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Strengthening the Partnership

By Cheryl Benard, Ph.D.

In the wake of the unprecedented devastation caused by the tsunami, a massive assistance effort has gotten underway. Aid organizations large and small, governments near and distant, and millions of private citizens, have mobilized to help.

One of the challenges in situations like this lies in the successful coordination of partners who otherwise might not be the most compatible associates. In particular, two institutions that must work together despite strong differences of style, philosophy, purpose and approach, are the NGOs – the Nongovernmental Organizations – and the military.

In large-scale disasters, from a refugee crisis to a famine or an environmental disaster like the current tsunami, there is no alternative to such cooperation. Only the military can provide some of the services that are essential to the effort. In a political crisis, this includes such things as providing security for aid convoys. In political, ecological and other humanitarian disasters, the military is often the only institution able to provide transportation into remote areas, a communication system, cargo planes large enough for some of the needed equipment and the like. And conversely, of course, the NGOs are equally indispensable. They have the personnel, the experience, the cultural and language skills, and the dedicated purpose to actually carry out the work of civilian aid.

And we can see this cooperation unfolding in Southeast Asia today. U.S. navy ships and aircraft carriers, along with military helicopters and medical equipment, were dispatched to rescue survivors, deliver food and water, and ferry the injured to hospitals. The militaries of Australia, India, Russia and France have also sent troops, vessels and equipment. De facto, the U.S. military is the lead agency overseeing and coordinating the relief effort in Indonesia. But while the technical and logistical contributions of militaries are essential, it is the UN, the Red Cross, and the NGO community that have the experience and know-how to actually conduct the relief

operation on the ground, and the staying power to put the subsequent rebuilding effort in place.

However much these two categories of institutions may complement and need each other, they also possess characteristics that naturally and inevitably place them at odds. Their institutional cultures, philosophies, overarching purpose and approach are very different. NGOs tend to be pacifist and to harbor a distrust of the military. Their internal structure is often egalitarian, their membership young and liberal or left leaning. Women are usually well represented in their leadership. And their basic identity is that of a noncombatant. In most situations, their ability to work and be accepted even in very dangerous situations stems from the fact that they are regarded as neutral, as civilians come to help other civilians out of purely humanitarian motives.

By contrast, the military of course has a different identity and mission altogether. It is not neutral, but takes sides. It engages in conflicts. It employs force. Its structure is hierarchical and its leadership is still, in spite of significant changes over the last decades, predominantly male, with a correlation between age and rank that can make a 50-year-old officer the counterpart of a 23-year-old NGO country director.

Along with the mutual respect and cooperation that often takes place, these differences breed distrust. The military often thinks of the NGO community as naïve do-gooders vulnerable to falling into the trap of radicals. The NGO community for its part often takes a cynical view of the military, sometimes seeing their humanitarian side as just a transparent ploy to win “hearts and minds” for their actual political and military goals.

These attitudes can lead to problems even in purely humanitarian relief situations, but they are even more pronounced in situations of political conflict. In Afghanistan, for example, there has been significant tension between the coalition militaries and the NGOs. In particular, the NGOs resent the deployment of the so-called PRTs or Provincial

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Reconstruction Teams, units that consist of a mix of military and development personnel, including doctors and engineers.

The job of these teams is to visit villages, conduct a needs assessment, and implement projects such as the digging of wells, the rebuilding of bridges, and the setup of clinics. Their work has been bitterly opposed by some NGOs, who see this as a dangerous blurring of the boundaries between what the military does, and what the humanitarian community does. The military, they say, can never meet the three most fundamental principles of humanitarian work: neutrality, impartiality, and independence. By making reconstruction and civilian aid part of the official coalition military effort, they give it a political meaning that robs the NGOs of their impartial, unattached status.

The coalition, and the Afghan government, which is highly supportive of the PRT's, see it differently. They point out that PRT's operate in parts of the country that are not served by NGOs, because they are much too dangerous. And indeed, major organizations such as Mercy Corps International, and even UN agencies, have either pulled out of or never entered a large number of districts and some provinces for precisely that reason. Without the PRTs, the populations in those areas would have no hope of medical care, schooling, or rebuilding.

And there is a deeper issue, too. The notion of noncombatant, civilian aid providers whose neutral status is respected by the warring parties, may no longer be as valid as it used to be. Islamist radicals – in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere – have shown little compunction about

kidnapping, terrorizing and murdering unarmed, unaffiliated members of purely humanitarian organizations. If that trend continues, aid givers may increasingly require military protection.

The RAND Corporation's study "Strengthening the Partnership: Improving Military Coordination with Relief Agencies and Allies in Humanitarian Operations"¹ identifies some key steps that can improve the coordination and the overall relationship between NGOs and the military.

There should be better mechanisms to share information about the status and needs of the civilian population, and about the unfolding security situation in areas where both groups are active. NGOs and the military should maintain a loose ongoing relationship even when there is no acute crisis, so that they will be able to interact more easily when that is abruptly required, and to discuss contentious issues through an ongoing dialogue. They might consider conducting joint exercises to plan and prepare for emergencies. They could develop a set of strategies for different categories of situations, so they don't need to improvise and reinvent the wheel each time. Such steps could make their cooperation more efficient and foster a better understanding of each other's goals and principles.



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(Footnotes)

¹ Daniel Byman, Ian Lesser, Bruce Pirnie, Cheryl Benard, Matthew Waxman, RAND 2000