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The role of UN humanitarian forums involving conflict parties in conflict situations

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Question

- What examples and lessons are there of formal committees or other regular forums driven by UN humanitarian actors, but involving different state and non-state parties to a conflict (at a senior level) to discuss humanitarian issues of concern and outside of any political process.

Contents

1. Summary

This query looks at the role of regular UN humanitarian forums that involve conflict parties in conflict situations to discuss humanitarian issues of concern. It focuses on forums that are held outside of any political processes or peace talks. It provides examples and lessons from those forums.

This paper finds only six examples of forums that meet two or more of the criteria, although several of these are informal and/or linked to a political process. Forums such as the Technical Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (TCHA) in Sudan (1998-2000) and the Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) in Sudan (2002-2007) have allowed humanitarian issues to be discussed in a co-ordinated way among United Nations (UN) organisations and/or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and parties to the conflict. This can lead to better technical co-ordination, a distribution of aid according to humanitarian principles rather than strategic negotiations, and a greater acceptance of humanitarian principles among the warring parties. However, the success of such forums is highly context-specific and depends upon their format, personnel and tactics, as well as the broader political context and the tactics and capabilities of the conflict parties. The forums risk legitimising the conflict parties and allowing aid to be instrumentalised.

Some key challenges shape the space humanitarian actors have for engaging in regular forums with conflict parties. Firstly, so-called 'complex emergencies' after the Cold War have changed the context for humanitarian action, and brought distinct challenges to implementing humanitarian principles and maintaining humanitarian space. Wars involving state and non-state actors make it difficult for humanitarians to gain access and threaten humanitarian principles. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) states that humanitarian organisations may offer help to populations in need provided consent is given. However, agreeing access with non-state groups may confer legitimacy on those groups. The process of negotiating access may also lead to aid becoming instrumentalised in military or political strategies.

Secondly, the UN introduced a 'policy of integration' in 1997, whereby UN peacekeeping, security and humanitarian agencies are linked together. Many aid agencies and scholars feel that the UN's policy of integration has contributed to a squeezing of 'humanitarian space'. Evidence from interviews points to a perception that aid is linked with UN political goals in contexts such as Somalia and Afghanistan, and a subsequent reduction in the efficacy of aid delivery (Keogh & Ruijters, 2012; Steets, Reichhold, & Sagmeister, 2012). Third, on a more technical level, the cluster system introduced in 2005, was implemented to improve co-ordination between NGOs. However, it can lead to similar problems as 'integration', especially where peacekeeping or other political issues are being led by a cluster member (Metcalfe, Giffen, & Elhawary, 2011, p. 27). Fourth, anti-terrorism legislation has also brought restrictions on NGO interactions with terrorist organisations such as Hamas and Al-Shabaab. As the territory governed by these organisations has some of the highest levels of humanitarian need, the lack of access to it has impeded humanitarian work considerably.

Humanitarian organisations and the UN have tried various methods to overcome these problems, including co-ordination mechanisms and the formulation of joint operating principles.

Regular forums offer a way to engage both sides during a conflict. They stand in contrast to the more ad-hoc negotiation of access used by many humanitarian organisations on the ground. They can be used to help implement 'joint operating principles' or 'ground rules' uniformly across

a conflict-affected state. They can also help to negotiate humanitarian access in situations where conflict is preventing it. It has been argued that these high-level forums are an effective way to ensure that humanitarian principles are adhered to by all parties in a war, and ensure a separate 'humanitarian space'.

This report is divided into two sections:

- The first section of the report lists examples of forums, discussing the context in which they worked, their format, and their successes and failures.
- The second section discusses some general lessons regarding the forums, including from cases which only partly meet the criteria, or where a forum is absent.

This paper finds only one example of a forum that entirely meet the specificities of this query, however five additional examples of forums may offer transferable lessons and are therefore included below. There is little direct discussion of UN-led forums in the literature. Most of the literature focused on negotiating humanitarian space and disseminating humanitarian principles includes high-level negotiation as only one facet. For reasons of sensitivity, some forums have generated little published research. However, conclusions can be drawn from the strengths and weaknesses identified in cases where such forums are not used: informal forums negotiations not including parties to a conflict, those linking humanitarian issues to political goals, and more locally based policies. Much of the literature discusses the difficulties of negotiating access with conflict parties through the UN. The evidence found does not address gender issues.

2. Examples of forums

2.1 Technical Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (TCHA) in Sudan, 1998-2000

The TCHA was a **high-level forum** where the Government of the Republic of Sudan (GoS), the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the United Nations met to discuss humanitarian issues related to the conflict. It met in Rome on 16-18 November 1998, Oslo on 25-26 May 1999, Geneva on 14-15 December 1999 and Geneva on 2-3 November 2000.

The TCHA was at the time one of the few humanitarian committees to feature non-state actors alongside governments. It grew out of the limitations of **Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS)**, the multilateral operation begun in 1989 to provide humanitarian aid to both sides during the ongoing conflict in the country. This OLS agreement was novel at the time in that it required 'the Sudanese government to cede partial sovereignty to the UN in areas controlled by the rebel movements' (Bradbury, Leader, & Mackintosh, 2000, p. 27). However, access under OLS was negotiated with the Sudanese government, and split between northern and southern sectors, and as such did not always correlate with humanitarian need. Because of this ad hoc nature, the government of Sudan became dominant and interfered with or delayed aid for its own purposes (Barbelet, 2008, p. 325).

As a result of the **instrumentalisation of aid and security threats** to humanitarian workers, OLS drafted 'an agreement on ground rules' for humanitarian access, which were signed by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), the Southern Sudan Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A) and the SPLA-United in 1995. However, the Sudanese government rejected OLS's attempt to include it in the ground rules in 1996. As a consequence, 'differences

between the northern and southern sectors [were] problematic for the implementation of the Ground Rules' (Bradbury et al., 2000, p. 38).

The TCHA was devised as one way of **sustaining the principled engagement** on issues in Sudan. It discussed principles of access, assistance, protection, the rights of civilian beneficiaries, security protocols, humanitarian ceasefires and access corridors. Unlike the 'Agreement on Ground Rules', the TCHA included representatives from both warring parties. It therefore risked legitimating the rebel groups. It provided **a forum for the discussion of humanitarian issues** and greater acceptance of humanitarian principles.

2.2   The UN Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit (UHAC), Angola, 1993-2000

The Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit in Angola, or Unidade de Coordenação para Assistençia Humanitaria, (UCAH), was **established by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)** in April 1993. It was explicitly designed to be independent of the political work of the UN, which was seen as implicated in the failed peace plan, and to arrange aid for both sides. UCAH did not meet both parties together, but rather acted as a point of contact for both when arranging the humanitarian aid, through **shuttle diplomacy** rather than a formal forum.

Since 1975, Angola had been in conflict between the Soviet- and Cuba-backed People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the US- and apartheid South Africa-backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The end of the Cold War saw the withdrawal of foreign backers, and more scope for humanitarian needs to be met.

UCAH aimed to improve on the UN's 1990-1 **Special Relief Programme for Angola (SRPA)**. Although both sides agreed to 'cross-line' aid, in practice aid was frequently manipulated. UCAH did not have the staff on the ground to provide accurate needs assessment, and so was more vulnerable to the warring parties' exaggerated figures (Richardson, 2002, pp. 77–79). War broke out again following elections in September 1992, following which humanitarian access became limited and ad hoc.

In May 1993, **UCAH** set out an **Emergency Relief Plan (ERP)**. Its principles and strategies included guarantees of humanitarian access and impartiality, and that 'the government of Angola and UNITA identify and make available suitably qualified technical personnel to assist in programme implementation'

The **aims of UCAH** were: to foster strategies for addressing humanitarian needs created by the Angolan crisis; to negotiate access and protect humanitarian space; and to promote a coherent and effective humanitarian response.

Both the GoA and UNITA agreed in principle to the plan following peace talks led by the UN. However, the ERP was halted almost immediately when the first aid plane to enter UNITA territory was shot at. According to Richardson (2002, p. 88), 'It is widely believed that this attempt to initiate the ERP failed because it was still seen as being linked to the political process. The plan had been handed to the two sides by the SRSG [Special Representative of the UN Secretary General], in the context of political negotiations'. From this point, UCAH decided to emphatically **divorce its work form the political work of the UN**, and to stop cross-line convoys (Jackson & Davey, 2014).

UCAH never dealt with the two sides at the same time but rather engaged in **'shuttle diplomacy'**. UNITA's new Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator (HAC), part of the movement's Foreign Ministry, and the GoA's Ministry for Social Assistance and Reintegration both worked through UCAH. The GoA could be contacted easily in Luanda, and UCAH placed a representative in the UNITA-held city of Huambo to talk to the HAC, although as the status of the war changed this contact was not always possible. This aspect of UCAH is seen as having been effective in focusing negotiations and giving less scope for playing NGOs and UN agencies off each other (Richardson, 2002).

The GoA had to authorise any contact with UNITA and insisted that its sovereignty 'be reflected in the tone and conduct of the negotiations.' It was consulted, whereas UNITA simply had the option to consent (Richardson, 2002). Nevertheless, **UCAH was point of contact** for both sides which helped in the implementation of programmes.

UCAH **field advisers**, present in seven provincial capitals, were vital in running the ERP as they shared information and maintained a radio network. This allowed UCAH to gain information separately from the warring parties (Richardson, 2002, p. 94).

Nevertheless, UCAH always struggled to agree the delivery of aid according to humanitarian principles as both sides sought to use it for their own ends. According to Toby Lanzer (1996, p. 17), who worked for UCAH, the organisation's work faltered primarily because of '**linkage'**. For instance, UNITA did not accept the principle of aid based on need. Although most of the need was in GoA-held areas, UNITA insisted on an equal split of aid. Convoys were frequently held up by such demands from both sides. In the contested city of Kuito in 1993, for example, UCAH had negotiated a strict procedure for the delivery of aid, including inspection by a humanitarian committee of GoA and UNITA members and checkpoints for humanitarian workers (Lanzer, 1996, p. 34).

UCAH also sought to build capacity among the warring parties, in anticipation of a peace settlement and with the possibility of gaining access to areas previously blocked by the war. Following the Lusaka Peace Agreement in December 1994, UCAH set up the **Humanitarian Coordination Group** which dealt with both sides in Luanda. It aimed to:

- improve general understanding of the humanitarian crisis in Angola by promoting needs assessments and sectoral evaluation missions;
- monitor access to civilians in need and make recommendations to the Joint Commission, as necessary;
- gather and analyse information to make recommendations concerning food security;
- track financial contributions to the 1995 Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Angola and encourage donors to support NGO programmes;
- facilitate information exchange with donors and NGOs about humanitarian needs and the financial and human resource capacity to respond; and
- keep the Joint Commission informed about the humanitarian situation in the country.

Overall, the effectiveness of UCAH and its predecessor the SRPA were limited. Hilshorst and Serrano (2010) argue that UCAH's 'performance and credibility changed over time as humanitarian and UN peacebuilding activities became increasingly intertwined, compromising the UN's ability to avoid cooption by the warring parties'. Independence from the peace processes, particularly in 1993-4, allowed it to build more trust with the warring parties and to work effectively (Enrico Pavignani & Alessandro Colombo, 2005). However, the persistent attempts of

both the GoA and UNITA to instrumentalise aid as part of ongoing hostilities meant that in most of the periods following, much aid was not delivered on humanitarian principles.

2.3 Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) in Sudan, 2002-2007

The Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) was a **humanitarian forum** for the implementation of humanitarian work in the Nuba Mountains. It was attended by both the government and the rebels fighting in the area, as well as a number of NGOs and representatives of the Nuba people. Pantuliano (2005) describes it as 'the only operational programme in Sudan subscribed to by both warring parties'. It ran from 2002 to 2007.

NMPACT came about from following diplomatic pressure from the UN and aid agencies, who felt that the Government of Sudan (GoS) was using aid to lure people into territory it controlled. Many aid agencies therefore withdrew from GoS-controlled areas in 2000-1 as a way to exert pressure on the government. This pressure led to a January 2002 ceasefire agreement (CFA) monitored by a Joint Military Commission/Joint Monitoring Mission (JMC/JMM). **NMPACT was linked to the ceasefire** and co-operated with the military monitors, so cannot be said to have been independent of a peace process.

As well as external pressure, the existence of **humanitarian wings**, developed following Operation Lifeline Sudan, within both warring parties, helped make NMPACT successful. The GoS's Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) and the SPLM's Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRC) were made up of technical humanitarian workers, separate from military or political structures.

Neither did it have purely 'humanitarian' aims. Its strategic goal was 'to enhance the Nuba people's capacity for self-reliance within a sustained process of conflict transformation guided by the aspirations, priorities and analyses of the Nuba people themselves.' As part of this it addressed several issues. It was focused on creating **sustainable solutions** for the Nuba people, which included mapping land tenure to return what was taken from displaced persons, and conflict between nomad groups and farmers.

Nevertheless, the engagement of the humanitarian organisations of the SPLM/M and the GoS is seen to have been an **effective mechanism** for implementation. The involvement of both the government and the rebels in regular forums 'gave them a strong sense of buy-in into the programme, towards which they consistently showed strong commitment and interest in facilitating its speedy implementation' (Pantuliano, 2005). It allowed for humanitarian and development issues to be addressed equitably, i.e. across lines and based on humanitarian criteria. The use of a forum in neutral locations is also seen to have brought both sides together.

2.4 UNOHAC in Mozambique, 1992-1994

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOHAC) was set up in 1992 to co-ordinate humanitarian aid. It was part of the integrated United Nations Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ) which oversaw the peace process between the government (Frelimo) and rebel forces (Renamo) in the country.

In practice, UNOHAC was **distinct from other UN agencies** in Mozambique. It also began operating about a year before ONUMOZ, meaning that it had, and was perceived as having, autonomy from the peace process (Barnes, 1998, p. 22). Donini argues that 'integration existed only on paper' (Donini, 1996, p. 67).

Many of the structures and personnel of UNOHAC came from a predecessor organisation, the United Nations Special Coordinator for Emergency Relief Operations (UNSCERO) which ran from 1987 to 1993. However, UNSCERO would only work in rebel-controlled areas with permission from the government, meaning that in practice the ICRC was the only organisation working in rebel-controlled areas (Barnes, 1998, p. 15).

The beginnings of a peace process in 1990 and a drought in 1992 led to a desire for a more co-ordinated way of arranging access to at-need populations. Before a peace agreement was signed, in July 1992, the government of Mozambique and Renamo signed a 'Declaration of Principles' stating that humanitarian aid would be impartial, without discrimination, and that they would not use aid for military goals. Following this, it was decided that UNOHAC would replace UNSCERO as part of the integrated UN mission.

UNOHAC's aims were to:

> • coordinate, with the government and Renamo, emergency activities and humanitarian programs of UN agencies, bilateral donors, and NGOs;
> • ensure speedy delivery of emergency commodities and eliminate duplication of effort;
> • gather, evaluate, and disseminate information on humanitarian programs and provide regular updates of unmet and additional needs;
> • maintain a comprehensive database on donor contributions, commitments, and expenditures and track the progress of programs;
> • advise on the use of humanitarian aid with special emphasis on the reintegration of returning refugees, the internally displaced, demobilized soldiers, and vulnerable groups; and
> • manage trust funds established by the UN for demobilization, demining, and for Renamo.

UNOHAC chaired a **weekly Technical Committee** with representatives from both warring sides and NGOs. The discussion was largely decentralised and saw **genuine engagement** between sides. According to Barnes:

> 'The field presence was a critical part of UNOHAC's coordination mechanism and perhaps UNOHAC's most effective and operational coordination contribution. Provincial Humanitarian Assistance Committees functioned as important bridging mechanisms in which, under a UN banner, Government and Renamo worked together with humanitarian organisations to assess needs, establish priorities and deliver assistance to the most needy areas. Valuable information was gathered on needs in previously inaccessible areas, and was passed on through UNOHAC to the international community' (Barnes, 1998, p. 23).

2.5   Humanitarian Working Group in Bosnia, 1992-1995

The Humanitarian Issues Working Group (HIWG) was a **working group** of the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia (ICFY), established in 1992. It was chaired by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and included representatives from all conflict parties.

The UNHCR's evaluation on working with armed groups recounts:

> 'when UNHCR was the lead agency in Bosnia, responsible for feeding millions of people, the High Commissioner sat down the Serb, Croat and Bosniak leaders in her office and pushed each party to sign an agreement opening up supply routes before winter struck affected communities. The meeting was not a courtesy call; at one point the High Commissioner threatened to withdraw from Bosnia entirely if the three sides refused to cooperate' (Keogh & Ruijters, 2012).

The ICFY was to be the basis for a peace settlement. HIWG was guided by 'Programme of Action on Humanitarian Issues' from the London session of the ICFY in August 1992. All parties to the working group had agreed to a **statement of principles**, including to comply with international humanitarian law and 'that the provision of humanitarian assistance should be carried out impartially and on a non-political basis for the benefit of all those affected by the conflict'. The working group also endorsed the 'Comprehensive Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in the Former Yugoslavia' a seven-point plan proposed by UNHCR at the International Meeting on Humanitarian Aid for Victims of the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia on 29 July 1992. The HIWG's work included **monitoring, commitments from the warring parties and appeals** (Rossanet, 1994).

However, on the ground, the conflict parties set the agenda. Frequent changes in humanitarian personnel and poor humanitarian co-ordination enabled this. The warring parties often did not honour their commitments and proved deceptive. They played off UN peacekeepers (UNPROFOR) against UNHCR. UNCHR had, in practice, to accept **reciprocity**. On many occasions, it gave aid for access, or delivered equal amounts to opposing sides, rather than on the basis of assessed need (Cutts, 1999; Young, 2001, p. 790).

2.6   Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) in Syria

The Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) is part of the **ISSG (International Syrian Support Group),** a multilateral body set up in 2015 to help end the conflict.

While the ISSG does not include any of the warring parties, it does include their **main sponsors**. It is chaired by the US and Russia and includes China, Egypt, the EU, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UEA, the UK, the UN, the US, the Arab League, Australia, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Spain.

By including the Syrian government's main sponsors, Russia and Iran, the task force aims to get cross-line aid to hard-to-reach areas. It has achieved **small successes** in widening humanitarian access and civilian protection on the ground (Lund, 2018).

However, **in-depth evaluations of the task force remain scare**.

3. Lessons from forums

3.1 Formal and informal forums

While the TCHA was a formal, high-level and UN backed forum for the discussion of humanitarian issues, many others do not entirely conform to this model. Barbelet (2008) notes that agreements on humanitarian matters 'can be "formal" with the signature of a document or

informal with some types of oral consent from the parties involved. Agreements may be formatted in a universal declaration or flexible in content. Agreements may be multilateral and all inclusive (involving all parties to the conflict including different factions, the government and humanitarian actors), bilateral (between an armed group and a humanitarian actor), or unilateral (statements made by ANSAs)'.

Informal contact can be useful in negotiating access. Donors and the UN are wary of legitimising groups such as Al-Shabaab in Somalia or Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt) (Mackintosh & Duplat, 2013). Many humanitarian forums were not documented for reasons of sensitivity, but low-profile engagement occurs in Syria, while the Salaam Support Group regularly meets with the Taliban in Doha. Governments fighting an armed non-state actor (ANSA) are often reluctant to enter into formal structures with them for fear of ceding legitimacy. Informal contacts are often the only way to gain access where there is a strong asymmetry between the sides. In Angola, the government insisted that negotiations with the rebel group, UNITA, 'were to be conducted by lower ranking UN officials than those with the government', but agreed to cross-line aid in principle (Richardson, 2002). The ensuing 'shuttle diplomacy' provided in informal forum to agree humanitarian access.

NGOs often negotiate informally with ANSAs, or work across the lines. Fiona Terry (2011) provides one example of an informal 'forum' which allowed the government to communicate with an armed non-state actor in the ICRC's work in Afghanistan. She describes how, seeking to work in a polarised situation, the ICRC undertook 'innovative and sometimes risky' initiatives. Starting from the dilemma that 'security guarantees depend upon the effectiveness of operations, yet the possibility to operate depends upon security guarantees', the ICRC undertook back-to-basics work, such as family tracing, medical work and first-aid training, in Taliban-controlled areas. It formed a health *shura* (council) to work with the opposition, which prompted President Karzai to request 'the delegation's help in contacting the insurgents with regard to the vaccination campaign.' In 2009, the ICRC negotiated a humanitarian ceasefire between the US and opposition forces to allow humanitarian access to cholera victims in Kandahar (Terry, 2011). In this case, **the ICRC itself functioned as a forum through which the government and the Taliban could co-operate on humanitarian issues**, albeit on a very ad hoc and unstructured basis. Such informal forums can have the advantage of allowing limited discussion of humanitarian issues in contexts where, for whatever reason, there are none.

However, **informal structures carry risks**. UNOCHA's guide to humanitarian negotiations with armed groups warns that unplanned and unstructured, armed groups are more likely to try and leverage humanitarian access for political gain (Gerard McHugh and Manuel Bessler, 2006). Informality can also lead to the exacerbation of power asymmetries. In the case of Sudan, the ad hoc nature of Operation Lifeline Sudan II (from 1990), saw the government of Sudan (GoS) become increasingly dominant in discussions (Barbelet, 2008; Terry et al., 2014). Similarly, in Angola, the UCAH dealt the Government (GoA) and the rebels (UNITA) separately, and emphasised that its role was not to mediate. However, its 1993 relief plan faltered because of attempts by both sides to achieve 'linkage' between relief and strategic goals, and ensure that relief given to one side was given to the other (Lanzer, 1996).

Some forums include a **declaration of principles** as a way of avoiding instrumentalisation. In 1992, the Mozambique government (Frelimo) and the rebel group (Renamo) signed such a declaration on humanitarian issues, agreeing to impartial assistance, safe passage for humanitarians, and to not seek military advantage (Donini, 1996). In Afghanistan, the formalisation of principles through a strategic framework in 1997 was a way for aid organisations

to present a common face to the Taliban and prevent agencies being played off against each other (Donini, 2004).

3.2 Forums in relation to other processes

Forums for humanitarian issues may be formally separate from political goals or peace processes, but nevertheless should be understood in the **context of political processes**. It is seen to be difficult to institute humanitarian forums to operate in conflicts fuelled by outside actors (e.g. Afghanistan, Syria). Donini, surveying the history of humanitarian engagement in Afghanistan, notes the shortcomings of the humanitarian agreement made by the UN Coordinator Sadruddin Aga Khan in 1988. Because of the highly anti-Soviet views of many Afghans, and the role of Pakistan in controlling entry for UN aid, it was very hard to deliver aid in a principled manner, and the agreement carried little weight. Indeed, he points to the subsequent 'warlord' and Taliban eras as more conducive to the principled delivery of aid (Donini, 2004). In Syria, the use of a UN forum involving the main funders of the warring parties has been seen as necessary to leverage humanitarian access. What little progress has been made on humanitarian ceasefires and corridors has come about through **great power leverage** rather than regular humanitarian forums.

The **balance of power** of the conflict affects how parties will engage with the forum. In 'strong states pursuing their own security and political agenda', such as Sri Lanka, the space for humanitarian forums that include rebel groups can be extremely limited. Similarly, states where a Western power or the UN is leading an intervention or stabilisation, such as Afghanistan, might offer limited scope for humanitarian discussion. Weaker states may be more amenable to international pressure on humanitarian issues, as might those undergoing a peace process (Harvey, 2013, pp. S163-164).

The success of the NMPACT forum in the Nuba Mountains of Southern Sudan came about following **diplomatic pressure** from the UN and aid agencies in 2000-1 as a way to prevent the government's attempts to use its blockade of SPLM-held areas to control the situation. NMPACT was linked to the 2002 ceasefire agreement (CFA) and the Joint Military Commission/Joint Monitoring Mission (JMC/JMM). The NMPACT programme is seen to have been successful in delivering impartial and proportionate humanitarian assistance across the lines. It would nevertheless not have been possible without diplomatic pressure from outside (Pantuliano, 2005). The humanitarian forum in Mozambique, UNOHAC, was also **linked to a peace process**. Institutionally, it remained separate from the peace mission, but it was undertaken at a time when both sides had agreed to peace talks.

Slim (2004) identifies the value of '**moving seamlessly between humanitarian and political discussion** of the crisis' in the case of the 2004 N'djamena talks on Darfur. The 'Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement on the Conflict in Darfur' was brought about following peace talks, led by the international community. Humanitarian issues were discussed when political issues became too hard. However, political pressure was needed to bring the parties to the table.

However, in many cases one of the main advantages of humanitarian forums or technical committees is that they are **separate from political processes**. UCAH's success in Angola during 1993-4 was based on a clear separation from the UN's more political work (Richardson, 2002; Lanzer, 1996). By contrast, humanitarian issues are harder to discuss with all parties in contexts where the UN has led an integrated mission, or where humanitarian work has been

closely linked to a military force. Many studies criticise UN integration because of this, and emphasise the need for separate humanitarian presence (Steets et al., 2012).

Particularly when they are led by UN agencies, UN actors have been able to effectively **distinguish themselves** from political processes, or perceptions of Western ideology. A European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) evaluation of humanitarian access in the face of integration notes that:

> 'Observers often argue that armed groups do not distinguish between different branches and agencies of the UN. Most interviewees consulted for this evaluation, by contrast, were adamant that politically motivated armed groups, such as Al-Shabab in Somalia or the Afghan Taliban, know the differences between the UN's political or military wings and UN humanitarian agencies. The Taliban's leadership has issued a number of public statements calling on humanitarian organizations to distance themselves from UN actors who support the Afghan government militarily or through civilian reconstruction and development efforts' (Steets et al., 2012).

3.3 Factors on the ground

In a several cases, warring parties have agreed to abide by humanitarian principles at high-level forums but done little to **implement them on the ground**. In Bosnia, a rapid turnover of humanitarian staff and a lack of co-ordination among agencies meant they could do little to prevent aid being instrumentalised (Cutts, 1999). In Angola, the Special Relief Programme for Angola (SRPA) was compromised by the inability of the UN to provide its own needs assessments to counter the warring parties exaggerated figures. The later deployment of field advisers to channel information is seen to have helped the humanitarian effort (Richardson, 2002; Lanzer, 1996).

Studies also point to the **value of local-level engagement** with both sides in building consensus and 'buy-in' on humanitarian issues. In the case of NMPACT in Sudan, the 'full involvement of HAC and SRRC in the coordination structure gave them a strong sense of buy-in into the programme, towards which they consistently showed strong commitment and interest in facilitating its speedy implementation' (Pantuliano, 2005). Similarly, in Mozambique, provincial committees involving both sides produced valuable needs assessments (Barnes, 1998). This sustained engagement on issues is also seen as one of the key achievements of cross-line forums.

The **ideology and capabilities** of the conflict parties determine how they will engage with humanitarian issues. In Bosnia, the warring parties did little to honour their commitments made in the Humanitarian Issues Working Group (Cutts, 1999). Groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or Renamo in Mozambique sometimes have little technical know-how regarding humanitarian programmes or of international humanitarian norms (Barnes, 1998; Donini, 2004). Other groups are better prepared. In the Sudanese context, the institution of Operation Lifeline Sudan prompted both the government and SPLM to create humanitarian wings (the SRRA and the HAC, respectively). Being staffed by technical workers with humanitarian expertise, distinct from military and political institutions, is seen to help engagement (Barbelet, 2008). Nevertheless, in Angola, both sides to the conflict had humanitarian institutions but nevertheless frequently sought to instrumentalise aid.

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