



PAPER 2

Humanitarian Protection of People in a Technological Age

Drones and Social Media - to use or not to use

1 Introduction

Technology and the digital space are transforming the nature of power in humanitarian settings on an extensive scale and at a fast pace. Humanitarians are recognising that even sharper threats loom if emergent issues are not dealt with prudently. Adapting to new technology without compromising the humanitarian principles is necessary. A protection-centred approach to the use of drones in humanitarian operations is crying out for clarity. Protection issues linked to social media also need clarity, especially as new actors come into humanitarian space. Over the course of three years in the north of Syria alone nine hundred local NGOs joined the aid response. This paper considers some issues that arise at the intersection of humanitarian work and ongoing technological developments. It touches on whether fundamental humanitarian and protection principles and practices are keeping pace with developments to ensure those in need of humanitarian assistance can be advantaged by new technology and still protected.

The main principles to which humanitarians adhere include that human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found and that humanitarian workers strive to be impartial, independent and neutral. Humanitarians enhance the safety, dignity and rights of disaster-affected people and avoid exposing people to further harm while helping to reduce the impact of physical and psychological harm arising from violence, coercion and deprivation. Assisting people to claim their rights and to access available remedies is fundamental in operations. A protection-oriented humanitarian response seeks to prevent, mitigate or end actual and potential risks, including the violations of international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law. Reducing the harm that affected persons experience during a conflict or other disaster is a realistic objective. Protection demands meaningful engagement with affected persons during all phases of a response in a manner that recognizes and is sensitive to age, gender, disability and diversity.

Local communities in Nepal were angry after drones operated by humanitarians and journalists visited the same sites several times with no plans to share data or make imagery publicly available. No effort was made to communicate to villagers the reason for the flights, why they might be important or how they might assist in aid efforts.

2 Body

2.1 Drones in humanitarian settings

Humanitarians increasingly consider issues relating to the use of drones. Drones usage by other actors in a humanitarian setting may create complications and dilemmas for humanitarians. For example, a secretive drone mission that hits its military target yet also kills many civilians creates a wave of uncertainty in communities and trust issues relating to humanitarian workers. Issues of targeting and under-reporting of civilian deaths also arise. The use of military personnel in a drone squadron operating far away from the target either eliminates or reduces the number of military deployed to places humanitarians need to be to respond so makes face to

face communication complicated. Distance also reduces the chances of communicating with military officials through traditional Civilian-Military networks. The use of military drones for military purposes changes relationships with communities and may restrict the capacity of protection officers to do a solid analysis. Communities may confuse the purpose of the presence of humanitarians and believe them to be the source of information provided to the military. This can further hinder humanitarian work as communities may prevent the use of other technologies such as electronic platforms to collect data for needs assessments or other aspects of the humanitarian response. Reports indicate that reprisals occur in some communities after a drone strike; alleged collaborators are summarily executed. Lack of trust arising after a military drone strike can reduce access, capacity to meaningfully engage with affected persons and alter the manner of the response to needs. Protection Officers, who need to identify issues and monitor, assess and address the problems require clearer and more transparent structures in order to do their jobs effectively.

Drones are used for monitoring and delivery by humanitarian agencies including WFP, OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Missions and INGOs and local NGOs. It is arguable today that humanitarians who are not using drones are not fulfilling the commitment to address human suffering wherever it is found. From the protection perspective, some agencies using drones are moving uncomfortably close to military, business and governments who like to develop models that suit themselves first and are not beyond involving humanitarians to bolster political or business positions. The use of drones by humanitarians that are owned and/or controlled by others may create a conflict of interest. Outsourcing humanitarian work to private drone companies can create many problems. Even sharing drones with UN missions, peacekeepers, troop contributing countries or business, government or military compromises humanitarians seeking to be impartial, independent and neutral. Strong protection analysis is required to ensure humanitarians effectively use drones without compromising protection or humanitarian principles.

Where military drones collect information about the movement of people or related matters and share that information with a humanitarian agency, questions arise. Today all kinds of human rights abuses can be watched. In one real-time example, a military intelligence officer reports that a team watched a gang rape through drone technology. Preventing sexual gender based violence is at the heart of the humanitarian response. Protection Officers, tasked to prevent, mitigate or end actual and potential risks need to respond. Yet it is unclear how humanitarians should respond to material passed from an intelligence source without compromising the humanitarian value of neutrality. Information is often received more quickly and more clearly than through traditional sources. Structures and protocols for sharing and assessing the veracity of this type of increasingly readily available information need to be developed.

Leadership on drones is a pressing issue. It is not clear which UN agency has carriage of this new sophistication in the humanitarian field. It appears UN agencies all intend to each have their own drones for exclusive use. Without strong and clear humanitarian leadership supported by the interagency protection doyens, gaps will remain or be filled by the unqualified limiting the impact of drone technology for those in need in humanitarian settings.

The UN humanitarians needs a drone champion from amongst themselves. This is a role the United Nations WFP appears ready to take on. WFP also leads the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster and manages the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service. While WFP has been taking some great steps forward in the last decade in terms of protection, there is much room to improve and broad protection experience is lacking. Dynamic protection partnerships and appropriate support from experienced protection leads is needed if WFP is to be the drone trailblazer.

Drones can and will enhance the safety, dignity and rights of disaster-affected people in conflict and natural disaster if those with substantial interagency experience take control. Agencies and aid workers must recognise the use of drones is a safety and security issue for those in need and address this appropriately to ensure stability and predictability in the humanitarian response. All will pay the price if communities are left out of or left behind the technological developments.

From a protection perspective, further analysis is necessary to develop methodologies for research so drones strengthen resilience in urban and other communities. Academics and protection practitioners need to add in-

depth research on the impact of drones on humanitarian action to their agenda. Public debate and engagement with communities is vital.

2.2 Issues in use of Social Media

It is clear from the discussion on drone use, that it is vital to inform communities about the identity and principles of humanitarians to ensure the perception of neutral and independent actors. Equally important is to identify the needs of vulnerable groups of people in a conflict setting and to respond through programming and advocacy to ensure that basic human rights are upheld. Questions posed in volatile environments are often about how to better engage with communities and key actors when there is limited access. Attempting to answer such questions for the Syria crisis made it blaringly obvious that social media platforms remain largely underutilized by humanitarian organisations. There are nearly two billion Facebook users worldwide with Twitter and Instagram users not far behind. This fact alone merits trying to better understand the possibilities of the use of social media in humanitarian settings.

Testing options enabled hearing directly from people across more locations. Facebook public profiles and Twitter gave first-hand insights into the state of the conflict and needs. The tool Trovero searched social media platforms for relevant keywords and helped identify individuals posting on a specific issue in key areas. After identification, people could be targeted with a poll questionnaire to collect ideas on a situation of interest, be that relating to water or security or other concerns in their neighbourhood. The questionnaires could be constructed using mathematical modelling to weed out untruths using another tool employed called Positify. Protection Officers must critically assess such opportunities for insight. There are issues relating to the quality of such data, particularly pending Facebook and others advancing profile verification of identities. These should not discount all such data collected, but rather be considered as a supplement to other information collected, which may also have imperfections.

Social media platforms can also enable new prospects for aid agencies to influence key actors with power to create change for affected communities. Tracking opinion makers and influencers in key areas in the Middle East and understanding the different connections among their followers can identify targets for advocacy campaigns. Typically, the largest one percent of accounts in Arabic have at least a million followers. The impact of traditional advocacy activities such as drafting a press release in English or a report to share with media, hoping for a shift in popular opinion is a 'stab in the dark' approach and hard to measure. A targeted approach creates the ability to identify specific personalities online and note any shift in agenda, attitude or willingness to take up a cause. There is an immediate need for transformation of ad-hoc contributions of communications specialists to advocacy and awareness into an arrangement in which stakeholders and decision makers can be informed through targeted, coordinated strategies which can be better evaluated. There are new tools which must be explored and utilised to achieve such ends.

As things stand, many in the Arab world do not have enough information about different humanitarian organisations and their function. Many major NGOs only have a modest number of followers on Twitter or other social media platforms. Humanitarian organisations must establish a presence, not just to be heard by the power figures, but also by the communities in a language easily understood. This may result in greater access and increased safety of staff in the field.

For those that are launching into new technologies, 'do no harm' principles must be considered. For example, Periscope and Facebook Live Apps enable live broadcasting via a smartphone so even conflict can be watched in real-time. Many ex-journalists are moving into media advisory roles in humanitarian aid organisations. Often the advice is that the more shocking or distressing the imagery shared, the wider the likely readership. A protection approach requires humanitarians to safeguard the privacy, safety and dignity of those being streamed to air. Documentaries and photos can be edited to protect identities or at least ensure informed consent by showing film or photos before release; live streaming does not always provide for those options. Those filmed must be given the option to refuse to be filmed and understand the intended purpose of the livestreaming, as well as, any risks to their safety and privacy. One NGO notoriously live streams from Syrian IDP camps and in separate posts on Facebook, indicates an alignment with a party to the conflict. This may further place those identifiable in streaming under threat and subject to later reprisals.

Humanitarian organisations want to make better use of the new efficient ways to work with communities they are endeavouring to assist and empower; yet most have a long way to go to establish a proper online presence and organisational will, prioritisation and investment in building skilled social media teams with an understanding of humanitarian and protection are all required.

3 Conclusions

A 21st century vision of humanitarian protection that includes substantial use of technology appears to be lacking. Humanitarians are right to be cautious and must be sure not to mistake activity for achievement and words for actions in the use of technology. Yet Protection Officers, generally hard-headed realists, need to position themselves closely enough to the tech savvy people to ensure they have sufficient voice to exert the influence necessary to ensure the centrality of protection and adherence to humanitarian principles in rule-making around drones and social media.

Unless people in need are brought along on the technology journey Protection Officers are not fulfilling their obligation to ensure the dignity and rights of people. Humanitarians must shy away from structures that are open to misuse. This includes close engagement with business and government or others who are happy to use of technology for dual purposes because this can intrude into humanitarian space and compromise impartiality, independence and neutrality. Some advocate humanitarians should not to use drones in conflict because of the complexities. Yet humanitarians working in conflict may be right to admonish such advocates and assert that if conflict is where the needs are often greatest drones must be part of the humanitarian toolkit.

Protection leads need to ensure communication with people who are not connecting through formal institutional mechanisms are not forgotten. Connectivity is increasingly pervasive yet not universal. Social media teams working in collaboration with policy and protection advocates need to communicate in the language of those needing assistance. Far more investment is needed in research surrounding drones and social media. Continued routine trainings must be carried out, especially for new NGOs. Codes of Conduct and guidance must be developed addressing new technologies in collaboration with protection leads so humanitarian, human rights and refugee law are all at the fore of technological development in the humanitarian field.