



Are we really protecting civilians?

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Protection of civilians, particularly in contexts of armed conflict, has become a vital focus for humanitarian organisations, in addition to the providing the physical basics of life to people faced with disaster, natural or manmade. This is certainly justified. Civilians have no doubt always been the main victims of war, but this has never been more evident than now, when the internal conflicts in places like Darfur, Congo and Syria produce relatively few military casualties, since pitched battles are a rarity, but lead to huge numbers of civilian deaths, injuries, displacement and misery. Standards and norms for the protection of civilians have improved enormously, and the Security Council regularly devotes sessions to the subject, with moving speeches from many countries about how important they think this issue is.

However there is room for a lot of doubt about how much difference this is really making on the ground. Respect for the standards and norms, and for the principles which, lie behind humanitarian work, is mostly absent from the main conflicts of the day. Accountability for abuses remains a major problem, despite the advent of the International Criminal Court. Access for humanitarians in remote and dangerous areas in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan is mostly deteriorating. Humanitarian workers are targeted in some places, not just caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Meanwhile it is also not clear that the deployment of large numbers of protection officers by humanitarian organisations is making the difference one might have hoped. There are several aspects to this. The broad humanitarian definition of protection work is not widely understood outside the humanitarian world, to the extent that some governments and others in affected places still think that protection officers are bodyguards, and are inclined to treat them accordingly. Leaving aside this caricatural response, the word protection does indeed imply a capacity to protect civilians physically, which is not there in practice, and is likely to lead to disappointed expectations on the part of affected populations. This is not to underestimate the excellent work many officers are doing in deterring abuses by their presence and ability to speak out, documenting abuses, advising affected populations of their rights, and helping treat victims physically and psychologically.

Donors are not always financing protection work as they could and should. Although some major donors do get the logic of protection work, and offer funding, programming to help prevent and deal with sexual violence, for example, even in areas where international consciousness has been raised, is not well supported. Certainly the rate of prevalence of rape and worse in places like eastern Congo has not gone down, and those responsible show few signs of changing their behaviour or attitudes.

There are no simple solutions to this. It will remain a complex and difficult area, where results will be hard to achieve. Not all the responsibility falls on humanitarians by any means. Leaders of UN missions and peacekeeping forces, and of military forces in general, have to do much better at understanding what is meant by POC and responding accordingly. Ending impunity remains a huge challenge. Human rights organisations and activists, and governments who care about these things, can help by speaking out more, and can be more outspoken than humanitarian organisations who are also concerned to maintain vital life-saving operations.

But humanitarians also have a responsibility: to explain much better and more clearly what POC means, and why it matters and is as much a part of modern humanitarianism as providing medical care; to be clearer about what protection officers can and cannot achieve on the ground, and why good protection work needs to be funded; and to influence governments of all kinds into respecting the obligations they have signed up to, without sacrificing their ability to work on the ground to provide the basic help so desperately needed.

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