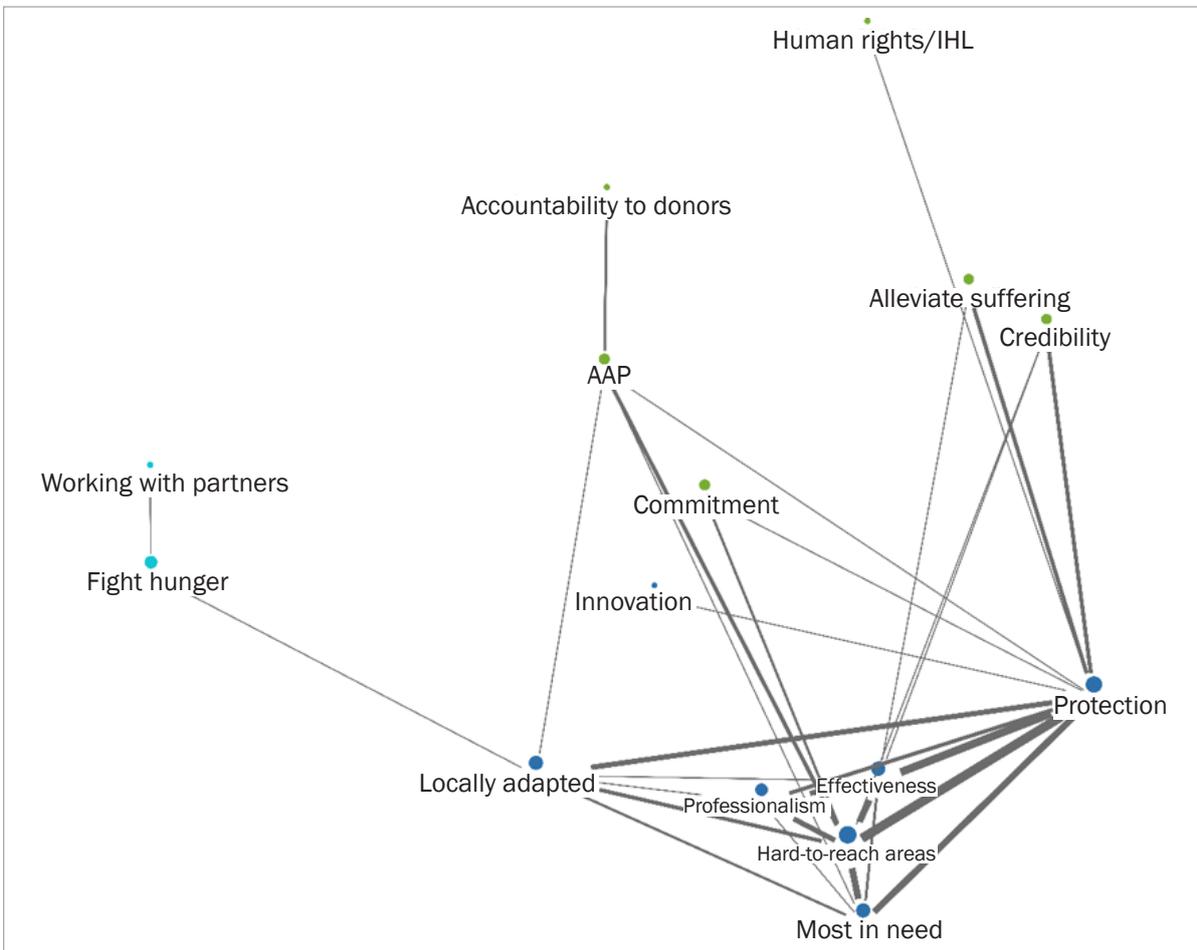


Figure 2: Overview of priority values – Organisations where humanitarian principles are used at the strategy level

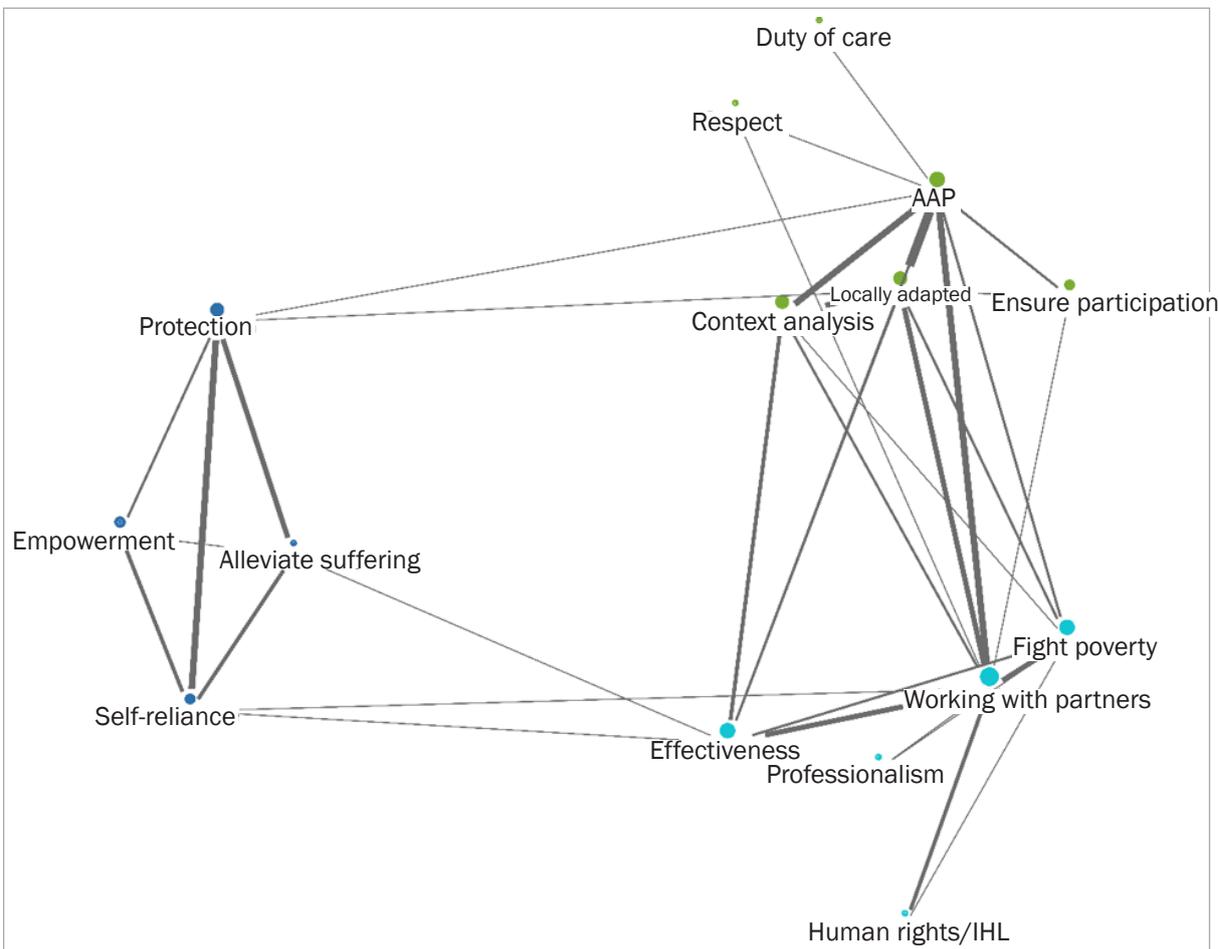


Figure 3: Overview of priority values – Organisations where humanitarian principles are used as tools

### TEXT BOX 2 IMPARTIALITY IN MALI

The research in Mali revealed that the challenge of assisting those most in need (who and where) overlaps with the question of how to address the greatest needs (what type). The participating organisations implemented different approaches. For instance, whether an organisation adopts humanitarian action as a goal in itself or uses humanitarian activities as a way to preserve developmental outcomes has concrete implications on how emergency aid is distributed. Who determines those most in need? The former group of organisations would independently compile lists of beneficiaries. The latter would delegate such a function to local community leaders, for example, in order to refrain from infringing on local customs and therefore preserve the dignity of those in need.

*The full Mali report can be found [here](#).*

### TEXT BOX 3 PRINCIPLES IN ETHIOPIA

In Ethiopia, the lists of beneficiaries have traditionally been drawn by regional and local authorities and have seldom been verified. It has, therefore, been difficult for humanitarian actors to uphold the principle of independence which in turn has had significant consequences on the ability of humanitarians to remain impartial. With NGOs re-aligning with their global priorities and an influx of experienced external staff following the crises in Gedeo and West Guji, it became apparent that many of those most in need had not been included in beneficiary lists. An agreement between the government and humanitarian actors was later reached about targeting guidelines with an additional level of verification.

*The full Ethiopia report can be found [here](#).*

Figures 2 and 3 portray the priority values for the four organisations where humanitarian principles are used at strategy level (A, C, F, and H) and for the four where the principles are used more as tools (B, D, E, and G) respectively.<sup>23</sup> A notable difference between the two is the positioning of the concept of ‘effectiveness’ among the four organisations that use principles as strategic tools as compared to others. In the first group, effectiveness is integrated in one core cluster. Employees of organisations in this group are also more likely to mention ‘hard-to-reach’ areas<sup>24</sup> and the importance of prioritising those ‘most in need’ – reaffirming the principle of impartiality – as specific values. In the second group, ‘effectiveness’, linked to ‘working with partners’, is but one cluster on an equal footing with two others strongly focused on ‘accountability to affected populations’ (AAP) and ‘protection’. For this second group, ‘working with partners’ appears as one of the core values. This may indicate that the organisations in this group focus more intently on implementing programmes through partners. ‘Protection’ has a central role for both groups, albeit clustered differently. For the first group it is an essential element together with reaching those ‘most in need’ in ‘hard-to-reach’ areas, and clearly linked and equal to ‘effectiveness’. For employees of organisations using the principles as contextual tools, ‘protection’ is somewhat separate from the core values and more clearly linked to other concepts such as ‘self-reliance’ and ‘empowerment’. This suggests a tendency to focus not only on emergency assistance to affected populations, but also on bolstering resilience and driving empowerment of local populations.

In practice, the starkest example of the difference in approaches is provided by the application of the principle of impartiality. As was seen in Mali, for example, such differences can cause confusion among affected

<sup>23</sup> Figures 2 and 3 are code-maps created using MAXQDA. The analysis covers the interviews of staff members at HQ level and in the field. Using an indicative approach, the Research Team coded for references to specific values linked to the identity, mission, or ‘mandate’ of the organisation. The code-maps display the values most frequently referred to for the two groups of organisations, and the way they intersected in the documents and interviews. The thicker the line connecting two codes, the more often these two codes were mentioned in connection with each other. The Figures portray only codes with a minimum connection frequency of 8, meaning that the absence of a code/value from the Figure does not mean that this value was not mentioned at all in the documents or interviews, but rather that it was not mentioned as often as those pictured.

<sup>24</sup> Hard-to-reach areas are roughly defined as areas that are not regularly accessible to humanitarian actors for the purpose of sustained humanitarian programming. See <https://www.acaps.org/glossary>.

communities (see Text Box 2). Organisations that highlight the assistance and protection of a specific target group as a goal – forcibly displaced populations, for example – may navigate more fluidly and pragmatically the humanitarian situation adapting to the context as required.

While each context is unique, organisations have been encouraged to recognise the degree to which they are including those most in need in their interventions. In areas where governments or non-state actors tightly regulate access,<sup>25</sup> in their interventions. In areas where governments or non-state actors tightly regulate access,<sup>26</sup> those most in need may well be beyond the reach of humanitarian organisations. Where organisations have tried to mainstream the principle of impartiality in strategic decision-making processes by integrating elements of it in their mandates/missions – clearly aiming to assist in the hardest-to-reach areas, for example – this has provided a sound basis from which to make operational decisions. In the absence of appropriate in-country humanitarian leadership and well-functioning coordination spaces, NGOs have leveraged rapid response mechanisms to achieve a commonly-agreed position on whom to prioritise, as was the case in Mali, or have invested in their emergency capacity, as was done in the CAR, where hotspots can change rapidly and suddenly. Integrating the principles at the strategic level may also help navigate contexts where the state plays a strong role in coordinating and overseeing humanitarian response, as in Ethiopia, where the organisations that more quickly aligned with their global strategy regarding the principles were quicker to change gears and adapt to changing needs (see Text Box 3). The way the senior leadership interprets the mandate of an organisation as well as the way it conceives the position of humanitarian principles can therefore have specific and wide-reaching organisational implications.

THE WAY THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP INTERPRETS THE MANDATE OF AN ORGANISATION AS WELL AS THE WAY IT CONCEIVES THE POSITION OF HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES CAN HAVE SPECIFIC AND WIDE-REACHING ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS.

25 As commonly understood, the principle of impartiality also includes the degree to which an organisation's programme strategy ensures that aid is distributed on a non-discriminatory basis. This aspect is not directly addressed here as it has been found to be relatively more straightforward in its implementation.

26 Access constraints, including strict bureaucratic requirements, may be imposed for a number of reasons: fears of foreign influence, tactical considerations, mistrust about the true objectives of humanitarian actors, etc. See ACAPS, 2018.

# 4 ORGANISATIONAL SET-UP

Working in complex environments, humanitarian actors are confronted with a number of common obstacles, from the politicisation of aid to insecurity and access constraints along with others. Being set up to achieve the mission and address such obstacles entails different sets of choices. These can range from decisions regarding operational modalities to more structural issues, touching on financing and human resources. As organisations are confronted with different types of responses in different types of conflict environments, the research has pointed to a number of elements that are perceived to impact an organisation's ability to operate in such environments, as well as tensions as to what the best organisational set-up may be. There are very valid discussions currently ongoing within each of the participating organisations – and within the broader humanitarian community – as to what being fit for purpose in conflict settings should amount to. Without disregarding the importance of all these elements, this paper focuses on two of the most prevalent, as highlighted in the interviews and as seen in the specific contexts of CAR, Ethiopia, Mali, and Myanmar. The first is about finding the perceived golden standard in terms of size and structure. The second is about finding the right balance between having added value and addressing needs found in conflict settings.

## 4.1 Size and structure

When looking at the operational constraints in conflict environments, the focus on size and structure is clearly linked to that of being able to align the right type and quantity of resources to be able to respond effectively. Respondents working for those organisations mostly engaged in direct programme implementation linked size to increased quality (and aid effectiveness)

### BEING SET UP TO ACHIEVE THE MISSION AND ADDRESS OBSTACLES ENTAILS DIFFERENT SETS OF CHOICES.

because of the credibility and flexibility size offered through the availability of specialised profiles for critical functions such as security and risk management, access experts, emergency response teams, etc. Large-scale programmes have also been found to drive cost efficiency because of the fixed nature of many programme costs (IRC, 2016). In this sense, support functions, such as logistics, were rarely highlighted as one of the main enablers in the interviews, but this tends to reflect an inherent tendency to overlook support functions. When reflecting on humanitarian aid effectiveness in Mali, CAR, and Ethiopia, respondents in fact made clear links between efficiencies in the supply chain – and the ability to control the different steps in the process – with a more timely response. For organisations working with partners the question of size was rather linked to the breadth of their established partnerships in the contexts in which they operate. In contexts with significant access constraints, for example, relying on a varied network of partners can help ensure that those most in need are integrated in the response.

More, however, is not always better. The relationship between the size and structure of an organisation has a long history of research in organisational management theory (Greiner, 1998; Hall et al., 1967). Traditionally, size has correlated with complexity and the formalisation of processes, such as greater attention to standards and procedures. This was also found to be true of those organisations participating in this research. Staff from five of the participating organisations highlighted that the increase in the size of their organisation had been linked to greater professionalisation with the establishment of standardised procedures, but also to moves to

decentralise decision-making to bring about greater intra-organisational alignment. As noted with one of the participating organisations, however, if the decision-making is largely decentralised – common where country directors have significant operational control – when an operation requires a readjustment to address a humanitarian crisis there is a risk that decisions that require a balancing of the multiple identities of the organisation are devolved to people who have a development commitment. In such instances, it matters little if headquarters have made a concerted effort to refocus the balance in any other direction – the control remains at field level. Similarly, with regard to size, arguments were also raised that being large does not automatically imply effectiveness as it could also result in a more complex bureaucracy, slowing down decision-making and making the organisation less agile.

Globally, the tensions around size were mostly felt regarding an organisation's identity and values. Respondents from two of the organisations that have integrated humanitarian principles at the strategic level feared, for example, that growth would come at the expense of their identity as principled humanitarian actors. While flexibility is dependent on types of funding (restricted or unrestricted), organisational flexibility in defining priorities in fact also comes with a certain mindset and culture. In Ethiopia, for example, the use of so-called crisis modifiers,<sup>27</sup> a type of risk financing option for how development funding envelopes can be used to face unexpected shocks in the operating environment, only worked insofar as the organisations were able to shift from a resilience-building mindset to one focused on emergency response to conflict-induced displacement (Montemurro and Wendt, 2019c).

## 4.2 Specialist or generalist

The question of whether it may be better to be set up as a specialist or a generalist organisation to be fit for purpose in conflict environments may at first not seem of importance. At face value, that is where most of the mandates provide boundaries and offer some direction: working with displaced groups, children, focusing on health or hunger, etc. As always, however, mandates offer a framework allowing a great degree of

### TEXT BOX 4

#### GEOGRAPHICAL MOBILITY IN CAR

Research in CAR found there to be a zero-sum game between independently defining geographical priorities and independently prioritising sectoral areas of work or types of intervention – i.e. emergency, early recovery, development, stabilisation, etc. Organisations often adapted to the funding available and expanded or changed the types of programmes to remain operational in a certain area. Participating organisations in CAR were often found to be confronted with a dilemma: go where the funding required them to go, or stay where they believed the needs were the most pressing but which donors no longer funded.

*The full CAR report can be found [here](#).*

flexibility. Being a specialist or a generalist organisation, therefore, touches on the core of the humanitarian identity in its specific articulation of the principle of impartiality and hinges on an organisation's perception of its own added value. No matter how specific and directive the mandate may be, organisations are still left to decide on how they are going to go about finding and supporting those most in need. The notion of added value, in particular, is one that very much complements that of legitimacy as seen in section 2.2 and informs an organisation's relationship vis-à-vis its stakeholders. Being a specialist may help an organisation to focus resources to drive technical excellency and ensure good quality programming to clearly demonstrate a comparative edge with regard to host states, affected populations, and donors. It may also result in pre-identifying those most in need in the event of a crisis – an approach that could exacerbate tensions with the principle of impartiality. As seen in CAR, for example, it could also have specific implications on an organisation's geographical mobility (see Text Box 4).

The research has found that the tension between a specialist or a generalist orientation stems, to some extent, from a strategic difference in approach to contextual analysis, partly driven by how an organisation's mandate/mission is interpreted. An organisation that uses needs assessments as the overarching framework to inform its response and allocate resources (“needs first, choose the activities later”), will necessarily be generalist, structuring its resources and processes so as to fit an array of services. An

<sup>27</sup> For more details about ‘crisis modifiers’, see Peters and Pichon, 2017.

organisation that has a very clear sectoral focus will naturally tend to prioritise technical specialisation. What may be gained in the width of coverage may be lost in the depth of the intervention and vice versa (see Text Box 5 on Mali). Technical expertise or being a generalist may be seen as a very concrete added value globally, as was the case for three of the participating organisations in this research. Working in complex environments may, however, challenge otherwise commonly and broadly accepted organisational values, as the research in Myanmar demonstrated. As organisations have been negotiating their role in Myanmar against the parameters set by the government, questions about their added value have also led to concerns around their being fit for purpose. For one generalist organisation, this meant questioning the value and the quality of doing “a little bit of everything” in a context like Myanmar. Conversely, a highly specialised organisation working in Myanmar for over twenty years was led to question the viability of not taking a more generalised approach along and with staff left asking themselves if they should be there at all (Montemurro and Wendt, 2019a). Indeed, being a generalist organisation could allow an organisation to focus on that which communities prioritise or need the most.

#### TEXT BOX 5

### PROGRAMMATIC DECISIONS IN MALI

In the absence of clear common guidance on prioritisation, organisations in Mali have mostly implemented one of two approaches. They have either used a qualitative lens and gone deep in a few selected areas (and implemented, some might say, a boutique approach), or they have adopted a quantitative lens by addressing fewer needs but in a larger geographical zone (a bulk approach). The choice has largely been influenced by an operational interpretation of their mission – whether organisations have a sectoral specificity or not – and on the basis of the resources available. This difference in approach has, on the whole, resulted in either greater flexibility and the ability to adapt to a changing context by going broad, or a very detailed understanding of the specific needs and the context in a designated area by going deep. Where such different approaches are applied in the same geographical region, though, there is a risk that affected populations receive aid of differing qualities and quantities depending on the organisation providing it.

*The full Mali report can be found [here](#).*

# 5 BUILDING ON COMPLEMENTARITIES

One of the questions that this research has tried to answer is whether the opportunities and/or limitations that derive from organisations' mandates appear to allow for complementarity. While the eight organisations were not selected on the basis of any relationship between them, it is relevant to look at the degree to which they (individually) use their mandates strategically to relate to other humanitarian or development organisations in order to help them achieve their goals. It is important to point out the high level of interdependence that exists in the humanitarian sector. Not only does the sheer scale, wide variety of needs, and the specialisation of a number of organisations imply that no single organisation can do the job alone, but it also raises the issue of individual agencies' mandates in relation to collective, overarching humanitarian or development goals. Thinking about complementarity therefore is not an option, but a necessity. This section looks at comparative advantage and the opportunity (or limitation) of the nexus between humanitarian and development activities as a way to advance complementarity.

## 5.1 Comparative advantage and partnerships

In conflict environments, understanding comparative advantage is not only about integrating the right reflexes and carrying out good programming, it is also about recognising each other's role and mandate. Humanitarian coordination within the broader humanitarian community is likely to work best if it is aimed at exactly this. But there are thin lines between coordination, complementarity, and competition. Current incentives work on the basis that organisations will buy into collective policies and plans as long as these help further their individual objectives. For this reason, this

## THINKING ABOUT COMPLEMENTARITY IS NOT AN OPTION, BUT A NECESSITY.

paper takes a less ambitious approach than agreements such as the Grand Bargain or country-based common humanitarian response plans, which refer to the humanitarian system or focus on collective performance or common targets. Taking individual agency mandates as the starting point, the findings from the study suggest that organisations should work towards complementarity, building on their diversity by being clear on who they are and what their contribution to the wider humanitarian response is.<sup>28</sup> This fits with the approach expressed in 2007, at the time of the adoption of the Principles of Partnership (PoP).<sup>29</sup> The starting point that also found general acceptance at the 2016 WHS was the belief that “diversity of the humanitarian community is an asset if we build on our comparative advantages and complement each other's contributions.”<sup>30</sup> While meant as an attempt to address the lack of attention around the non-UN humanitarian response capacities within the humanitarian reform process at the time, the PoP had the ambition to serve as a framework for all actors in the humanitarian space.

Partnerships are an interesting proxy for exploring comparative advantage. The research in CAR, Ethiopia, Mali, and Myanmar has shown that partnerships serve a dual purpose: to maximise impact and increase access. In terms of increasing access, partnering with organisations that have an already-established presence in a particular country or area may seem the most straightforward way to maximise one's opportunities. For two of the participating

<sup>28</sup> This paper is taking the conclusions from HERE's contribution to the WHS a step further. See DuBois and HERE-Geneva, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> The five principles are: Equality, Transparency, Results-Oriented Approach, Responsibility and Complementarity. They can be accessed at <https://www.icvanetwork.org/system/files/versions/Principles%20of%20Partnership%20English.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> As spelled out in the principle of complementarity in the PoP.

organisations, working with partners had a clear organisational value, strengthening local civil society being seen a goal in itself. As such, an organisation might structure itself in a way that prioritises functions that work in support of local partners as part of the objective of local empowerment. For other organisations, it can be a way to address a specific task, issue, or challenge more effectively. Whether using partnerships as an operational modality, or being part of a network or federation, clarity for all actors involved is required as to who they are, what they do, and why they do it – so to also manage concerns about adherence to humanitarian principles – as well as a critical understanding of their own added value.

The risk, however, is that complementarities and comparative advantages that inform both formal and informal partnerships are seen only through a technical programmatic lens. One significant example is the current use of consortia as the increasingly preferred model of several humanitarian and development donors. Mostly used as an administratively efficient funding mechanism, consortia are generally used to leverage complementarities from a geographical or sectoral perspective. Most of the time, they are largely an administrative set up whereby one organisation assumes the role of the grantee and is responsible for the reporting and successful implementation of the contract. Consortia, however, could be much more strategically leveraged to truly reflect upon existing gaps in any given contexts and provide solutions as to how to best tackle them. The starting point, however, should be to go back to the PoP. The review by one of the participating organisations of their role in consortia management, in fact, has highlighted that to truly leverage strategic complementarities, four elements are essential: equal participation as partners; transparency and clarity regarding each one's comparative advantage; alignment in terms of risk management approaches; and long-

term investments. One of the most successful examples of a consortia-based approach cited by respondents was the almost seven-year-old Building Resilient Communities in Somalia (BRCiS) Consortium, which has been able to benefit from multi-year funding support.

Being clear on one's own rationale and comparative advantage is all the more important as the research has found that organisations could be seen to oscillate between an understanding of humanitarian action as an end in itself – to save lives and alleviate suffering – and that of humanitarian action as a subsidiary to other goals: humanitarian action being only seen as a contribution towards development goals such as state-building, for example. These two ways of understanding humanitarian action are not always either/or categories. Indeed, there are instances when the same organisation can be found to adopt either goal, depending on whether the decision to respond comes from the country office or is the vision at headquarters. Such confusion can have important and practical implications not least in informing partnerships. Looking at why organisations do what they do is, therefore, essential.

Organisations are more likely to form formal and/or informal alliances with organisations that they feel strategically aligned with. Similarly, an organisation's understanding of what humanitarian action actually is will shape the degree to which they interact with development entities and state actors. Broadly speaking, the more an organisation aligns itself with humanitarian action as a goal in itself, the less ease it will have in interacting with development actors. The more humanitarian action is seen as subsidiary to development goals, the more an organisation will seek alignment with development and state plans and priorities.

## 5.2 The nexus: complementarity or not?

The research has demonstrated that while it is inappropriate to demarcate humanitarian and development work and treat them as silos, this not an argument for a merger. Organisations, including those that combine humanitarian and development work, have different perspectives and goals, and use different ideological frameworks. They should use their comparative

**THE RISK, HOWEVER, IS THAT COMPLEMENTARITIES AND COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES THAT INFORM BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL PARTNERSHIPS ARE SEEN ONLY THROUGH A TECHNICAL PROGRAMMATIC LENS.**

advantage to mutually reinforce each other's mandate. One question this research has asked is whether or not the nexus between humanitarian and development aid that has dominated the humanitarian narrative in the last few years offers an opportunity for this complementarity to be maximised.

Shortly after its launch in 2016, the nexus was framed as the triple nexus (as a peace angle was added to it).<sup>31</sup> While there is an overriding assumption that the humanitarian and the development parts of the nexus are well-defined and are clearly identifiable, less clarity exists around the role and scope of peace actors, and the way of actually connecting these different pieces (Thomas and VOICE, 2019). According to the OECD, a nexus approach aims to strengthen “collaboration, coherence and complementarity, [...] in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict” (OECD, 2020). In this vision, the nexus has been contrived as a conceptual framework – or “systems thinking” – that can help both individual actors better integrate the connections between their own programmes and different actors join up their different interventions.

Comparing the current global policy discourse around the nexus with the findings from HERE's research, two sets of considerations become immediately apparent. Firstly, at the moment, the nexus offers no space for diversity at the different ends of the humanitarian-development spectrum. The adoption of the notion of the humanitarian ecosystem at the World Humanitarian Summit elevated the reality of humanitarian environments to the position of an axiom, informing wider humanitarian policy discussions. Such a reframing reshaped the boundaries of the traditional humanitarian model. From being entirely equivalent to the one led and shaped by the United Nations, the humanitarian model

31 The concept, as such, is not new. It has been used, for example, since the 1980s in the context of resource management as an effort “to improve water, energy and food security, while supporting the transition to a green economy” (Solińska-Nowak, 2018).

## TEXT BOX 6 DONORS' ROLE IN ETHIOPIA

As seen in Text Box 3, an agreement about targeting guidelines between the government of Ethiopia and humanitarian actors was reached, adding a level of independent verification. Instrumental to achieving this was the role played by donors. Using their leverage across the humanitarian and development spheres, they could bring more developmental actors to the table. In view of the Ethiopian government's focus on development goals, these actors in turn had the ability to influence the regional/local authorities to agree to a set of specific guidelines.

*The full Ethiopia report can be found [here](#).*

as an ecosystem allows for diverse systems led, shaped, and cohabited by different actors. It reinforces the idea that such systems do not need to be mutually exclusive. In such a model, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as NGOs, find their clearest argument for interaction with the UN-led system. With the localisation agenda – one that advocates for greater recognition of the role played by national and local actors – gaining momentum, this new model also provides a conceptual basis for national and local actors to interact with the more traditional humanitarian system on an equal footing. With the nexus, however, the UN system has also sought to reclaim primacy.

The nexus brings some opportunities with it, such as a greater incentive for sharing context/conflict analyses among a wide, diverse group of actors, or leveraging development and peace actors' influence, for example, to call for the respect for humanitarian space. There are examples – although limited – of using the nexus to support principled humanitarian action (see Text Box 6). For this to be more systematic, however, there would need to be a rethinking of current incentives and how to raise them from the individual to the collective level.

But the nexus also carries risks. In its approach to the Agenda for Humanity, the UN has tended to move towards an understanding of humanitarian action that is closer to being a subsidiary goal to development and other peace and/or political objectives. The nexus was born out of the Grand Bargain's vision to relieve the burden being increasingly carried by humanitarians in conflict-affected and volatile

**AT THE MOMENT, THE NEXUS OFFERS NO SPACE FOR DIVERSITY AT THE DIFFERENT ENDS OF THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT SPECTRUM.**

environments. Merging the nexus with the New Way of Working, an internal UN process to better align its different stated mandates, carries the risk of primarily putting the burden on humanitarians to reach out and coordinate with development and peace actors. And if the UN model becomes the sole reference on how to operationalise the nexus in the minds of governments and donors, there is a risk of losing the added value of a diverse humanitarian ecosystem for supporting those in need impartially in volatile and politicised contexts. In active conflict environments, where development actors are mostly absent, talking of the nexus in terms of collaborations between humanitarian and development actors risks being futile at best, or further restricting the space for humanitarian action at worst. Furthermore, by failing to embrace complexity, the nexus risks missing the nuances that will be necessary for its implementation. In the same way that visions for humanitarian action will differ, simply aligning the nexus alongside a UN understanding of development that is in line with state-building will risk missing the opportunity to leverage the experience of NGOs in bottom-up/community-led development.

Secondly, the current focus on the nexus seems to be diverting attention away from developing further insights into how to combine different humanitarian approaches. Comparative advantage should not solely be framed as specific to humanitarian vis-à-vis development and peace actors, but should be further explored among humanitarian actors themselves. As seen in the previous section, the organisations participating in the research have been leveraging the complementarities of their different humanitarian approaches both formally and informally. Informally, complementarities are informed both substantively – e.g., supporting different but complementary target groups – and culturally – e.g., based on common values and/or history, or from the perception of sharing similar values and modus operandi. Formally, global membership of alliances has enabled the maximisation of resources available, especially in emergency situations and in contexts where humanitarian funding envelopes are not stable. In-country and global humanitarian leadership and coordination mechanisms should pay closer attention to collective humanitarian outcomes that are based on different visions of humanitarian action and go beyond the sum of the different sectoral approaches. As found in Mali, CAR, Myanmar, and Ethiopia and highlighted in the previous sections, there

## THE CURRENT FOCUS ON THE NEXUS SEEMS TO BE DIVERTING ATTENTION AWAY FROM DEVELOPING FURTHER INSIGHTS INTO HOW TO COMBINE DIFFERENT HUMANITARIAN APPROACHES.

are significant risks when different visions for humanitarian action clash, especially in conflict environments given that it may have disastrous implications for the protection of affected communities and the safety of humanitarian staff.

# 6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

During three years of research with eight major international organisations involved in humanitarian action in armed conflict, we have sought answers to questions about their mandates: whether or not they help or constrain their work, and if it is possible to build upon the complementarity of mandates. The research has shown that ‘humanitarianism’ – both as it is understood and is practiced – is not homogenous nor coherent. Humanitarians do not all speak the same language. While it may be easier to frame diversity from a sectoral or technical perspective or to think of differences in terms of ‘single-’ or ‘dual’/‘multi-mandate’ organisations, the truth is that mandates, broadly understood to include organisational missions and values, carry flexibility. Organisations may self-identify as having a ‘single’, ‘dual’ or even ‘multi’ mandate, but the basis for this is intimately linked to their own separate organisational culture, and is not a meaningful basis for categorisation or comparison across organisations. What then, is helpful? It is not easy to condense the findings of this multi-year research project that has pointed to the complexity of humanitarian response into a few concise messages. That said, a number of issues stand out:

 **To build constructively on the complexity underlying humanitarian action, it is necessary to go beyond labels and understand the motivations of organisations.**

HERE’s research shows that labels can be helpful in providing a generalised

understanding of what it is that organisations do. However, given many of the terms used to describe humanitarian action are broad, such labels are not always meaningful. For instance, using ‘life-saving’ as a concept to define humanitarian action does not translate into coherent operational guidance since organisations have vastly different understandings of the concept. Moreover, defining humanitarian action solely as short-term is no longer appropriate: in protracted situations, it is almost impossible, if not undesirable, to neatly categorise types of need temporally. More substantively, HERE’s research has also revealed that organisations oscillate between an understanding of humanitarian action as an end in itself – to save lives and alleviate suffering – and as means to other goals – to contribute to state-building, for example. These two understandings of humanitarian action are not mutually exclusive, nor do they neatly correlate with ‘single-’ or ‘dual’/‘multi-mandate’ identities. Rather the way organisations position themselves between these competing visions of humanitarian action fluctuates and changes.

Different understandings of the role and reach of humanitarian action has implications both internally, how organisations shape their programmes, and also externally in terms of how organisations manage relationships with their stakeholders, be they affected communities, host states or donors. Meaningful partnerships and inter-agency coordination are only possible when there is clarity around how different actors interpret humanitarian action and conceive of their purpose.

DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS  
OF THE ROLE AND REACH OF  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION HAS  
IMPLICATIONS BOTH INTERNALLY  
AND EXTERNALLY

## **Working in armed conflict needs to be a conscious strategic choice.**

The choices organisations make operationally – where, when, and how to operate – will be reflective of choices made in terms of the structural set-up of the organisation and the ideological framework used to support them. Humanitarian organisations need to be clear about their rationales and comparative advantage. If they see their mandate as working in complex environments and situations of armed conflict, this choice needs to be accompanied by strategic thinking in terms of how best to do so. In this regard, two significant issues need to be considered:

### 1. *Leadership and organisational attributes matter.*

An organisation's opportunities and/or limitations during humanitarian response in armed conflict depends to a large extent on how that organisation's mission is interpreted by its leadership and how the organisation is set up to deliver on that mission. While a mandate provides a theoretical framework for action – particularly if it has a legal basis – it also confers a degree of flexibility, regardless of whether the organisation self-identifies as 'single- or 'dual'/'multi-mandate'. An organisation can therefore evolve and adapt depending on how its senior leadership interprets the role of the organisation in any given crisis and at any given time.

Organising around a mission entails choices and decisions. These can range from preferred operational modalities to more structural issues such as finance and human resources. Those organisations choosing to work in armed conflict need the leadership to ensure it possesses the right set of skills and the appropriate capacity. It also needs to consider whether an appropriate risk management approach

is embedded in the organisational culture, what the ideal organisational size and structure might be, and how to find the right balance between having added value and addressing needs found in conflict settings.

### 2. *The approach to the core humanitarian principles matters.*

A considerable degree of diversity can be found in the way the organisations interpret and apply humanitarian principles, how they understand the goals of humanitarian action, and how they set different priorities in situations of armed conflict. HERE's research has revealed two primary approaches: organisations that embed the humanitarian principles directly into the articulation of their vision and mission, and organisations that approach the principles on more of an *ad hoc* basis, as one among several contextual guidance tools. While the latter tend to focus more on accountability to affected populations, self-reliance, and empowerment in their work, the former put a stronger emphasis on humanitarian access and protection – issues that are particularly significant when it comes to working in situations of armed conflict. It is noteworthy that the two categories are not distinct – an organisation that integrates the principles at the strategic level can also use them as pragmatic guidance tools. Moreover, these distinctions do not, as is commonly understood, coherently align with either 'single' or 'dual'/'multi'-mandate organisations.

If the choice is made to work in armed conflict, it is important to carefully consider the link between an organisation's approach to the humanitarian principles, and the types of issues and activities on which it focuses. The extent to which the humanitarian principles are strategically embedded in the culture of an organisation can shape the extent to which it manages to uphold its purpose in certain environments.

## **Policy discussions on collective outcomes need to be reframed to recognise complexity**

In conflict environments, understanding comparative advantage not only involves responsive programming, but also requires a recognition of the other actors' roles

**IF THE CHOICE IS MADE TO WORK IN ARMED CONFLICT, IT IS IMPORTANT TO CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE ORGANISATION'S APPROACH TO THE HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES.**

and mandates. Coordination among the humanitarian community is likely to work best when this becomes its primary aim. There are thin lines between coordination, complementarity, and competition.

Successive humanitarian reforms, sector-wide humanitarian policy processes, the nexus discourse, and UN-led coordination platforms have oversimplified the reality on the ground and little account for diversity in humanitarian action. As a result, they have missed the opportunity to build on comparative advantages and maximise complementarity. HERE's research suggests the need to embrace complexity and dissect how decisions are being made by different humanitarian actors and why.

Comparative advantage is not specific to the differences between humanitarian, development, and peace actors, but should be more fully explored between humanitarian actors themselves. Organisations will make decisions and align investments based on the interpretation of their mandate and their individual vision of humanitarian action. Individual interpretations as to what being fit for purpose in delivering humanitarian response in conflict settings implies does not necessarily lead to greater collective outcomes.

The humanitarian ecosystem needs to work towards finding a balance between organisational diversity and collective direction. Too often, humanitarian coordination boils down to partitioning a cake based on available resources and organisational size. An effective humanitarian response requires inter-agency coordination which accommodates diversity, drawing on the complementarity of the added value of the actors involved. At the same time, it is crucial to find a collective way forward that provides enough of a framework to ensure that organisations work coherently.

Coordinating bodies and donors need to look at the motivations and goals of humanitarian actors – *why* – not simply *what* they aspire

to do. Not only should they focus more on organisations' strengths and added value, but they should push organisations to explain these strengths and to be clearer about their purpose and motivations when engaging with partners and stakeholders.

For humanitarian organisations, it is similarly important not only to consider *what* they do, but also to clearly acknowledge *why* they do it, and *how* they organise themselves to achieve this. An open and transparent discussion on the role and interpretation of the humanitarian principles and the way in which they are linked to the motivations of the organisation would appear imperative.

THE HUMANITARIAN ECOSYSTEM  
NEEDS TO WORK TOWARDS  
FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN  
ORGANISATIONAL DIVERSITY AND  
COLLECTIVE DIRECTION.

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HERE-Geneva  
Tourelle Emilio Luisoni, 4e etage  
Rue Rothschild 20  
1202 Geneva  
Tel +41 22 731 13 19  
[contact@here-geneva.org](mailto:contact@here-geneva.org)  
[www.here-geneva.org](http://www.here-geneva.org)