

The Irish Times - Tuesday, January 19, 2010

Pitfalls of civil-military co-operation in disasters

ANALYSIS: Problems inherent in co-operation between civil and military organisations can make disaster relief difficult, writes **GRAHAM HEASLIP**

THE AMERICAN military are operating the airport at Port-au-Prince in Haiti, looting has begun and there are claims that the aid is not getting to those who need it.

Why? Two words: co-operation and co-ordination.

To the layperson, the term civil-military co-ordination evokes notions of a seamless division of labour between aid workers and international military forces. Media coverage from crises such as New Orleans, Pakistan, Chad and the tsunami in Asia has reinforced this expectation, showing relief agencies distributing food and medicines under the guard of heavily armed soldiers, or aid workers and military working together to construct refugee camps, set up field hospitals, provide emergency water and sanitation, etc. Donor countries, like Ireland, providing relief and development aid and troops to such missions expect efficient teamwork as pure common sense.

The problem is that this image of civil-military teamwork is too simplistic and assumes too much. This prevailing approach frames co-ordination as a technical exercise that the right combination of meetings, information flow, and co-ordination focal points can solve. It also frames civil-military co-ordination as an agreed goal.

Yet, in fragile settings such as Haiti, the mandates, timeframes, guiding principles and methodologies for working of civilian aid agencies and military forces are radically different and often clash, despite good intentions and a sincere common desire to “help the people” held by international military and civilian aid personnel involved in disaster relief operations.

Civil-military co-ordination essentially deals with two aspects of military support to civilians: firstly, the provision of security, eg a military escort for a humanitarian convoy; and, secondly, the provision of military assets, eg equipment such as trucks or helicopters, and skills, knowledge and manpower such as medical and engineering expertise.

We can see both these elements slowly emerging in Haiti. So what are the immediate challenges to co-ordination and co-operation in Haiti?

Military culture and civilian cultures do not necessarily mesh seamlessly in conflict settings. There are inherent stressors between them owing to differences in mandates, objectives, methods of operation and vocabulary. Operationally, aid agencies tend to be flexible whereas the military functions in a top-down manner.

Some aid organisations consider their independence a higher priority than co-ordination with other organisations. They are not prepared to follow the lead of another organisation, particularly if it is the military. There is also a fear among non-governmental organisations of co-option and marginalisation in some crisis regions where military forces have an overwhelming presence.

Organisations compete for financial resources, for status, power, recognition and influence. Because most funding is crisis-driven it inhibits long-range planning and undermines the sustainability and effectiveness of programmes. Under these arrangements, donors find it difficult to track the impact of successive appeals or to hold providers accountable.

A major barrier to delivery of aid is poor communication. Not only are there obvious difficulties associated with speaking to someone using a different language but, as in Haiti, the communications infrastructure may be crippled. Relief agencies may not be able to communicate with headquarters or donors during a disaster. Military forces, however, can supply specialised capabilities in communications such as equipment and information technology.

Something often forgotten about delivering aid is packaging. Special packaging requirements dictate what type of food can be brought into a country.

The standard transport container for grain products is a 50kg bag. This is the largest parcel that one person can carry, and is more practical than bulk issue but they are not impervious to moisture or pests. Medical goods such as pharmaceuticals, blood and equipment often have temperature and moisture sensitivities, as well as an associated manpower burden thanks to a variety of wrappings and markings that complicate sorting and storage.

Success in cross-sectoral collaboration, particularly in the realm of civil-military relations, often depends on the personalities of the field level personnel and the liaison structures that are established.

Reliance on individuals is a risky business however, particularly among relief and development NGOs, given high rates of turnover, particularly among field staff. Unco-operative attitudes are not uncommon within and across relief organisations and the military. This may result from competition for resources, for power, and for profile, but it may also arise from personal likes and dislikes, or stereotyping.

Due to the enormity of the disaster in Haiti and the number of organisations that are present, this emergency has highlighted the need for leverage of available resources and co-operation and co-ordination between the military, private sector and humanitarian organisations to provide effective relief.

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