

Humanitarian-Military Relations in Complex Emergencies: Practical Guidance for Policymakers and Humanitarian Planners

This policy guidance is based on a 2022 report by Brown University's Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies (CHRHS) that analyzes practices in the field of humanitarian-military relations (HMR), as well as perceptions of crisis-affected communities about the role of armed/security actors in disaster response.¹ This study draws on 175 interviews with humanitarian actors, armed/security actors, and crisis-affected communities in complex humanitarian emergencies across three contexts: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Syria/Jordan, and the Philippines.

#1: Redouble Efforts to Cultivate a Community of Practice

There is a need to redouble efforts to cultivate a community of practice spanning a broad set of actors in the HMR space at the local, and regional, and global levels. An important element of moving closer toward this vision will be striking the right balance between continuing to develop global-level policies and guidance to synchronize the field of HMR around a core understanding of the issues at hand and ensuring a bottom-up approach that uses frontline experiences, challenges, and successes as an empirical starting point.

#2: Meaningfully Engage Crisis-Affected Communities

The report indicates an incongruity that can arise between the considerations that drive responders' decisions and the primary issues of concern to crisis-affected communities. Civilian responders root their discourse, discussions, and debates in the core principles of humanitarianism and HMR. However, absent adequate engagement with the local community, these debates can become divorced from the actual priorities of the crisis-affected population.

Civilian responders and armed/security actors should bring the views of crisis-affected communities into discussions relevant to HMR practices, so that the continued development of HMR as a field will be centered around crisis-affected community members' concerns and needs. Placing crisis-affected communities at the center of decision-making should be considered a crucial component of addressing many of the key challenges facing HMR.

#3: Link HMR with Ongoing Policy Evolution on Gender, Localization, and Decolonization

A gendered approach in understanding disasters and humanitarian work is crucial in promoting a holistic and relevant intervention. Gender, sex, and sexuality can shape the vulnerabilities of the

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crisis-affected population, how responders can effectively engage with the local community, and the dynamics at play during interactions between civilian responders and armed/security actors.

HMR, as a field, has thus far remained largely siloed from ongoing policy discourses in the humanitarian sector on localization and decolonization of response efforts. Power differentials are inherent in an outside intervention, when more resourced foreign actors have capabilities to alleviate suffering amongst a crisis-affected community lacking the resources to adequately address a local crisis. More locally inclusive responses can increase the capacity of local networks and practitioners to respond to future crises.

#4: Invest in More Robust High-Level Diplomatic Organizational Engagement

Humanitarian actors should invest in more robust efforts to engage governments at high diplomatic levels on issues of humanitarian and public health response. More robust humanitarian engagement with high-level governmental decision-makers has the potential to inject humanitarian considerations into relevant governmental and military decision-making processes.

The aim of implementing this recommendation should not necessarily be to push states to always make decisions that will maximize humanitarian outcomes. It is understood that states will in some way balance humanitarian concerns with the political and security concerns that tend to dominate decision-making. States should bring humanitarian concerns—including contingency planning for different humanitarian scenarios—into the decision-making equation.

#5: Continually Adapt and Resource Evidence-Based Guidance and Planning

Traditionally, the field of HMR has conceptualized response contexts dichotomously as either a context of natural hazards or a complex emergency. The cases in the report point toward a much more varied operational landscape, including the overlap between natural hazards and conflict, public health emergencies, and forced displacement crises.

There is a need for updated guidance on various aspects of HMR given this complexity. This is especially true considering the reality that there are numerous ways that conceptual thinking on HMR has focused on a somewhat narrow scope of issues, compared with the broader array of actor types, response contexts, and issues facing practitioners in the field.

Relatedly, there is also a need for more proactive, realistic planning and thinking for issues related to HMR. A core consideration should be ensuring that planning and preparedness measures are actionable, striking the right balance between the need for clear procedures and the need for flexibility amidst the fluidity inherent in complex disaster responses.