

The meaning of neutrality and impartiality in humanitarian assistance in Complex Emergencies - the case of Haiti after the earthquake in 2010

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A Haitian armed rebel checks a truck from the International Committee of the Red Cross bringing medicine to the rebel-held Haitian city of Gonaïves, north of the capital, Port-au-Prince.

The problem and research question

Medical personnel, often on mission with small humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), are increasingly not only required to have skills in Emergency and Tropical Medicine but also knowledge about the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. Intra state armed conflicts as frequent destination of their missions are additionally fuelled by natural disasters as earthquakes, floods and droughts as in the case study about Haiti in march 2010. In this *Failed State* United Nation blue helmet troops could contain the excess of violence since the late 2000s but the earthquake destabilized the fragile order by causing casualties among the blue helmets and infrastructure destruction. The humanitarian organisations put into this complex scenario had to decide either to position themselves according to political neutrality and impartial aid towards all parties of the conflict or to subordinate themselves under the coordination of the Haitian government and the United Nation bodies. Beyond this question the case study focuses on the consequences for the security of humanitarian personnel and their access to victims. Beside Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the World Food Programme of the United Nations (WFP) will be looked at.

Methodology

Interviewing and observing humanitarian and military actors with following qualitative analysis. Interpreting news and publications of political science and conflict research.

Results

Both humanitarian organisations of the United Nations as the WFP and numerous NGOs interpreted the *Complex Emergency* primarily as a natural disaster and ignoring the still existing dimension of an armed conflict. As a consequence, they subordinated design and location of their aid operations under the coordination of the Haitian government and the United Nations. By doing so, they got only limited or no access at all to those parts of the population living under the control of government hostile armed groups. In those territories almost only well-established humanitarian organisations as the ICRC or *Doctors Without Borders* who strictly followed the principles of neutrality and impartiality were accepted by the non-governmental armed groups and thus could perform aid projects.



The mandate of the UN soldiers is not neutral but to support the government and fight government hostile armed groups.



In areas not controlled by UN or Haitian forces aid delivery often was not possible for many humanitarian organisations, including UN organisations. Mainly the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or Doctors without Borders (MSF) who strictly followed the principles of neutrality and impartiality had access to victims in areas controlled by non governmental armed groups.

Discussion and implications

To be able to position themselves independently from political influences according to the principles of neutrality and impartiality humanitarian actors need comprehensive knowledge about the conflict history and conflict parties. Additionally, it is a paramount to perform the aid projects independently from blue helmet troops as they are often not neutral in complex conflict scenarios as in Haiti but conflict party involved in fighting against rebel groups or gangs. Those NGOs cooperating tightly with non-neutral United Nation troops should be clear about increasing their risk of getting under armed attack and loosing access to victims living in territory controlled by non-governmental armed groups.