

Is There Still a Place for Impartial Humanitarianism?

Yves Daccord

Director-General, International Committee of the Red Cross

Chair: Lord Mark Malloch-Brown

Chairman, EMEA, FTI Consulting

4 September 2014

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Mark Malloch-Brown

Good evening, everybody. I'm Mark Malloch-Brown. I have the pleasure of chairing this session today. I was just telling Yves that I started life running a competitor group on the Thai-Cambodian border, when I was a young UNHCR field officer. ICRC, as I was just telling him, had the best restaurant in town. But how the world has changed. They don't have time for that anymore, with the number of crises they're dealing with.

Just a few technical notes first. The event is being held on the record. You can comment via Twitter at #CHEvents.

Now, just a quick introduction of Yves Daccord. An ex-journalist but now a very long career on the different sides of the ICRC which really matter: the whole sort of rule of law side of things; the protection side of the organization; as well as the communications side as that became, in the modern era of humanitarianism, the real protection, I'm sorry to say, which was securing public support for ICRC's difficult missions; and now as its director-general.

I think the reason why so many of us are here tonight is this has been an astonishing summer for an organization like ICRC – a summer of crises. We like to think that our politicians and foreign officers are overwhelmed by everything from Ukraine to Iraq and Syria, to West Africa. Hell, they've got the easy end of the stick. If you're ICRC trying to respond to all of this it must be, in every sense of the word, overwhelming operationally, overwhelming conceptually, overwhelming in terms of how you fight on so many fronts to protect your humanitarian mission and the people you're there to look after.

Yves Daccord

Thank you very much, Mark. Good evening to everybody. I'm very pleased to be with you today. Mark, you just mentioned – I'm pleased not only because I have the chance to discuss with you, but I'm pleased also to be able with you to reflect a little bit. I feel deeply the need to take some time – I don't know if it's a step back or aside – to see what's happening. I found it difficult – we found it difficult, the International Committee of the Red Cross – to put to words what is happening right now in some parts of the world. We are not sure. Mark, you were asking me the question: is it the most difficult summer of ICRC? I don't know, but it's very busy. It's complex, it's unpredictable.

What I would like to discuss is: in this very complex environment, is there still some place for impartiality, or impartial humanitarianism? You would say the obvious response is yes, of course, there is. I can stop my speech and take some questions. And of course, we believe – I believe – that there is space, more than ever, there is need more than ever, for humanitarian action which is really, truly need-based and perceived so. And perceived so – very important, especially when you have so many wars which are internal. That's critical.

The problem is, this is what we would like. This is what is needed. But that's not exactly what's happening on the ground. We see major challenges, especially in armed conflict. I just would like to, if you agree, lay out some of the challenges, tell us what it means for us, and of course then take your questions and comments and maybe advice, because I think we would welcome that.

3 Is There Still a Place for Impartial Humanitarianism?

My perspective, the perspective I'm bringing you, is one perspective on the questions. I know there are a lot of different perspectives. It comes from an organization who is now present in 86 countries. You know, maybe some of you, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has 13,000 professionals, most of them, my colleagues, in a very complex environment – from Ukraine to Syria, from Congo to Somalia – and really trying to be as close as possible to the situation and to the people. So that's the feedback I'm trying to bring you. That's one perspective; there might be other perspectives.

Why is it so important to talk about impartiality? We can talk about other principles, but if we talk about impartiality and the impartial dimension of humanitarian action, it is important because we perceive very strongly that there is more, growing humanitarian needs in armed conflict. It is always difficult to put a benchmark but let's say our reading today is there is more instability, possibly a bit more armed conflict – we can dispute that – and certainly what we see is that there is less humanitarian actors being able to act within armed conflict. There is good reason. We can look into that. One of the reasons is resource constraints. We see the economic pressure for NGOs, for big organizations, for also governments to develop [indiscernible] response, what is needed. But what I would like to explore is two or three other issues that I think are critical when it comes to trying to understand why today there is possibly less response of humanitarian actions within armed conflict.

One – it's not a surprise for you – is there is a clear lack of international convergence today to deal with conflict. It's not a surprise we are living through a major change of the international political landscape, but we feel – we as humanitarian workers – there is absolutely a lack of international convergence to deal with conflict. Dealing with conflict had always been major issues but these days we feel that very strongly. At best, containment.

We might see one convergence when it comes to states, which is to fight extreme groups like the Islamic State. That might be the only convergence of the next coming years. But when it comes to dealing with conflict, very limited. Look at Syria. Syria has been, over the last few years, the most impressive element. No convergence. The last convergence possibly was the Security [Council] resolution around the questions of Libya. Since then, I would say, that's clear for us, we have seen that, and that's very problematic.

The fact also that we have a change in the political landscape also has an impact on sovereignty of states. This is nothing new, it's just even more stronger. We see that sovereignty of states is now a total taboo. States have responsibilities in armed conflict, that's very clear, but today very clearly you cannot discuss what is happening – or very rarely – within a state. Very complicated, at a time where most of the issues cannot just be contained within a country. It's not a surprise but we see the extreme difficulty today to be able to discuss.

Linked with that, when you are a humanitarian you see also how much states understand, even to be clear, when they are born – not a very strong state, like South Sudan, from day one they understood how to control, put pressure, on humanitarian actions by legislation, by taxes. It's interesting. So I think clearly there is an understanding. It's maybe linked with the fact that we have gone, over the last 15 years, into sometimes an integration of the humanitarian perspective into larger international response – in Afghanistan, in Iraq and other places. But at least that's very clear, sovereign state, and we feel it very strongly.

The third element which we believe has an impact on the way humanitarian organizations are working, or not, within armed conflict is linked with, in fact, the model of big humanitarian organizations over the last ten years. I will call it (I'm careful) the business model, you can say, of humanitarian organizations, professional humanitarian organizations.

4 Is There Still a Place for Impartial Humanitarianism?

What happened? Two things. One, most of the big organizations have developed over time, in fact, an outsourcing of the response, very clearly, and sometimes an outsourcing with risk. So a big organization, they have developed the ability to, in fact, have partners, that's what we call it – local partners, national partners – while working on their behalf, in partnership. We have seen, frankly, five years ago that was possibly the model, the dominant model, the mainstream model. It makes a lot of sense when you are in a situation where truly you want to support, to push, to frame maybe, the response of the local authorities or the national authorities. It makes a lot of sense, really it does.

It's much more complex in an environment where local authorities or national authorities are not in a position to provide services to the population because they actually don't exist – this is Central African Republic – or because they are at war – this is Syria or Mali. Very complicated. So the model, which is quite an important and a mainstream model, has been developed over the last ten years by mainly the UN and some organizations but also big NGOs, with one or two exceptions like MSF. So we see today that it's difficult for organizations to really have the ability to operate with their own people or with partners within armed conflict, or to find the right local partner.

So yes, governments, change of the political landscape, the complexity linked with sovereignty and no international convergence – but also the fact that humanitarians over the last ten years (not all, but most of them) have changed their model.

Last but not least in terms of impact, we feel – and this is something very strong – we do feel that we are living in a world where (and I'm not sure we grasp it still today) the people that we are trying to serve have changed their perspective towards us. Here it is a collective 'us'. Some of you have measured that, discussed that. But it seems more and more that we are living in a world where people look at us and wait until we prove – we have a feeling it is 'prove it'. It's not because you are the Red Cross or the ICRC or whatever that you do good. This time is over. Maybe here our families still believe that we are doing good things; that is still positive socially. But when you discuss with people, what they are looking at is really 'prove to me': prove to me that you are really independent and impartial; prove to me that your service is relevant. What we find interesting is that in most of the countries (not all, but most) where we work, people have mobile phones. Not everywhere, but most have it, they compare. They check, they discuss, they argue. They more and more look at us as an organization, including ICRC, who provide services – a service provider.

So that's also a challenge in terms of what does that mean as an organization. How do you connect emotionally? How do you do that when you're perceived as a service provider and what is important is the service you provide to the population, to the community? That's a challenge.

I would say here, one of the elements we discuss also is we are also clearly confronted more and more with a lack of trust. We see that everywhere, not only in wartime but in wartime also. We see also that people – everybody talks about the Islamic State right now. When you start to discuss with the Islamic State to sit down, it's first of all very difficult to sit down but they also are not sure that when you come, you don't come with an agenda or you're not a spy. It's a very complex environment in which to operate right now. So a lack of trust which makes it very difficult.

So roughly speaking, not a surprise, but we today in armed conflict, when it comes to ability to access people, access populations, the situation is more complex than a few years ago. No discussion on that. We see that very strongly. Here I really would like to insist, when we talk about accessing the population, we are talking about ability to access directly people, to be close to where it's happening, to be able to stay with people, to be in close proximity. We need to be able to do that in order to be impartial. That's where it's so critical, because we feel that we need to be in a situation, to be there, to be able to do needs assessment and understand the evolution of needs.

The needs assessments, as you all know, are not done anymore as it was before, where you go in and you check and you're out. This time is over. You have to stay. You have to listen, you have to engage, you have to repeat the visit if need be. It's critical, absolutely fundamental. You need to understand the culture, you need to speak the language. All things that you know but it has changed the dynamic. It has made it much more complex.

The key question for us really, for an organization like the ICRC (and not only us), is our own ability to get access and to be respected and to have really a direct access, not through partners. As an organization we work very closely with, as you know, local Red Cross and local Red Crescent. But the more the situation is conflictual, the more themselves they are torn, put under pressure. We talked about the Syrian Red Crescent, for example. The Syrian Red Crescent constantly has been challenged as an organization close to the government, one-sided. It made it very difficult for them to find the right balance. So it is complex right now to get access and to be perceived as an organization which is impartial and able to really provide what we need to do.

So what I find important is if you look at that, what is extremely important is it's almost a vicious circle in which we operate. Because in fact today the feeling we do have is that there is just no space in armed conflict, no space in the Middle East if you look at the Middle East, no space if you look at the Sahel, if you look at Nigeria, Somalia, for a decent humanitarian action. That there is no space for humanitarian actors to be there to deal with it. That's why it's so critical, impartiality, the ability to be impartial, to in fact do truly needs assessment – to discuss with the people, to engage groups, is critical.

Here my sense, especially if I look at what's happening in Syria and Iraq right now, is we need to be able to maintain, for an organization like us, the ability to engage in dialogue, including with the most difficult. The impartiality of humanitarian aid is possibly the place where we can find a dialogue with the most complex group, because they might understand that, yes, we are talking about humanitarian needs, and yes, if we assess the needs, because we are present we can talk about it, instead of 'I have seen your needs' or 'please give me the money' or 'give me the medicine that myself, as a group or as a government, I've assessed'. That's critical.

Just to give you two examples, I'll talk about Syria. What we found the most difficult over the last three years, if you look at Syria as an organization, we've been able to be present of course in Damascus, a little bit in Aleppo and in Tartus. So very frustrating for an organization who wants to be not only in the capitals but really where it's happening. We were not able to go and to stay longer because some of the rebel groups didn't want us, they didn't provide us security, I would say, support. We still have three colleagues who were taken hostage in Syria. That makes it very difficult. On the other side, also the government was not interested to have a real, impartial humanitarian aid.

What is interesting is we were able to carry out quite interesting operations when it comes to water and sanitation engineering within the country, but when it comes to medical aid or assistance, for example, that was much more complex. Here it gives you also a trend. Governments and also armed groups are sometimes ready to help humanitarian assistance as long as it doesn't touch the questions of medical or protection. Here one of the big concerns when we talk about impartiality is also the fact that if you do not allow an organization like us to be present, to engage on a daily basis with armed groups and the government to understand what is happening, not only do you find it difficult to have impartial humanitarian aid but possibly you will not be able to engage on protection. That's one of my big worries right now, the difficulty to be able to engage on protection and to do what we want to do.

So where does that leave us? I think as an organization, if I look at ICRC, and I would say most aid organizations, I think it leaves us to agree that we should take on us. We don't believe in the next five years you will see more international convergence when it comes to dealing with conflict. We do believe that the war in Syria will last. I hope I'm wrong. We do believe the situation in Iraq will continue to be extremely difficult. We believe that we still have not seen the end of – I don't know how to call it – the revolution in the Middle East possibly. We do believe that the chaos in Libya will have a major impact in Niger and in the Sahel. We do believe that the northeast of Nigeria will be – it is already – an extremely complex situation. That's what we do.

In that sense, I don't think the humanitarian organizations can just expect today the UN and the Security Council, governments, being able to deal with it. I don't think so. I hope that you will find international convergence in the years to come. I hope to see governments will take Article I of the Geneva Convention seriously, respect and ensure respect. But right now this is not what we can count on. So as an organization, we need to be able to count on us and possibly to invest and to take a bit more risk. That's the key question. What does that mean? How far as an organization can you take risk? What's your duty of care, what's your responsibility to your own staff? That's a critical element.

I think we'll have to reflect on the idea of the outsourcing of the risk. What do we do? Do we want to have our local partner taking the risk for us? How far do we want to push? Knowing that if you push the local partner in a situation of violence, of tensions, their own ability to do protection, to really do impartial work, is a very complex one – when you go into ethnic tension, for example. So how do we do that? So our conviction at the ICRC is: no, on the contrary, we should try to push, to maintain the ambition to have a presence and not just with our residents, locally hired staff, but also international staff. Have a balance. Work with our partner but also absolutely maintain this response and this presence.

I'm of the opinion, and I think we should be humble, that a presence like that doesn't respond to all the needs. I don't think so. Let's look at Somalia. The ICRC right now, what we do in Somalia compared to the needs is very limited. But just the fact that we continue to be there, to engage on a daily basis, trying to find solutions, is also a human connection. It's critical. Otherwise what will happen in this area – very unstable, very polarized – you will have a risk that the footprint of international humanitarian will be so limited that it will be totally irrelevant. That's a major issue.

So yes, strong commitment. Possibly pushing, which means investing in people, having a different staff, taking care much more than we did towards our locally hired staff, that they're much more central. Having a much more diverse staff, that's a critical issue. Bringing, supporting, when we do networking, security. Being able to deal with local issues but at the same time connecting, when it comes to transfer issues.

Last but not least, in terms of management it's a pure nightmare, but it's possibly agreed that we need to move out of a one-size-fits-all response. The standard response works in some situations but the more we move in a situation where impartiality is critical, where it's really need-based – if we're serious about that, then you cannot have the same response. You have to develop. You have to possibly have a vast array of services that you can deploy and change depending on the context and depending on the needs and depending on the constraints.

So investment, yes. People, that will be [indiscernible], and being aware of the extreme fragility in which we operate. And maybe also last but not least, ladies and gentlemen, not complaining too much. I find there are too many humanitarian writers complaining about the world. It's a tough world but it has been tough always. I'll be careful about that. It's true we lost, as humanitarians, quite a bit of people. But if you compare what's happening right now, I would just ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to remember that it's interesting, it's important, to look at what's happening – when we talk about the Islamic State, that what people should remember is that the Islamic State controls territory with more than 2 million people. So what I'm interested in is about the people controlled by the Islamic State, how we do that and not just complain too much about us. And being aware of the fragility in which we operate and being ready to make a difference. Thank you.

Mark Malloch-Brown

Thank you, and thank you for that brave end of 'don't complain'. We're open for questions.