Humanitarian principles amid the militarisation of aid: an interview with Vincent Bernard of the ICRC
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Camilla: My name’s Camilla Burkot, and I’m a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre, and it’s my great pleasure to be sitting down today with Vincent Bernard, who is the head of the ICRC’s Forum for Law and Policy, and the Editor-in-Chief of the International Review of the Red Cross. Did I get that right?

Vincent: Yes, thank you.

Camilla: You’re welcome. Thank you very much for being here. Perhaps you can just tell us what brings you to Australia?

Vincent: Thank you for your invitation. We’re here because we have a series of events on the principles guiding humanitarian action, and tomorrow we’ll have a conference here in Canberra about the militarization of aid.

It’s actually a debate where we will discuss the opportunities and the risks that the growing use of military means and capacities to conduct humanitarian operations can represent. So we hope that we’ll have a very interesting discussion.

Camilla: No, I’m sure it will be fascinating. I think it’s something that—it’s a bit new to some people, or some people don’t know that much about it. So maybe you could give us a bit of background. Are militaries increasingly involved in humanitarian assistance?

Vincent: It’s something that we have seen developing. Time and again you see the military involved in providing relief. I think it’s quite common in situations of disasters. We see it also in times of conflicts.

And actually, they have a role to play definitely, and even in international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions provides that the military has a role to play, for instance, in the evacuation of wounded civilians, in making sure that the civilian population, you know, is spared from the fighting.

But definitely they have a role to play. What is relatively new is that humanitarian action is used as part of the military effort, or has been used as part of the military effort.

You know for instance to win the hearts and minds of the population, as part of counter-insurgency, and we’ve seen that often in recent conflicts that there is a conflation between the military agenda and the humanitarian agenda. And that’s where problems start in our view.

Camilla: And do you think that conflation, do you think that’s something that’s being done deliberately, or is that something that’s—there’s sort of a misunderstanding between traditional humanitarian organisations and military about what they’re doing, what their roles are?
Vincent: I think it can be deliberate in the sense that some military interventions have been justified on humanitarian grounds, and I think that’s something which is likely to come again.

And then it can create the perception in the mind of the people that actually there are good victims and there are bad victims, and while taking sides in a so-called humanitarian intervention, we actually take the risk that humanitarian action will be perceived as one-sided.

And humanitarian action is not one-sided. By definition, it has to be impartial. And in some circumstances, it will be conflated with political or military interests. Another situation is when humanitarian aid – goods, assistance, the provision of services – is used by the military very deliberately in order to gain the support of a segment of the population, and this is deliberate.

This is clearly deliberate, and it can create the perception that actually humanitarian action is part of military or political agenda. And this creates a direct risk for those who are conducting genuine humanitarian assistance, which is impartial by definition.

Camilla: Yeah, so I guess there’s sort of two situations, and that you mentioned, the military is involved in relief for example, and natural disasters, that sort of thing. That seems less problematic than an actual conflict situation. It’s really the conflict areas where it’s—there’s potentially really an issue?

Vincent: Absolutely. Because people may not realise that actually providing humanitarian assistance in situations of conflict is not something which is easily done. It’s a space you need to negotiate.

And for humanitarian actors, like International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian organisations, we face lots of challenges in today’s conflicts. Today’s conflicts are often of a non-international character. They are with armed groups which often very fragmented.

It’s difficult to know where is the chain of command, to get the security guarantees we need to operate. In some regions, there is total lack of states, and crime proliferates around the conflict or as part of the conflict. So there are often extremely dangerous environments in which we operate.

So the question of trust is key for humanitarian actors to operate in these environments, and trust is built out of the perception that we are truly humanitarians, that we are not there to pursue some other interest.

And when other actors use the same kind of equipment, look like humanitarian actors or provide assistance in exchange of information or support, then they jeopardise the capacity of humanitarian actors to operate in the same area.

Camilla: Yeah. I think, yeah, the issue of trust seems really critical. Also when you do have situations where there are perhaps militaries providing humanitarian assistance that might be—how should I say—not genuinely humanitarian, or not entirely humanitarian, then you get an issue of trust between humanitarian groups and militaries.
Are there situations in which humanitarian groups might want to partner with the militaries? Are there benefits that working with militaries can bring in those situations?

**Vincent:** Well, military can do lots of good in situations of emergencies, because they have logistics. They have a capacity to mobilize means that few other actors have. As I said, in a situation of conflict, they can provide assistance, and sometimes they have an obligation to do so.

However, this situation should be distinguished from situations where they have participation in humanitarian assistance, or the fact that they will instrumentalise humanitarian assistance can create this misperception and this blurring of lines between on one side what should remain an impartial action based on the principle of humanity, and on the other side, political or military interests.

So even though in the situations of disaster or certain situations it is well-defined where there is a clear distinction between what the military are doing and what humanitarian actors are doing, it’s perfectly fine to have military actors delivering humanitarian assistance.

They should be very careful not to create this confusion, and not to conduct humanitarian operations to pursue military or political interests. With this being said, humanitarian actors themselves have also a responsibility.

For instance, when certain humanitarian actors accept armed escorts, or actually align with certain groups in situations of conflict, they also create misperceptions. So it’s also the responsibility of humanitarian actors to also truly deliver impartial humanitarian aid.

**Camilla:** Do you think there’s better communication between—it all seems to rely on good communication between humanitarian organisations and militaries, and they seem like two groups that don’t traditionally speak to each other very much.

Do you think is there increasing communication, or increasing research or engagement, that’s sort of helping these two sides, if we like, to potentially work together better or at least communicate better with each other?

**Vincent:** I think the International Committee of the Red Cross has been trying consistently to work with not only military armed forces but also all sides in conflicts, including non-state armed groups, and to establish this trust and establish the capacity to work in the same area.

So I think this dialogue is extremely important so that we understand each other and understand the constraints of each other, and this dialogue is indispensable in order to get security, especially in situations, in situations of conflicts where we have extremely complex situations with many different actors being involved. So this dialogue definitely needs to take place, and the International Committee of the Red Cross is trying definitely to contribute to this type of dialogue.

**Camilla:** So similar to there being a humanitarian situation, it has been more complex, it’s my impression that we’re also seeing more protracted conflicts, and more conflicts where you get a complication
or a blurring between what’s humanitarian assistance and emergency aid, versus long-term development. And it seems to me that would add another layer of complication to how groups are interacting in those conflict areas.

**Vincent:** That’s a very important point you’re raising, because it’s true that protracted situations of conflict but also long-term occupations, as we see for instance in the case of Israel and the Palestinian territories, creates situations [that are] extremely complex for humanitarian actors.

Because it creates a dilemma for them, a choice to make between answering to the needs of the population and the needs in terms of assistance or protection on one side. And on the other side there is also the temptation to address some longer-term problems, which are related to the lack of governance sometimes, or the lack of capacity of the states to provide services such as education and healthcare.

And then there the border between what is emergency assistance, which is traditionally the role of humanitarian actors on one side. And on the other side, the long-term developments, which requires a different expertise, is difficult—it’s difficult to make this distinction.

So I think for humanitarian actors, it is important for them to stick to humanitarian mandates. While sometimes of course they need to expand and address new types of problems, it is important that they don’t mix with other agendas which are—which could be related to the rule of law in the country, or the building of a different society, or the implementation of international human rights.

And this conflation between the international agenda on one side, and the humanitarian mission on the other side, can also create misperceptions and can also endanger the security of humanitarian workers.

So there is a need to distinguish between humanitarian work, and on the other side, other agendas of the international community in terms of development, or regime change, or issues which may have very good and valid reasons but could be perceived by local actors as transformative, and as against cultural or traditional ways of life.

**Camilla:** And often have quite a lot of political implications and power implications in those situations.

**Vincent:** Indeed. But of course, for humanitarian actors, it’s a fine line, because how not to perceive the needs for education of these populations, or the need for better healthcare? So I think we need complementarity.

We need to respect the space of humanitarian actors, and not to give humanitarian actors too large mission, simply because they are present and because they have a capacity to operate.

I think the international community should refrain from giving them too large role, but we need also to find a space for other actors to come in. And it’s extremely difficult in situations of conflict and violence.
Camilla: I suppose that also—that point you’re making, that also speaks to the need for good communication and knowledge-sharing of humanitarian actors, maybe in situations where they do have a lot of information about what the education system is looking like, what’s the status of the health system in a place.

If that sort of information they have, can be shared with longer-term development actors or be shared with other actors? Sorry I’m just hypothesizing now. But you know, just even if we don’t expect them to act on it, that’s still potentially valuable information and knowledge that could be, could be beneficial, could be helpful for somebody else to take up.

Vincent: Well there’s a dialogue to have, and I think very often we hear about the exit strategies of humanitarian actors in situation of long-term crisis, or the question of ‘when do you leave the country?’ But we should also reflect about an entry strategies of development actors.

And so there is sometimes, okay, the need for entering this transition, and then of course, the dialogue between the two types of actors can take place. However, again, I think in the past few years we’ve seen efforts by the international community to build integrated responses to crises, and integrate humanitarian action within a larger package of measures which range from building of a proper judicial system, trying to work on gender equality, developing social or economic mechanisms.

We think that humanitarian actors and humanitarian action should be kept separate from these other agendas, even though we may all agree that they may be necessary. But that’s not the role of humanitarian actors to be engaged in those other agendas of the international community.

Camilla: Sure. I guess while we’re sort of thinking about what is the role of humanitarian actors, what is sort of the focus? I know that ICRC developed these principles of humanitarian action. Could you just tell me a little bit more about what those principles actually are, where they came from, and what they seek to do or how they seek to help guide the humanitarian sector?

Vincent: Well, we are referring to the seven fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which are the principles which guide the action of the countenance of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. But by extension, some of these principles have been adopted by the larger humanitarian community, and so then we speak mostly about four principles.

• The principle of humanity, which gives the main reason why we act. So it’s in order to help others that humanitarian action should be carried out and again, not to fulfil other objectives.

• The principle if impartiality, which is also key to the definition of what true humanitarian action is. So the idea that assistance is provided according to the needs and not according to any preference to military, national or political. So this is essential to the definition of what is humanitarian action.

And then two other principles, which describe how humanitarian action should be carried out.
• First, neutrality, which takes out humanitarian actors from political controversies, from taking sides for one party or another in a situation of conflict.

• And finally, independence from political interests, from any other agenda.

And these are principles which are there, independence and neutrality, to allow humanitarian actors to operate.

Camilla: Right, okay. And lastly, I wonder if I could just throw you a broad question. The World Humanitarian Summit is coming up next year, and I’m wondering what you’re hoping to see out of this? It seems like quite a big opportunity, and I’m interested in what you’re interested to see come out of that summit.

Vincent: Mm-hmm. I think it’s a great opportunity to bring back humanity at the centre of the discussions of the international community. I think that would be—one expectation would be this. Because in the past few years, in recent months we’ve see so many atrocities committed during situations of conflict, that it’s definitely the time to reflect on a new consensus, international consensus, on key values for the international community.

And to replace a basic sense of humanity, or common sense of humanity in international relations. And so that’s, I think, something that definitely a discussion on humanitarian issues in 2016 should address. We think that issues related to the protection of the civilian population should be discussed.

There are many other issues that can be discussed, and many important issues related to the funding of humanitarian action, to the effectiveness of humanitarian action, and to the improvement of humanitarian response in general, that could be discussed. But they are secondary to this larger issue of putting humanity at the center of the debates. So these are our expectations.

Camilla: I think that would be great. As you said, there’s so many complex, complicated, horrible things happening in the world. It would be good to just sort of have that come out, come out again. That’s all from me. I want to thank you again for taking a few minutes to chat. It’s been great, and best of luck with the rest of your—the debate and the rest of your trip.

Vincent: Thank you very much. Thank you.