Helpdesk Research Report

Evidence on effects of humanitarian neutrality on outcomes for civilians

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Question

How strong is the evidence base about the effects of (the perception of) humanitarian neutrality on outcomes for civilians in armed conflicts? Specifically, identify the quantity and quality of multi-case or general evidence available on whether neutrality in humanitarian action has facilitated access or other positive outcomes for civilians. If relevant, identify the evidence base about key intermediate variables between neutrality and outcomes.

Contents

1. Overview

Neutrality is a core principle of modern Western humanitarianism, alongside humanity, independence and impartiality. The definition given by the Red Cross / Red Crescent movement is the most widely cited: neutrality means to "not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature"[1].

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[1] IFRC (2015). Neutrality. IFRC. Retrieved from: https://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/vision-and-mission/the-seven-fundamental-principles/neutrality/
On non-Western traditions of humanitarianism, and the differences and similarities on neutrality, see for example ODI's research on non-Western humanitarianism: Global history of modern humanitarian action, http://www.odi.org/projects/2547-global-history-modern-humanitarian-action-moving-forward-hpg

Practitioner and academic literature typically describes neutrality as an essential means towards the end of alleviating suffering and protecting lives and human dignity in armed conflicts. At the same time, there has been significant debate about the current state of humanitarian neutrality (e.g. in integrated UN missions that bring together political, military and humanitarian activities). There have also been questions about the usefulness of neutrality for humanitarian action, compared for instance to avowedly partisan military forces that do have a capacity to implement aid activities. In this context, what rigorous evidence is available to shed light on the effects of humanitarian neutrality (actual or perceived) on outcomes for civilians in armed conflicts? This rapid review searched literature published in 2005-2015. At the enquirer's request, it focused on evidence from multi-case and general studies, excluding single-case studies.

- Evidence on the question is **very limited quantitatively and qualitatively**. Fewer than 40 references turned out to address the question substantively and rigorously. There are few references on the topic to begin with, and even fewer that meet minimal standards of methodological rigour, as confirmed in Schreter and Harmer (2012: 6). Several studies confirm that the humanitarian field at large is characterised by a lack of quantity and quality of knowledge.

- The **available rigorous evidence base is small**. A sizeable segment of it comes from a small number of sources. The methods used are nearly entirely qualitative (many with references to history). They are typically based on secondary sources, and there are no systematic reviews or meta-reviews. Findings are not consistent, and are indicative rather than conclusive.

- There are **significant thematic gaps** in coverage. In particular, local humanitarians and local populations' perceptions are under-researched. A few cases draw the most discussion (e.g. Afghanistan), while entire regions are not discussed. There is barely any attempt to disaggregate thinking about neutrality and its outcomes by social structures, such as class, gender or age.

- Available evidence on the effects of neutrality brings up the following main aspects and themes:

  - Setting neutrality as an object of study is challenging. Definitions of neutrality and their interpretations differ. There are debates about which humanitarian actors qualify as neutral.

  - Designing studies is challenging. Humanitarian neutrality is present in claims of principle, in practices, and in perceptions. Very few references are clear and consistent in taking into account that distinction. Yet for example, there are significant differences between how humanitarian actors attempt to be neutral and how local populations actually perceive their (lack of) neutrality (e.g. Abu-Sada, 2012; WHS, 2015).

  - Operationalising studies on neutrality involves complex work on humanitarian actors' motivation, intentional and unintentional impact, and public as well as confidential action. The level of analysis and the generalizability of findings are important challenges.

  - Causalities are difficult to establish and attribute. Overall, the few rigorous findings available are contradictory on the effects of humanitarian neutrality on outcomes for civilians. Findings include positive effects, mixed or variable effects, negative effects, and a lack of major effects (where alternative determinants appear to play a greater role in outcomes).

2. Limited rigorous evidence available

Little knowledge produced on the topic

This rapid review looked at academic and grey literature published between 2005 and 2015. The searches remained open throughout to any knowledge type – qualitative or quantitative – and to any research method used rigorously – from ethnography to randomised control trials.

Strikingly, this rapid review found only a few dozen studies that specifically explored the question. For example, a search for social science references in the academic database Scopus found only 120 potentially relevant publications in the ten year period; and only a tiny fraction of those actually addressed the report question[2]. Searches for grey literature in Google did not fare better. For example, there were only four pages of results for documents published in 2005-2015 with the words "humanitarian" and "neutrality" in the title (and only two pages of results with the word "neutral"). Attempts at replacing "neutral*" with "impartial*" returned even fewer results in both academic and grey literature.

The matches from these searches were then screened for relevance. This led to retaining references that, in whole or in part, addressed the report topic substantively (i.e. in more than a few lines).

Very little rigorous evidence available

Of those relevant references, **fewer yet met minimal standards of methodological rigour**, i.e.: being transparent about their methodology and knowledge base; supporting claims about effects with evidence; ensuring internal validity in demonstrations, with limited confounding factors or circular reasoning; and cogency in argument, with clear links connecting concepts, theories, analysis, data and conclusions[3]. This rapid review thus operated a simple screening of initial references, based on substantial relevance and minimal rigour. This left fewer than 40 references for 2005-2015. Of those, a selection of the most directly relevant was retained to write this rapid report.

A DFID-commissioned study on delivering humanitarian aid in highly insecure environments documented the problem with existing literature (Schreter & Harmer, 2013: 6-7). It noted there is considerable literature supporting humanitarian neutrality, impartiality and independence in such contexts. Many references present these principles as central to local acceptance of humanitarian action, and document the challenges involved in maintaining humanitarian principles.

Yet most of the evidence "is qualitative, **general analysis and think-pieces** rather than empirical, field-based research over an extended timeframe with concrete findings and guidance" (Schreter & Harmer, 2013: 6). This is what the author of the present report observed as well: many references initially found for this rapid review were eventually screened out because they had clearly started from certain views on the effects of neutrality and set out to prove their point by using selective illustrations rather than by examining complexity and contradictions in realities. Normative language on right and wrong approaches to humanitarian aid is often used throughout the analysis, not just in recommendations. An

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[2] The search terms used were: (humanitarian* OR emergency OR emergencies OR relief OR aid) and (neutral*). Searches looked for items that had the first terms in the title and the other one in the title, keywords or abstract; and then vice-versa. Only 80 and 40 matches respectively were found since 2005.

[3] These minimal standards are similar to some of those laid out in: DFID (2014: 11-15); Knox Clarke & Darcy (2014: 15-17).

understanding of how humanitarian principles are put into practice is lacking, as is a mapping of patterns of access in insecure environments, as Schreter and Harmer sum up (2013: 6).

The review conducted for the present report found that one frequent problem with the literature was **tautological claims** ('neutral aid leads to not taking sides', 'neutral aid improves access thanks to not taking sides'). Circular reasoning was often offered rather than demonstrations of causalities that would disentangle concepts and connections. Another frequent problem was that claims were not backed by knowledge that was explicit, clear, specific and that established causalities. Most discussions of humanitarian neutrality turned out to be based on unexamined assumptions that are widely circulated, repeated and shared in the Western humanitarian field. But little rigorous knowledge is ever provided to substantiate these premises.

This review identified several **frequent assumptions** made without rigorous supportive evidence. Humanitarian neutrality is assumed to be a concept that can be identified, and an object that can be studied, with objectivity and stability in humanitarian practices. Local groups' perceptions on neutrality, and their effects on outcomes for civilians, are assumed to be understood. Practices deemed neutral are contrasted with practices deemed non-neutral. Many references claim – but do not actually show – that they have identified and attributed causalities in relation to humanitarian neutrality. The causal effects of non-neutrality are assumed to be established and are used as counter-factuals. Yet in the overwhelming majority of documents found in this rapid review, authors provide neither direct evidence to back up their assumptions or claims, nor references that do so[4].

A number of rigorous studies confirm that **problems exist throughout the humanitarian field** with the quantity and quality of knowledge:

- In a study commissioned by OCHA and CARE International, the Feinstein International Center found that the humanitarian system "remains **largely anecdote rather than evidence driven**" (Mazurana et al., 2011: 1). It has "significant weaknesses in data collection, analysis and response in all stages of a crisis or emergency" (*ibidem*).

- The International Rescue Committee used systematic reviews to create gap maps on evidence about ten interventions in conflict and post-conflict contexts (Annan, 2014)[5]. It concluded that **large bodies of rigorous evidence "do not exist"** in relief or post-conflict contexts. Most systematic reviews did not find enough studies that measured outcomes in the same way. As a result, meta-analysis is impossible, and the conclusions in many systematic reviews are narrative rather than statistical. In addition, "[a]lmost none of the systematic reviews compared the effectiveness of interventions against each other". Lastly, the amount of evidence "varies widely by intervention and outcome, even within gap maps". Where interventions and their causal chains are not described precisely, the evidence base cannot be assessed case by case.

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[4] Efforts to follow up on the most promising footnotes largely led to references that offered little detailed evidence, though a few follow-ups did lead to relevant references that were taken up in this report.
[5] The interventions are: agricultural interventions; cash transfers, vouchers, and cash for work; social and economic development of youth; quality education; social and emotional well-being of children; access to justice and community protection; physical, mental, and social wellbeing of women or children survivors of violence; social and economic empowerment of women; social accountability; community-driven reconstruction or development.

- A study for the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) also confirms that "there is **significant room for improvement**" in the quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action (Knox Clarke & Darcy, 2014: 67). For example, the quality of the evidence in humanitarian evaluations "is often poor", for example in terms of accuracy and attribution of causality (*idem*: 44). Many evaluations also fail to meaningfully include affected people's perceptions (*ibidem*).

- A scoping study for 3ie (the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation) on evidence in humanitarian assistance found most areas "suffer from a **paucity of evidence**", with the exception of health and nutrition (Clarke et al., 2014). There is a general lack of good evidence, especially of studies that show a causality between assistance and targeted results.

- The DFID study on delivering humanitarian aid in highly insecure environments found that the **quality of evidence is typically problematic** such contexts (Schreter & Harmer, 2013: 14-15).

3.   Characteristics of the evidence base

What does the selected rigorous knowledge look like? First, a small number of academic, practitioner and policy organisations and individuals have conducted rigorous research into the effects of humanitarian neutrality on outcomes for civilians. As a result, available rigorous knowledge comes from **fairly few sources**, and there are frequent cross-references between them. In addition, many sources are connected to humanitarian practice and funding. This may raise the issue of how independent their assessment of neutrality and its effects is of dominant perspectives. For example, one contributing expert noted that simplifications to defend the importance of neutrality "can also be self-interested (e.g. humanitarian NGOs have a vested interest in presenting neutrality as their distinctive value added)" (expert comment).

Second, **methods** are nearly entirely qualitative. Indeed, Schreter and Harmer note that quantitative evidence is generally lacking. For example, politicisation of aid "is rarely linked to firm evidence measuring the impact on humanitarian access" (Schreter & Harmer, 2013: 6). This rapid search found no systematic review or meta-review on the topic. Most references used either comparisons between a small number of cases, or offer general conclusions based on various cases examined without systematic comparisons. Most use secondary material rather than primary data.

One prominent feature of the selected documents is the **reference to history** to discuss past and current effects of neutrality on humanitarian outcomes[6]. These references emphasise that fierce debates about the role of neutrality in humanitarian action have accompanied modern humanitarianism since its early days: numerous articles document how strong debates about humanitarian neutrality were throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. They also show how similar they are to contemporary ones in many ways: across time, humanitarians have perceived the dilemmas and challenges around neutrality as being radically novel, specific to their times, or uniquely intractable.

Findings **lack consistency**. They are split between conclusions of positive effects of neutrality, mixed effects, and no direct effects. The degree of certainty on effects is also variable: some authors suggest correlations, others causalities. Overall, the approaches are typically descriptive or narrative, which generate indicative rather than conclusive findings.

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[6] See e.g. Collinson & Elhawary, 2012; Destexhe, 2013; Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011; Hansen, 2013; Kennedy, 2009; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009.

Lastly, there are **several thematic gaps** in the available rigorous evidence. Nearly no reference discusses local humanitarians, or local populations' understandings of neutrality and its effects. Geographically, a small number of cases form the bulk of contexts examined (e.g. Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Kosovo, Palestine and Somalia). The effects of humanitarian neutrality are mostly discussed in relation to access, and to a lesser extent protection; other outcomes for civilians are barely mentioned. Nearly no reference attempts to disaggregate enquiries into effects by social structure of inequality. As a result, the literature does not examine whether choices on neutrality might lead to differentiated outcomes based on positions of class, gender, ethnicity, migration, age, (dis)ability, let alone positions at the intersection of inequalities. This is a widespread problem across humanitarian practice, as Mazurana et al. (2011) demonstrate on the frequent lack of collection and use of sex- and age-disaggregated data.

4.   Main aspects and themes in the evidence base

Available rigorous evidence shows there are few clear-cut answers, if any, about the effects of humanitarian neutrality on outcomes for civilians – a point also emphasised by two experts who contributed to this report. In fact, a number of findings are about questioning claims and emphasising complexity rather than providing answers. To reflect this state of the evidence, the present section will highlight points from the literature about the various questions involved in considering the topic, and finish by presenting the elementary findings available.

Challenge of neutrality as an object of study

Conceptualisation: what is neutrality?

First, while the current Red Cross / Red Crescent definition of neutrality is widely cited as the major model of humanitarian neutrality, comparisons across time and space clearly show that it is not the only way to approach neutrality. Definitions of neutrality and their interpretations have not been permanent within the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, nor in other humanitarian organisations (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012; Destexhe, 2013; Forsythe, 2013; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009).

Neutrality as a principle is largely held to be self-evident and value-free in the literature. But in fact the idea of humanitarian neutrality is grounded in an ideological worldview. That worldview is based on political values such as equality between all human beings, a value that is not universally accepted, as noted by Rieffer-Flanagan (2009: 895-896) and one expert who contributed to this report. Neutrality has also been challenged as problematic altogether since the early 20th century (see e.g. Rubenstein, 2014: 334-335).

Application: which actors qualify as neutral?

Another issue for rigorous research is determining if every humanitarian organisation that delivers humanitarian aid can qualify as neutral. This is contested. Egeland, Harmer and Stoddard (2011: 16) note that **the UN** is both a political and humanitarian actor. They state that this makes it more difficult to project a neutral image for UN aid agencies than for many other humanitarian groups. For example, the UN has a political role in many highly contested situations. This role has placed it "squarely in the Western camp", making it seem a legitimate and prominent target for some armed groups (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 16).

The **religious identity** of some aid actors can also increase risks to humanitarian neutrality in some contexts (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 16). In particular, where insurgent groups or local populations are concerned about proselytising, religious aid organisations can see their work curtailed. For example, in south-central Somalia, armed groups in the Al-Shabaab movement ordered several Christian organisations to close their operations. In Afghanistan, authors of violence that affected aid workers cited accusations of proselytising as a motive (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 16).

One expert also argued that **governmental agencies** active in humanitarianism can hardly be categorised as neutral – this is distinct from acknowledging that they do provide humanitarian aid (expert comment).

National societies of the **Red Cross/Red Crescent** are identified as lacking neutrality in several references (e.g. Destexhe, 2013; Forsythe, 2013). The ICRC's record of being neutral is also uneven historically, with bias for example in relation to fascist Italy and Ethiopia in the 1930s, to Nazi Germany in World War II, and during the Korean and Biafra wars (see e.g. Forsythe, 2013: 65-66; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009).

Issues in the design of studies about neutrality

Distinctions: neutrality as claim, practice or perception?

The neutrality of any given humanitarian actor can be a variable in three ways: as a claim widely made and publicised by humanitarian organisations; as a practice that humanitarian organisations try to accomplish, in both policies and daily action; as a perception by other actors.

Many references fail to **study distinctly** neutrality as a claim, practice and perception. For instance, authors will often acknowledge that perceptions matter, but then fall back on using organisations' mere claims of neutrality as a source of causality. Discussions about the effects of neutrality often lack precisions on which of the three categories are being referred to. Hence, many discussions lack theoretical clarity, cogency and validity. For example, the UN position is often read that of a neutral broker for humanitarian access, whereby the UN leadership's advocacy aggregates many humanitarian organisations' positions (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 39). However, field representatives from UN agencies and NGOs have found the UN often too deferential to hosts governments and donors, and unwilling to push back over conditions of operation. (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 39).

There are very few rigorous studies of **perceptions** of humanitarian neutrality. However, available knowledge does point clearly to the significant differences between humanitarian organisations' statements of neutrality and local perceptions of the matter. For example, a recent survey asked 327 people in five Middle Eastern and North African countries[7] who are affected by humanitarian crises to rate how much they thought aid groups are neutral and impartial on a 10-point scale, where 1 is low (WHS, 2015). The score were "particularly damning": 5.0 in Jordan; 4.7 in Egypt; 4.1 in Palestine; 3.0 in Yemen; 2.9 in Lebanon (*idem*: 10-11).

Evidence also establishes the complexity of local populations' and belligerents' perceptions, and their historical, social, political and cultural construction and embeddedness (Abu-Sada, 2012). The gap can be very large between international humanitarian actors' representations of neutrality and of how they are perceived locally, and actual representations and perceptions. This is true of both individual humanitarian actors and the international humanitarian system perceived as a whole (Abu-Sada, 2012).

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[7] The countries are: Egypt, Jordan, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Syria and Yemen.

Operationalisation: conducting studies of neutrality

For studies that choose to focus on practices and perceptions instead of mere claims of neutrality, a number of questions and challenges come up in putting research into practice. For example, studies on practices of neutrality may need to examine humanitarian actors' motivation, intentional and unintentional impact, and public as well as confidential action – discussed by Forsythe (2013) and Rieffer-Flanagan (2009) in relation to the Red Cross/Red Crescent. Each of these aspects is complex to study and understand, and many studies fail to disaggregate issues in favour of general statements about neutral practice as a whole.

The level of analysis, and the presumed generalizability of findings, are additional issues. Many references seem to assume that their findings on the effects of humanitarian neutrality about specific cases and levels at of humanitarian action have general applicability, without valid methodological grounding for this. One frequent generalisation is to assume that findings around international humanitarian actors are valid for local humanitarians too. Yet for example, Rubenstein (2014) argues that seeking to protect local health service providers through global humanitarian aid models (including neutrality) may be ineffective or even dangerous. He argues that local health service providers face distinct conditions, where adhering to humanitarian neutrality is often impossible, misplaced and risky.

Complexity of causalities and mixed findings

Difficulty of establishing and attributing causalities

Across rigorous references, authors emphasise the extreme difficulty of establishing and attributing causalities between humanitarian principles and actual outcomes. The chains of causalities involved are typically long, complex, multiple and confounding. On such a topic, it is exceedingly difficult to establish and use rigorous baselines, counter-factuals, hypotheses or comparisons between different organisations, times or places on the issue. Therefore, rigorous authors acknowledge that causalities that are established typically stem from narrative and context-specific insights that are hardly generalizable.

The case on positive effects of neutrality

The widely cited **UN compendium of humanitarian good practices** (called '*To stay and deliver*') argued that the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality underpin acceptance and form the basis for belligerents to accept humanitarian action in armed conflicts (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 4).

The study found that policies and practices that run counter to neutrality have "severely undermined humanitarian negotiations with all parties […] for timely, secure, and unimpeded access" (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 4). For example, some governments and international organisations have explicitly or implicitly banned any contact with entities designated as terrorist. Some states have imposed armed escorts to humanitarian actors, or expected humanitarian actors to be part of their political and military strategies. Many humanitarian organisations have obliged, thus compromising their neutrality (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 4).

The UN compendium discusses contexts of internationalised insurgencies and counterinsurgency campaigns as areas of particular threat to humanitarian neutrality (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 13). For example, in Afghanistan and Iraq, humanitarian actors have found it difficult to be perceived as neutral amid military-led campaigns for stabilisation. These campaigns use counterinsurgency tactics to win locals' 'hearts and minds' by providing services and assistance. Aid distributed by the military may then becomes a legitimate target in the eyes of belligerents. At the same time, traditional humanitarian actors become

more vulnerable to attacks, due to their direct collaboration with counterinsurgency or perceptions of such collaboration (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 13).

If humanitarian workers' perceptions are taken as a form of evidence, a global multi-language online survey conducted to prepare the UN Compendium is also part of the case for the positive effects of neutrality. In it, 94 percent of national aid workers stated that their organisation actively promotes impartiality, independence and neutrality. Ninety-one percent also stated that adherence to these principles enhanced national aid workers' security (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 46).

The case on mixed or variable effects

Taken as a whole, the literature mostly suggests that humanitarian practices related to neutrality have had mixed or variable effects depending on a variety of other factors and of contexts. One type of case has been has been somewhat better researched, in relative terms, than others: **UN operations that integrate military, civil and political missions**, instead of preserving a separation to enable humanitarian neutrality. A rapid review of the literature on the effects of integrated UN missions on humanitarian action (Combaz, 2013) confirmed that positive, negative and neutral effects could be identified. It also confirmed that effects vary by individual actor, type of actor (e.g. UN or NGO), and context (place, time and mission).

Another example is where some host states have promoted '**nationalisation policies**', partly to counter the associations of aid with the West (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 21). The policies increase the representation of national organisations and staff involved in humanitarian aid. Chad and Sudan are two such cases. This has led to different, even contradictory, outcomes. On the one hand, national staff is often more acceptable to government officials, which has sometimes resulted in improved access. On the other hand, at initial stages, service risks being slower and of low or quality until national staff and partners have built up their technical capacities. In addition, this sometimes makes neutrality harder to maintain (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 21).

The case on negative effects of neutrality

Several references draw attention to cases where humanitarian organisations' neutrality had negative, at times disastrous, effects – directly or as an enabling factor (e.g. Destexhe, 2013; Forsythe, 2013: 65-66; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009). Cases of genocide and crimes against humanity are frequently mentioned in this regard: ICRC during the Italian fascist wars in Ethiopia (1935-1936) and during World War II, as well as the humanitarian system in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s.

For example, in the period before and during World War II, the Red Cross and Red Crescent valued being a universal movement and neutrality above all else (Destexhe, 2013: 57). They never broke off relations with a government during that time – not even after Nazi Germany expelled Jews from the German Red Cross, and not in the face of Nazi extermination camps. The Red Cross in fact handed over aid packages for people in death camps to German authorities (*ibidem*). The ICRC neither pursued discreet diplomacy to help Jewish and other victims of the Nazis, nor did it speak out as it became clear from 1941 on that a genocide was in process (Forsythe, 2013: 66; Rieffer-Flanagan, 2009: 898-899). The ICRC leadership allowed Swiss neutrality that tilted toward Nazi power – and Swiss nationalism – to inform (and curtail) its neutral humanitarianism (*ibidem*).

In Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, most international humanitarian actors positioned themselves as neutral (Destexhe, 2013: 61). They ended up giving people "food but not protection", and provided cover for political inaction against Serb aggression and ethnic cleansing (*ibidem*).

In the face of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, humanitarian neutrality was invoked (Destexhe, 2013: 61-64). This provided cover for international inaction against the genocide, in the humanitarian response and, most importantly, in the political and military realms (*ibidem*). For example, many humanitarian organisations provided aid to Hutu refugees in camps in the eastern DRC. But neutrality consolidated genocidaires' control over and strength in those camps. This, in turn, made future armed conflict in the region more likely, all while genocide victims were receiving little humanitarian aid (*ibidem*). In short, Destexhe emphasises that goodwill is not enough: while humanitarian aid should serve all victims without taking sides, "humanitarian aid is useless if it is not accompanied by political action and efforts to achieve justice" (2013: 64).

The case on a lack of major effects and on alternative determinants

Overall, there is no strong case in the evidence base that neutrality would in itself improve access or other positive outcomes for civilians. Conversely, a number of humanitarian actors who have not positioned themselves as neutral (at times or permanently) have successfully delivered sustained humanitarian aid for decades, such as MSF (Collinson & Elhawary, 2012).

The literature suggests that major determinants of outcomes for civilians are specific to contexts and do not centrally involve neutrality as a variable. For example, while making the case for humanitarian neutrality, the UN compendium in fact identifies a number of **alternative factors** that, in some contexts, determine humanitarian outcomes for civilians much more strongly than neutrality. For example (Egeland, Harmer & Stoddard, 2011: 13-15):

- **Global vs. local insurgents:** Global insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as Al Qaeda, "present a different type of threats to humanitarian action than do their local or national counterparts" (*idem*: 13). The more a local the group in control, the more likely that group is to have an interest in facilitating services for the population, and therefore accepting to negotiate secure access with humanitarians. Negotiating on access with international humanitarians can also increase the legitimacy and leverage of local insurgencies vis-à-vis the government. On the other hand, internationalist fighters tend to be motivated by ideology more than a political interest in local populations.

- **Strong States and violence:** With Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories and Sri Lanka, political impediments by strong governments and the threat of collateral violence have played a major role in hindering humanitarian access and movement (see also *idem*: 34-35).

- **Insecurity and security dependence:** In the Democratic Republic of Congo and Chad, humanitarians' access has often become functionally dependent on UN peacekeeping missions because these provide area security and protection. This is shaped by a context where there is a multiplicity of armed groups or groups involved in illicit economy, and large areas without effective law enforcement or government control. Dependence on peacekeeping forces limits humanitarians access to areas were those forces themselves can travel, i.e. it becomes dependent on the forces' capacities and the localised levels of acceptance or threat the forces encounter.

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Key websites

- ALNAP: http://www.alnap.org/
- ReliefWeb: http://reliefweb.int/
- Feinstein International Center, Tufts University: http://fic.tufts.edu/
- Humanitarian Accountability Partnership: http://www.hapinternational.org/
- Humanitarian Outcomes: https://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/
- ODI - Humanitarian Policy Group: http://www.odi.org/programmes/humanitarian-policy-group

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