

UN ON THE GROUND



The Stanley
Foundation

In memory of our friend and colleague, the passionate advocate Arthur C. Helton, who decried “the price of indifference.” His tragic death in Baghdad, along with other humanitarians, deprives the field of some of its finest practitioners.

The UN on the Ground project, convened by the Stanley Foundation, brought together experts on humanitarian action to discuss proposals that would improve the operations of the United Nations’ specialized agencies, funds, and programs in addressing the challenges in contemporary war-torn societies.

The project was chaired by Thomas G. Weiss, presidential professor and director, Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York. Stanley Foundation program officer David Shorr was project director. Peter J. Hoffman, also of the Ralph Bunche Institute, served as rapporteur.

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Cover Photo: A UN worker passes through an Israeli army checkpoint in the West Bank. Unarmed humanitarian workers in areas of conflict around the globe contend with regular and irregular armed forces as they bring relief and protection to civilians caught in the cross fire. AFP Photo/Abdelhak Senna

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Introduction

From October 2001 to July 2003, the Stanley Foundation conducted a series of 14 forums with a group of nearly 30 experienced humanitarian professionals and diplomats from inside and outside the United Nations. Their objective was to develop concrete recommendations to address some of the perennial challenges that the UN system regularly confronts when operating in war zones, especially in dealing with nonstate actors (NSAs).

In the discussions of the UN on the Ground project, participants sought to reconcile competing demands that humanitarians carry out their work with a minimum of waste or unintended consequences but do so in the face of the pressures and complexities inherent in war-torn societies. It is difficult to control the impact of humanitarian action as it ripples through a local society and economy because powerful factors in the conflict environment—the presence of armed elements, acute political and ethnic polarization, the lack of real public safety, or the struggle over resources in war economies—can convert even the simplest inputs into perverse outputs. And yet aid workers must strive to navigate these currents and bring help to affected populations. Doing nothing is not an option.

Coherence is always a problem in humanitarian operations—within agencies (including headquarters and field) and among agencies, as well as between UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or outside militaries. This traditional challenge is exacerbated in the so-called new wars where access and partners are often uncertain and unreliable. Our group looked across the wide array of

actors on the ground and discussed how best to work with them where possible and in spite of them where necessary. The essential insight is that humanitarians can improve the way they deliver aid and protect victims by better understanding the nature of—and consequently be more effective in engaging—local actors.

In the simplest terms, the aim is to avoid or marginalize spoilers who use and abuse local populations and to bolster those legitimate interlocutors who contribute to peace, development, and humanitarian capacities. Malevolent armed elements sometimes dominate population and territory, or both, and thus exert unofficial, yet no less effective, control over access by UN and other humanitarian agencies. Some of these entities may be characterized as NSAs, but others may have formal or informal ties with government authorities. The presence of destabilizing armed agents as gatekeepers creates a dilemma between, on the one hand, institutional and moral imperatives to come to the rescue of affected populations and, on the other hand, the ethical, political, and security needs to avoid feeding the conflict.

Humanitarians can improve the way they deliver aid and protect victims by better understanding the nature of—and consequently be more effective in engaging—local actors.

At the other end of the spectrum of legitimacy are the natural allies of international aid representatives—local populations and organizations who pursue health and dignity for their compatriots. Here the issue is one of capacity: Do the local authorities or civil society organizations have the wherewithal to serve as effective channels for relief or protection? And since capacity-building is rarely given

enough attention and priority and is actually often misunderstood by humanitarian actors, a cycle of dependency often results.

There is also a wide assortment of local actors—who are neither warlord devils nor service-providing angels—who fall into the ambiguous middle. Such actors present their own set of issues as they grapple with the role they want to play and the kind of future they want to pursue. These issues would themselves comprise a fascinating policy agenda, but we did not pursue them in our forum.

The controversies surrounding humanitarian action in the 1990s have prompted a range of initiatives that critically examine the premises and conduct of international relief and development efforts. There is currently a lively discourse on issues such as principles of “good donorship” and the need for all those involved in humanitarian response to be more transparent and accountable. We sought to avoid obvious overlap with the important and essential efforts on other issues, however interconnected they may be, in order to make a discrete and practical contribution.

The UN on the Ground project focused on how the effectiveness of humanitarian operations can be bolstered through more systematic assessments of local actors and other aspects of the conflict environment. In substantial part, the intricate political, economic, and military forces that give “complex emergencies” their name operate at a subterranean level. Much of our discussion focused on the critical importance of information and analysis as a basis for humanitarians’ key tactical and strategic judgments. A crucial question arises for relief workers operating in a conflict environment: “How can I know if this group or individual commander will live up to our agreements

and permit aid to reach the intended recipients?” Far from resigned, though, our group was hopeful that a refined appreciation of local dynamics and a wider sharing of accumulated information and experience could narrow the gap between humanitarian intentions and outcomes.

The group also looked at the issue from the vantage point of both the ground-level UN operations as well as from the key UN capitals (New York, Geneva, and Rome) from which budgets and political directives originate. We started with the operational level in order to orient ourselves to the issues as they are confronted every day in crisis zones and affect peoples’ lives before moving to the central decision-making level.

A number of core principles were affirmed as fundamental during our deliberations:

- Local citizens play pivotal roles in relief and protection by providing information, access to distressed populations, or logistical support. It is important to recognize them not as passive recipients but rather as resources whose input and capacities can be integral to both the design and implementation of aid programs. Indeed, it is local efforts that serve as the foundation on which any sustainable system to meet human needs rests, and international agencies must take care not to undermine this foundation.
- From their early phases, enhancing and building local capacity should be incorporated into relief and protection activities consistently. When local governments are effective and legitimate, they are the preferred channels, but partnerships should also be

formed with civil society actors, especially when central governments have collapsed or are illegitimate.

- The objective of aid efforts should be to transfer responsibility for services and infrastructure back into local hands once they have developed sufficient capacities. In short, humanitarians should aim to put themselves out of business. While the continual disruption from ongoing armed conflict sometimes makes this impossible in the near term, the goal remains—“make yourself obsolete” should be the operating principle.
- Flexibility, decentralized decision making, and experimentation will often be essential to respond to local exigencies and develop new “best practices.” The member states of the UN system—and donor governments in particular—should support these efforts as essential to improved efficiency and effectiveness. Sometimes this will entail financial support for pilot projects that explore new approaches to humanitarian operations, but most important is an appreciation of the value of creativity and innovation in confronting some of the persistent challenges of humanitarian action.
- Instruments should be developed to monitor the progress of UN agencies and their field offices toward these goals, thereby holding them accountable to the local populace and government, as well as donors. At the same time, these other parties should also be held to account for their own cooperation in and contribution toward a collective effort, including respect for universal human rights standards.

As UN humanitarian officials struggle to feed and protect the victims of conflict without fueling war, they face a critical problem of assessing the intentions and capacities of potential interlocutors. Indeed, much of what follows and underlies the above principles is equally applicable to the United Nations' NGO implementing partners.

One of the striking features about the United Nations' system of humanitarian relief and protection is that it is a web whose connections run from the high politics of member states all the way out to the villages and refugee camps. The agenda of this Stanley Foundation project reflected the multiple layers. At the same time, we confronted the reality that the specialized agencies, funds, and programs work in the world's far-flung corners and yet answer to central bureaucracies and political masters, the governments that comprise the United Nations. While the first phase of discussions focused on a "bottom-up" agenda of operational issues in the field (yielding the first seven recommendations), the second phase took a "top-down" approach and discussed steps to support operational needs that could be taken at the headquarters of the humanitarian agencies and the UN Secretariat and diplomatic councils in New York (resulting in recommendations #8-11). Some participants were present for all of the deliberations, and some for only part (see annex). As with all such group endeavors, it cannot be assumed that everyone agrees with every recommendation, but the text accurately reflects the strong consensus of the group.

“Bottom-Up” Recommendations

Recommendation #1

UN personnel on the ground should continuously build and refine their understanding of the local context through regular informal consultations with individuals selected for special knowledge and who reflect the range of local opinion.

As with a number of the recommendations here, the best aid workers are already consulting widely as a matter of routine, but it is far from universal practice, and the importance of gathering input from local citizens cannot be overemphasized. A few examples illustrate the value of grassroots consultations: traders and truck drivers can advise on logistical questions, for instance, and newly displaced persons can offer up-to-the-minute information on military movements, tactics, roadblocks, landmines, and perhaps even command

UNDP/PHOTO



Supplies crossing the Afghan–Pakistan border.

structures—information that can be vital for protection of the vulnerable. Journalists and businesspeople can help analyze power hierarchies and economic networks, even those that operate in the shadows. In highly polarized and sensitive conflict environments, biases are an occupational hazard of information-gathering. It is difficult to know the affiliations and agendas of any given party, so the only insurance is to take as broad a sample as possible.

Recommendation #2

All relevant and available information should be compiled into profiles of those actors (key individuals and organizations) with direct influence (for good or ill) over a humanitarian situation. Such dossiers should pay particular attention to mapping the local socioeconomic infrastructure. As a lever on accountability and honoring agreements, profiles should document the outcomes of agreements made by UN humanitarian agencies with local parties.

Through assessment reports, databases, and regular internal discussions, the kind of information discussed in recommendation #1 can be assembled into a relatively accurate picture (whether a portrait or snapshot) of the key local actors on the ground. Regarding armed NSAs who control access, such assessment can help aid agencies determine whether a militia—or specific units within it—can really be trusted to allow relief supplies through or whether their pattern of abuse is so systematic that they should be shunned. Experienced aid officials know well that it is sometimes necessary to cooperate with warlords and other spoilers to gain access to vulnerable populations, but this cooperation should be undertaken consciously and carefully on the basis of a sober evaluation.

All too often the agreements that UN agencies make over the terms of access to affected populations or the management of distribution channels are broken. While the most egregious examples may become common knowledge within the aid community, rarely is there a systematic attempt to track the evolving relationships within the entire UN system or a particular agency and an interlocutor. If the diversion of aid is to be avoided, information on broken promises by local actors should be shared. The potential embarrassment to the agency whose resources were pilfered is outweighed by the real harm done to the war-affected people themselves.

While each UN agency collects and processes information tailored to its own mandate, key findings should also be shared within the UN family in the field—indeed, more broadly—whenever possible. Participants were aware of the barriers to such cooperation. At the same time, if the process of compiling profiles or other databases is sufficiently participatory and cooperative, most staff will appreciate its value. More systematic tracking of performance could also heighten UN program accountability. Participants endorsed the Humanitarian Accountability Project.

Scrutinizing local actors for whom capacity, rather than malevolence, needs to be gauged is also important. The objectives of delivering aid to target populations and enhancing their security while building capacity are all served by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of local partners. For those whose legitimacy is reasonably established, priority should be given to organizations and individuals who seek systemic and structural solutions to humanitarian problems. Such an emphasis may not only yield greater sustainability and cost-effectiveness but also

may generate additional political legitimacy for humanitarian operations.

Recommendation #3

To augment the measures that field offices take to address problems of assessment, humanitarian officials should also be able to share and tap into analytical work by scholars and practitioners. This should include—but not be limited to—a special journal or bulletin tailored to these needs, training in empirical methodology, regularized participation by junior and senior scholars in field missions, and opportunities for UN personnel to have periods of extended reflection.

To the detriment of relief efforts, the demands of the moment rarely allow time to consider the vast amount of existing information about a crisis, a geographic or cultural region, or the field of humanitarian



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTO

Local Afghan elders measure food for distribution.

action. The UN system has made some strides in the circulation of information, as evidenced by the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) updates. A new electronic journal emulating IRIN's broad distribution and relevance to operational concerns should be created specifically for UN agency field personnel. Its mission would be to provide a dynamic forum for the exchange of lessons and practices. It would also be useful to develop a training curriculum for agency personnel to instruct them about some of the methodological issues that academics regularly confront in reaching empirically based conclusions. As program managers progress along their career path, they should be given sabbaticals to consider and document their own experiences and review other relevant research, or they should at least be rotated through agencies' policy and evaluation units. As a general principle, UN personnel should realize the value of regular exchange with academic specialists and encourage such interactions. Scholars, too, would benefit from exposure to field personnel and agency perspectives.

Recommendation #4

UN staff who are bargaining over the terms of access should have the most up-to-date information at their fingertips in order to effectively prepare before negotiating with interlocutors, armed or not. In particular, it is essential that they anticipate all the issues that may arise and go into the negotiations with their arguments, proposals, concessions, bargaining tactics, and nonnegotiable "bottom lines."

Too often, UN officials enter a meeting with problematic actors—hostile combatants often—equipped with nothing more than the humanitarian mantle. For agency staff to be fully prepared, detailed

plans and complete outlines of the different courses that discussions might take are necessary. Indeed, research from the field of negotiation theory has consistently shown that parties' preparation is a major factor in determining outcomes. The dynamics of meetings can also be influenced through tactics such as "good cop/bad cop," overwhelming the other side with numbers, appealing to professional pride ("soldiers don't kill old people and children"), dividing responsibility for topics within a delegation, and letting guests bring up awkward topics. Bringing in other concerned local actors may also encourage a NSA that is predisposed to control or subvert assistance, for instance, to be more cooperative.

Recommendation #5

The most senior countrywide representative for UN agencies should have the authority to approve operational agreements with official or unofficial interlocutors that establish aid channels in war-torn societies.

Compelling humanitarian circumstances sometimes force agencies to cooperate with actors other than recognized political authorities (indeed, often those in armed rebellion against that authority) in order to reduce suffering and loss of life. Implementation of a number of the above recommendations would help aid officials test the intentions of interlocutors and uphold humanitarian objectives. But the appropriate level for making these difficult decisions is that of the country director, resident representative, or humanitarian coordinator. His or her place in the bureaucracy—between the headquarters and local program suboffices, but with connections to both—creates an ideal position to balance their respective concerns. UN professionals in senior positions should, and often do, possess

the recommended qualifications to handle the responsibility. Underpinning this recommendation is the need for agencies to help cultivate—through training and mentoring, for example—maturity and political sophistication in their staff. These virtues need to be embraced more consistently, as they already are in the highest quality professionals.

Recommendation #6

Leaders of the UN agencies should emphasize the need to build indigenous agencies' capacity to plan, implement, and administer humanitarian services independent of international support. At the same time, UN agencies should assess the ability of their own systems and human resources to hand off responsibility to local counterparts and carry out other elements of their mandates. This commitment should be made manifest through the integration of key skills and methods into training curricula and planning and



A representative of the Peruvian ombudsman speaks with a local woman.

evaluation instruments. Particular emphasis should be placed on appreciating the vantage point of local actors themselves, taking stock of an international agency’s capacities, and making use of a wide array of capacity-building techniques.

Participants in our discussion noted that consistent emphasis from the highest levels of humanitarian agencies can (and has) made a big difference in how operations are conducted in the field, and leadership from the top is what is needed for capacity-building to be taken more seriously. Most UN agencies could benefit from more rigorous self-assessment—evaluating strengths and weaknesses, developing abilities, and monitoring effectiveness. These organizations and their staff should also work to expand their capacity-building toolboxes. There are many ways to build capacity—mentoring, coaching, organizational capacity development, human resource development, training of trainers, even moral support—and staff in the field need to be commensurately flexible. Training and mentoring are specialized skills that require rigorous preparation and cannot just be left to chance or common sense; the United Nations needs to invest more time and energy into making sure its own staff have the competence to train and mentor others. Participants also stressed that new technologies and related skills are critical in facilitating communication among key humanitarian colleagues on the ground.

Recommendation #7

Program partnerships with local implementers should include a plan for the phased transfer of responsibility to local agencies, with clear expectations and benchmarks.

The transfer of responsibility to local partners has proven to be one of the most persistent challenges in emergency responses. In the post-conflict reconstruction context, there is at least the built-in overall objective of restoring sovereignty and legitimacy. UN on the Ground participants emphasized the importance of developing a clear plan for how local counterparts will gradually assume responsibility for a program or sector. UN agencies should be careful not to rush the process. Detailed and concrete benchmarks can help set an appropriate pace—the more detailed and concrete, the better.

“Top-Down” Recommendations

Recommendation #8

Security Council visits to crisis regions should be enhanced to make better use of participants’ strengths. Consultative, stakeholder-based planning with longer stays by fewer people will enable Security Council members to learn more from their visits and help mitigate unintended political and administrative consequences.

Given the Security Council’s dual responsibility for defining the mandates of UN operations and ensuring their implementation, it is essential for it to make occasional visits to see conditions first-hand. The quality of these visits—their objectives, composition, and itinerary—can deepen diplomats’ appreciation for the challenges that aid workers confront and thereby result in better Security Council decisions on issues with humanitarian implications. On balance, the growing use of such missions has been positive. The council can clearly make a difference in war zones by using its political capital to hasten aid, enhance protection, and save lives. On the other hand, such missions are not without their problems. To date,

they have tended to be bulky to the point of being cumbersome and overly brief.

The most prominent asset of Security Council missions, their political clout, is also their potentially largest drawback—in the form of the sometimes unintended political and administrative repercussions of such visits. While raising the awareness of the council and other concerned parties, they invariably send messages about who is a belligerent and who is a victim. They also raise sometimes unrealistic expectations of a political breakthrough in the local situation as well as for humanitarian action and can create problems for field staff. The format of such missions should be designed to prevent the political weight of delegations from disrupting humanitarian operations.

The mission's objectives should be clearly and publicly announced beforehand to avoid misunderstandings. If the mission's purpose is mainly to gather information and focus attention, that should be stated. Indeed, advance planning should emphasize the political sensitivities on the ground (particularly as they affect humanitarian operations) and the need for a common message from diplomats taking part in the mission.

Better planning can enhance the value of Security Council field visits.

Those orchestrating council visits should have good communications with the on-the-ground leadership of UN operations and, in particular, should consult with the in-country humanitarian coordinator and other sources of keen insight. Indeed, some suggested that a request for a mission might sometimes emanate from the field. Because the United Nations' international NGO

partners can also be valuable sources of information, their input should be sought, both in the field and through the Arria Formula, a mechanism for unofficial gatherings of Security Council members in New York that allows the council greater flexibility to be briefed about peace and security issues. Moreover, the Arria Formula should be used regularly to keep council members updated on developments and trends.

The ability to send Security Council delegations quickly is often critical to such an enterprise, and it may make sense to send missions comprised of deputy permanent representatives or even counselors, rather than requiring the participation of the UN permanent representatives. A more flexible approach to Security Council missions—one that prioritizes the need for timely and informed responses over particular national political agendas—would bring greater focus to humanitarian crises and their political contexts.

The itinerary itself is a determining factor in the eventual impact of a mission. Too often, missions try to make too many stops in too short a time with all participants attending virtually every meeting. Furthermore, UN on the Ground participants emphasized the need to meet with a wide variety of people, not just those at the highest political levels. Much more could be learned by spending more time in the field, especially outside the capital cities, so that meetings are not rushed and a range of perspectives can be collected. In addition, it may be helpful to split up a large group into smaller subdelegations for more diverse, candid, and intimate meetings with civil society and humanitarian actors, as well as with government representatives. The addition of regional perspectives often entails multiple stopovers, and this function itself might well justify splitting up

delegations. In addition to the Security Council, such other UN entities as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Assistance (ECHA) should consider convening discussions “on the spot.”

Recommendation #9

Humanitarian action should not be constrained by the more traditional interpretations of state sovereignty that have been advanced by a few member states in regular UN deliberations. New diplomatic forums for current issues of humanitarian action should be created by member states, for example, to foster better dialogue between donor and recipient states. Diplomats who wish to overcome contemporary challenges to the humanitarian enterprise should convene informal, periodic meetings in New York, Geneva, and Rome to wrestle with the key thematic issues and to finesse direct confrontation with wary states.



AFP PHOTO/GEORGES GOBET

An aid distribution point in Monrovia, Liberia.

Too much of the discussion of humanitarian affairs in the United Nations is dominated by member states intent on constraining the specialized agencies as part of a broader agenda to defend the principle of national sovereignty, often with scant consideration for the practical effects on the people most directly affected by war. A tiny handful of governments, acting in an obstructionist mode, often exert a disproportionate influence over the humanitarian agenda when it is discussed in formal intergovernmental forums.

While sovereignty remains the bedrock of international order, there is a need for more balanced and better-informed discussions of humanitarian action that recognizes the concerns of states as well as the rights of populations and the mandates of humanitarian organizations to assist and protect them under international humanitarian, refugee, and human rights law. Indeed, this has been very much the main normative shift over the past decade, and the



Assessing local economic conditions in Burundi.

secretary-general himself has led the charge. Alternative, informal, off-the-record discussions between donors and recipients could help ensure follow-up to decisions by ECOSOC and the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict as well as to pertinent recommendations from key expert groups such as the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, the Panel on UN Peace Operations, or the Commission on Human Security. The support group for the secretary-general's initiative on the protection of civilians is seen as one possible model for convening representatives of member states for regular thematic discussions. Such caucuses or "friends of" groups could take place in the context of ECOSOC or the General Assembly.

A number of participants in the project called for greater interactions between recipient states and participating donor states. The staff of the specialized agencies and the Secretariat have been working with the new Humanitarian Liaison Information Group to brief recipient countries—a counterpart to the Humanitarian Liaison Working Group, which is a donor forum. The next logical step is for the two groups to meet jointly.

Recommendation #10

As part of a set of personnel reforms to improve the performance of humanitarian operations, the United Nations should create a humanitarian career track that develops well-rounded leaders with mobility among the different agencies, funds, and programs. The ECHA should consider how to sponsor such a career track and appoint a board to oversee it. Increased flow of personnel between the United Nations and NGOs should also be encouraged. Other innovations in the personnel system are needed to

bolster continuity and institutional memory when there is transition in leadership on the ground. Agencies should provide an opportunity for outgoing managers to document their experiences before moving on to new posts and for incoming ones to be exposed to lessons learned by their predecessors.

The litany of complaints from junior and senior personnel is well known. Despite the broad perspective that can be gained by working in different parts of the UN system, it is hard to move ahead and gain experience by navigating the bureaucratic maze when moving among the different agencies, funds, and programs along with regular rotation between headquarters and the field. The standard path for advancement is typically within the system of just one agency, and it is difficult to arrange secondments to other agencies. Staff are reluctant to risk their prospects by leaving their organization, even if only for a year or two, and managers are loath to let go of their most capa-

A new career track should be set up to give humanitarian professionals a wide-ranging experience of the UN system.

ble people. UN on the Ground participants, though, believed strongly that exposing personnel to organizations with different mandates and cultures would greatly enhance effectiveness and encourage a stronger sense of shared purpose within the UN “family.” The ECHA, which brings together the various agencies, funds, and programs around the humanitarian agenda, seems a logical candi-

date to establish this new career track. Staff on the new track would not have a single home agency, and the administrative custodians of the proposed new career track should be charged with nurturing skilled leaders and assuring warranted promotions. Since the current UN under-secretary-general for administration has herself led a key

humanitarian agency, she may well be sensitive to the need for such a career path and is well placed to facilitate its consideration by the secretary-general's chief executive board.

In the meantime, one way to promote mobility among agencies, short of a new career track, would be to ensure that position announcements are circulated broadly. The Secretariat's "Galaxy" electronic system should be opened up to include positions with the specialized agencies, funds, and programs. The ReliefWeb job board could also be improved by creating a search function that can target particular career levels or technical specialties, as well as appeal to experienced candidates open to broader possibilities.

Just as rotating UN staff through the different agencies can benefit the staff and the United Nations itself, greater mobility between UN agencies and implementing partners would yield similar advantages. Some flow of personnel between NGOs and the UN agencies already takes place organically, but measures should be taken to augment and encourage such movements. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), whose membership comprises both the UN agencies and private voluntary organizations, should seek ways to encourage mobility, including perhaps a special program of fellowships or secondments.

On the flipside of exposing personnel to a variety of experiences is the need for agencies to preserve and exploit the knowledge of staff as their careers progress. For key leadership positions in the field, the participants recommend brief "sabbaticals" to document for their successors what they have learned. Country directors, humanitarian coordinators, and resident coordinators/representatives should be

given several weeks to prepare an in-depth transition memo and one week to brief their successor. The writing time could be spent in the agency's policy analysis unit or at a university research center; the briefing could take place at headquarters or in the field. Opposition to this idea has traditionally suggested that such a luxury was an inefficient use of time and money, and that staff had to get on with the next assignment. However, participants in our discussions emphasized that this initiative would prove a net gain to the UN system.

Recommendation #11

The program of reforms outlined above calls for the UN humanitarian agencies to take on added work, which will necessitate new staff, consultants, travel, or training. Donors should thus provide additional resources for agencies to bolster their effectiveness. A number of the recommendations in this report—including decentralization,



The International Red Cross builds a health clinic in Sierra Leone.

information-gathering and assessment, local capacity-building, diplomatic missions and informal forums, and human resource development—can and should be tested through pilot programs or feasibility studies.

The UN on the Ground project expects that the implementation of its proposals would improve humanitarian programming and reduce waste and overlap. But clearly there are costs associated with the implementation of our recommendations, particularly in the short run. Adding functions and new patterns of work to organizations that are already stretched and moving ahead with these proposals will necessarily entail some incremental costs. Without additional earmarked resources, experiments that could pay dividends in terms of enhanced effectiveness will simply not be attempted.

For example, to ensure that field operations are generating and sharing information about the local environment, evaluation and policy offices of the agencies could send people from headquarters to consult with their colleagues on the ground. But, of course, this would involve staff time and travel costs. And if UN and partner agency staff devoted more time to mentoring local agencies and staff—a labor intensive process—those efforts may need to be offset by expansion of the staff to ensure that core functions are being carried out.

Today's humanitarian responses demand careful analysis of socioeconomic and political landscapes.

Today's humanitarian responses demand greater information and careful analysis in gauging socioeconomic and political landscapes and in developing appropriate programming partnerships. Although

conventional wisdom holds that the current delivery and protection system is “top-heavy,” participants indicated that investing in analytical and related functions may not have the same immediate and quantifiable impact as, say, a food delivery, but certainly pays off in the medium and long term. If donors are concerned with the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the humanitarian enterprise—and most of all a humanitarian exit strategy—then more resources should be invested to permit flexibility, understand local contexts, improve human resource management, and foster innovation.

Participants

The ideas and recommendations in this paper were developed in a series of 14 meetings convened by the Stanley Foundation at the Roger Smith Hotel in New York between October 2001 and July 2003. The discussions were conducted in two phases, with the first focusing on humanitarian response at the operational level (“bottom-up”) and the second dealing with the political and headquarters level (“top-down”). Recommendations #1-7 were developed in the first phase; #8-10 emerged from the second phase of discussions; and recommendation #11 covers the resource implications of the project’s entire agenda.

The chair and director of this project gratefully acknowledge the participants listed below for their insights, though responsibility for the text rests with them alone.* As with most such group endeavors, it cannot be assumed that every participant agrees with all of the paper’s conclusions.

Chair

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Phase I—Bottom-Up

October 2001–December 2002

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Phase II—Top-Down

February–July 2003

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* The participants listed here attended multiple sessions, with many attending several, as well as contributing to the drafting process electronically. The affiliations were current at the time of their participation and are listed for identification purposes only.

** Papers were commissioned from these participants to delve into key issues as the group prepared to discuss them.

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Aid workers interview a Burundian family to assess their economic viability.

From October 2001 to July 2003, a group of experienced humanitarian professionals and diplomats from inside and outside the United Nations met regularly to discuss the challenges that humanitarian agencies confront in war zones. Participants in the Stanley Foundation's UN on the Ground project stressed the importance of understanding local actors and other aspects of the conflict environment. The group developed 11 practical proposals to boost the effectiveness of humanitarian agencies, minimize unintended consequences, and make aid programs more sustainable.



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