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## Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA 2015)—A Summary

HA 2015 is a major independent research project based at the Alan Shawn Feinstein International Center at Tufts University in the US. It is an international effort involving researchers and consultants from a wide variety of countries. It focuses on the challenges and compromises that are likely to affect humanitarian action worldwide in the next decade.

**The issues** are organized and analyzed around four interrelated “petals”: the *universality* of humanitarianism, the implications of *terrorism and counter-terrorism* for humanitarian action, the search for *coherence* between humanitarian and political agendas, and the *security* of humanitarian personnel and the beneficiaries of humanitarian action.

**Six case studies**—Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Liberia, Northern Uganda and the Sudan—provide the basis for the analysis, conclusions and recommendations contained in this report. Additional case studies—Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Nepal, Sri Lanka—are planned as part of phase two of the research. A final report will be issued in 2007.

**The approach** is evidence-based. The focus is on local perceptions. Generic and country-specific findings are distilled through an inductive process involving interviews and focus group meetings at the community level aimed at eliciting perceptions of local people on the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise. Additional data is gathered through interviews with aid community staff and an electronic survey of headquarters personnel. Readers are encouraged to make their own assessments of the field data, which is available on the web.

**The findings** highlight the crisis of humanitarianism in the post 9/11 world. They show that action aimed at alleviating the suffering of the world’s most vulnerable has been incorporated into a northern political and security agenda.

With respect to **universality**, humanitarian action is widely viewed as a northern enterprise that carries values and baggage sometimes at odds with those of civilians

affected by conflict on the ground. Urgent steps are needed to make it more truly universal including recognizing the contribution of other humanitarian traditions and managing more effectively the tensions between “outsiders” and “insiders” so that the perceptions and needs of communities in crisis are given higher priority. Northern humanitarians also need to listen more, learning from the resourcefulness, resilience and coping strategies of communities. Top-down, expat-driven approaches to humanitarianism need to give way to more inclusive, culturally-sensitive and grounded approaches that are fully accountable to beneficiaries.

**Terrorism and counter-terrorism** increase the need for humanitarian action to assist and protect vulnerable civilian populations. Yet governments and non-state actors use the concepts loosely and opportunistically, often frustrating the work of humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian actors need to be more discerning in understanding the political and military forces at work, more creative in finding ways to function in highly politicized circumstances, more assertive in advocating for policies that do not undermine the rights of civilians, and more professional in their approach to these challenges.

The **political-humanitarian relationship** is far from a collaboration among equals. The data from our research shows that the so-called coherence agenda is advanced at humanitarianism’s peril, especially in high-profile crises where conflict is on-going or simmering. There is a recurrent danger that humanitarian and human rights priorities will be made subservient to political objectives. It is necessary to counter the orthodoxy of integrated missions and to continue to document instances of instrumentalization in order to be able to develop safeguards that can protect, to the extent possible, the independence of humanitarian (and human rights) work.

Our data points to a disconnect between the **security** perceptions of affected communities and those of aid agencies. Understanding local perceptions of security is key both for the effectiveness of humanitarian action and the security of aid workers. Humanitarian staff, both national and international (and the former more than the latter) continue to pay a high price for their commitment to alleviating the suffering of the most vulnerable. Humanitarian agencies will have to rethink the way in which they operate in extremely fraught and insecure contexts. In asymmetric wars, humanitarian action may itself be seen as skewed in favor of the more established military and political actors and thereby more vulnerable to attack by non-state groups. Hence the need to better analyze local perceptions of security and to re-calibrate programs with these perceptions in mind.

**Our findings** in the four areas above confirm that the humanitarian enterprise is vulnerable to manipulation by powerful political forces far more than is widely understood. Its practitioners are more extended and overmatched than most realize. Failure to address and reverse present trends will result in the demise of an international assistance and protection regime based on time-tested humanitarian principles. Moreover, if the disconnect between the perceived needs of intended beneficiaries and the assistance and protection actually provided continues to grow, humanitarianism as a compassionate endeavor to bring succor to people *in extremis* may become increasingly alien and suspect to those it purports to help.

More information on the HA 2015 project is available on the internet at:

[http://hwproject.tufts.edu/pdf/humanitarian\\_agenda\\_2015.pdf](http://hwproject.tufts.edu/pdf/humanitarian_agenda_2015.pdf)

## HA 2015 Project—Summary of Findings So Far

What is the outcome of our research as we conclude Phase 1 of our study, *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions?* Five years after September 11 2001 and a decade away from 2015, the humanitarian enterprise is wrestling with major challenges identified in our consultation of 2003 and explored in the present research. Humanitarian principles and action are under duress from those with power, whether major states, donors, host political authorities in countries in crisis, or non-state actors. Perceptions of local populations, both of their own priorities and of the activities of international agencies, exist in tension with how the agencies see themselves.

With respect to the specific challenges identified for humanitarian actors, our research confirms that *a lack of universality characterizes the present humanitarian enterprise*, which is largely western and northern in approach and underwriting, in personnel and accountability. There is little that is new in our findings in this regard. Although the institutions are for the most part aware of their provincialism, they are unable and/or unwilling to take the necessary steps to become more inclusive and culturally sensitive. The data suggest that while the externality of the current enterprise serves certain useful purposes, a strategy for focusing international involvement in areas of clear comparative advantage remains lacking.

*Terrorism is a fact of life in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.* Yet violence against civilian populations did not originate with 9/11 but has been an ongoing reality for generations. Indeed, the politicization of the concept of terrorism and the paradigm of

a “global war on terror” distort the reality that affected people experience and complicate the work of assistance and protection agencies. Our report breaks some new ground in documenting constraints imposed on humanitarian action in the service of GWOT and the need for governments and non-state actors to respect humanitarian norms and to provide space for the work of the agencies, which must themselves achieve a higher degree of professionalism.

Our findings regarding the third issue reviewed provide evidence that *assistance and protection activities often suffer from inclusion within political frameworks*. The report therefore calls into question current orthodoxy in policy circles: that the integration of humanitarian and human rights activities within, for example, peacekeeping programs is a win-win proposition. Additional case study work is needed, however, to fine-tune this conclusion and draw the necessary institutional implications.

Finally, the *security of civilian populations*, an objective in its own right, is affected by the perceived lack of universality of humanitarian activities, by the conduct of counter-terrorism measures, and by the extent to which assistance and protection work is integrated into political frameworks. The security of international and national humanitarian personnel is similarly affected by those vectors. Association with political-military effort bodes ill for the future of humanitarian action in Afghanistan or, for that matter, Iraq. In other countries its longevity may be less compromised.

In short, the picture of challenges and responses is a checkered one which, in our judgment, the humanitarian enterprise, optimistic by nature and can-do in orientation, is in some danger of misreading. As we see it, the humanitarian project is in far more serious straits than is widely understood or acknowledged. Projecting the data from our six-country sample onto a more global and future-oriented screen, we are doubtful that the current love affair of the international community with humanitarian action will continue deep into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Humanitarianism as traditionally framed and implemented may well come to occupy a smaller place on the international screen, relegated to crises with low political profile in which the strategic interests of the major powers are not perceived to be in play. Meanwhile the assistance and protection challenges of the Afghanistans and Iraqs—Lebanon’s emergency and postwar reconstruction may soon join their number -- will continue to pose major assistance and protection challenges. However, the needs in high-profile conflicts seem likely to be addressed increasingly, if at all, by an array of non-traditional actors, including international military forces, private contractors, and non-state actors rather than by card-carrying humanitarian agencies.

An evolution toward a more modest humanitarianism, delimited in scope, objectives, and actors, would not be an entirely negative development. It would reflect a realization that current global trends and forces that generate a need for humanitarian action can be neither redirected nor significantly buffered by the humanitarian enterprise itself. This does not mean that humanitarians are uncommitted to a more just and secure world but rather that they are realistic in recognizing that their first obligation is to be effective in saving and protecting lives.

As often the case with serious research, this study has produced answers to some essential questions while refining others that need more detailed attention. Both the answered and the unanswered questions from Phase 1 of our work will benefit from discussion in the various debriefings planned for the fall of 2006 as well as from further attention in additional case studies and reflection to be carried out during Phase 2 in 2006-07. As the process goes forward, we welcome input and criticism from all quarters.