

From face-to-face to face-to-screen: remote management, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarian action in insecure environments

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Abstract

This article provides a first attempt at analysing the complex set of issues around remote management practices in insecure environments and their increased use. It looks at definitions and reviews existing published and grey literature on remote management and related practices. It tries to situate remote management in the evolving context of post-Cold War strategies of dealing with conflict and crisis. On the basis of interviews with a cross-section of aid workers, senior headquarters managerial and policy staff, donors, and research institutions, it provides an assessment of current remote management practices, with a particular focus on Afghanistan and Somalia, and their implications for the future of humanitarian action.

Keywords: remote management, humanitarian action, Afghanistan, Somalia, effectiveness, accountability, conflict.

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In insecure and fraught environments, humanitarian agencies are increasingly resorting to various forms of remote programming and remote management in order to maintain aid delivery when the presence of international staff is no longer possible or allowed. These approaches generally involve the withdrawal of agency international staff, and even senior national staff, from the area of operations and their replacement by a variety of remote control, telemonitoring, distance management and/or sub-contracting arrangements with local partners.

Remote management implies the withdrawal of senior international or national humanitarian managers from the location of the provision of assistance or other humanitarian action as an adaptation to insecurity or denied access. As such, it constitutes a deviation from 'normal' programming practice. It is different from decentralised programming or the capacity-building of local organisations and communities that occurs routinely in development or humanitarian situations. Rather, remote management denotes a less-than-desirable adaptation – in the sense that it is understood that quality and effectiveness may suffer – to what the agency deems an unacceptable level of risk. It is typically a last-resort modality, short of suspending operations.¹ It is usually intended to be temporary, but can also be of considerable duration.

1 Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Jean S. Renouf, *Once Removed: Lessons and Challenges in Remote Management of Humanitarian Operations for Insecure Areas*, Humanitarian Outcomes, New York, 2010.

More broadly, remote management approaches are a response to a number of poorly understood and under-studied developments in the functioning of the humanitarian enterprise, including: the perception that aid work has become more dangerous and access more difficult; the consequent increasingly risk-averse posture of mainstream aid agencies; the collapse of system-wide approaches to negotiating access; the introduction of anti-terrorism legislation that proscribes contact with, or the provision of material support to, certain groups; the emergence of United Nations (UN) integrated missions and other ‘joined-up’ approaches that incorporate the provision of relief into political or military agendas; and the requirement to satisfy the demands of insurance underwriters, security managers and the risk-avoidance regulations of employers. There also seems to be a correlation between the increase in remote management and the development and generalised availability of a number of distance technologies such as mobile phones and video devices, remote mapping, crowdsourcing, use of ‘big data’, and the use of drones for data collection.

The paradoxical result of the generalisation of remote management in insecure environments is that, while the humanitarian enterprise has seen exponential growth in the past two decades, there has been a parallel social, intellectual, emotional and geographical withdrawal – a growing remoteness – of international aid workers from the societies and communities in which they work.² Bunkerisation of aid workers in protected or gated structures and remote management are the two key exemplars of this loss of proximity.

In most cases, an international or national organisation will withdraw or reduce its international or senior management staff in its area of operations and shift responsibility for aid delivery to more junior national staff, local partner organisations, or contractors. Remote management has the important benefit of allowing some aid activities to continue, but it entails a number of hazards and disadvantages.

These can include lower-quality and less efficient service delivery, difficulties in maintaining policy or strategic direction, the risk of corruption or other abuses, and accountability concerns. Similarly, it may become more difficult to abide by humanitarian principles, to avoid discriminatory practices on the basis of gender or ethnicity and to withstand pressure or manipulation from strongmen and abusive power-holders. While remote management may allow the continuation of some material assistance programmes, the implications for the protection of at-risk individuals and communities are a particular cause for concern.

Moreover, remote management raises serious ethical questions regarding the transfer of security risks from international personnel to national actors and local communities who often become more vulnerable and have fewer security resources, less training and scant alternatives for other gainful employment.

And lastly, remote management fundamentally changes the nature of the humanitarian relationship from a technology of proximity to one of distance.

2 Mark Duffield, ‘Challenging Environments: Danger, Resilience and the Aid Industry’, in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 43, No. 5, 2012, pp. 475–492.

The 'face-to-face' approach, which was at the core of decades of NGO voluntarism, is replaced by a virtual or 'face-to-screen' relationship that increases the geographical, social and emotional distance between the international (or capital-based senior national) aid worker and at-risk individuals and communities on the ground.

Defining remote management

The term 'remote management' has been widely used to describe situations in which humanitarian agencies implement programmes with limited or non-existent direct access to populations in need. For some agencies, remote management is simply the decentralisation of management, a practice that might be used in situations where the agency did have access but chose to work through partners on the ground. Several organisations have linked the notion of remote management to the absence of international staff performing some key functions associated with assessments, programme design and/or monitoring. To other agencies, remote management implies a lack of physical presence due to political limitations or security risks. It is notable that organisations also employ diverse definitions of 'access', ranging from occasional short visits to a given area by senior staff with the constant presence of local staff, to working only through local partners without any direct contact between the agency and the affected population.

Remote management was defined by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as 'an adaptation to insecurity, the practice of withdrawing international (or other at-risk staff) while transferring increased programming responsibilities to local staff or local partner organizations.'³ According to OCHA, remote management should be viewed as a viable strategy when lives are at stake and a humanitarian organisation can bring value to an intervention, even if it has to subcontract all programming steps because of security risks to its staff or other constraints to access.

For the purposes of this article we adopt a similar definition: the withdrawal of senior international or national humanitarian managers from the location of the provision of assistance or other humanitarian action which represents an adaptation to insecurity and a deviation from 'normal' programming practice.

Similar definitions have been adopted by various NGOs.⁴ For its part, the ICRC defines remote management as 'an ICRC activity or objective being fulfilled by a third party due to the absence of an ICRC staff in the phases of response (assessment, implementation, monitoring and evaluation).'⁵ Interestingly, interviews conducted by the authors with aid agencies, including the ICRC, indicate what

3 Jan Egeland, Adele Harmer and Abby Stoddard, *To Stay and Deliver: Good Practice for Humanitarians in Complex Security Environments*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, New York, 2011, p. xv.

4 See for example A. Stoddard *et al.*, above note 1.

5 Communication from ICRC.

seems to be a shift from considering remote management as a measure of 'last resort' to 'one among other' possible modes of operation.

Remote management is specific to situations where access is constrained by insecurity or political barriers and where the physical presence of international or senior national programming staff is replaced either by devolving responsibilities to local staff or subcontractors or by distance technologies (for example, remote monitoring using mobile phones, use of proxies such as traders or market mechanisms to reach people in need, and the like). Remote management is sometimes accompanied by remote assessment of needs; this is done through a variety of techniques, ranging from the use of mobile phones to satellite imagery and mapping and, potentially, humanitarian drones.⁶ There is even talk of using drones for the next technological step, which might be remote delivery.

In this context, remote management is not to be confused with decentralisation of decision-making in a stable environment or capacity-building. It is (ideally) a temporary adaptation of programme management, in which agency staff would be physically present to make decisions, provide guidance and monitor quality implementation. In other words, it is usually a reactive rather than a planned approach; it is a departure from normal operating procedures. It ranges from a temporary suspension of normal programme management to a sustained or permanent withdrawal. As will be discussed below, a combination of security, political, insurance and liability factors conspire in some situations in making remote management the default position of the aid community, if not the new normal.

Review of the existing literature⁷

Remote management – or the use of proxies to deliver assistance to groups that are impossible or too dangerous to reach by international agencies – has a long history. Cold War strictures as a rule did not allow aid agencies to work in war zones: anti-colonial liberation movements were thus supported by solidarity groups from outside the theatre; the ICRC routinely worked (and still does) with and through National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; from Eritrea to Sudan to Cambodia, internationally provided assistance was delivered via warring parties or their 'humanitarian' wings, local solidarity groups, or religious structures. Before post-Cold War rapid growth and institutionalisation of the humanitarian enterprise, remote management was not a topical issue in humanitarian circles.

6 See Kristin Bergtora Sandvik and Kjersti Lohne, 'The Promise and Perils of "Disaster Drones"', in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, No. 58, July 2013, available at: www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-58/the-promise-and-perils-of-disaster-drones. All internet references were accessed in May 2014.

7 We are grateful for the contributions of Heather Stobaugh to this section.

Origins of remote management

Although previous publications had discussed the issues surrounding remote management within other larger issues, such as security,⁸ it was not until 2008 that the increasing use of long-term remote management practices began to generate widespread discussion on the need for policies and guidelines about remote management in its own right. Even so, most detailed discussion began only around 2010, as access within both Somalia and Afghanistan became extremely limited. Humanitarian agencies had begun pulling country offices out of Somalia in the mid-1990s after the US intervention debacle, but while senior managers might have been based in remote locations (Nairobi), by and large they were still able to visit programming locations. Debates had started around 2005 in Iraq, in the wake of the US-led intervention and major attacks against aid workers, but had not generally spread to aid agency headquarters and international fora.⁹ In Afghanistan, the issue of remote management has grown in prominence in agency discussions in parallel to the shrinking of humanitarian access and the growing perceptions that agencies were aligned with the US-led military intervention.

In recent years there have been several articles and papers discussing various aspects of remote management, though very few agencies have developed clear guidelines on its design and use.¹⁰ Several agencies working in Somalia have begun this process, using their growing base of experience with the issue. Discussions in Afghanistan initially focused more on operational modalities for access and needs assessments in insecure areas rather than on remote management *per se* (partly because the default position of the aid community was that the situation was improving).

Remote management and ‘humanitarian space’

There is an ongoing debate on whether humanitarian space is actually shrinking, or whether this is a misperception based on a few exceptional cases.¹¹ On one hand, humanitarian agencies are now attempting to provide assistance in contexts that

8 See Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Katherine Haver, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: Trends in Policy and Operations*, Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Report No. 23, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2006.

9 Greg Hansen, ‘Operational Modalities in Iraq’, Briefing Paper No. 2, NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq, Baghdad, 2008.

10 See J. Egeland *et al.*, above note 3, pp. 25 ff.

11 See Antonio Donini *et al.*, *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Final Report: The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2008, available at: www.alnap.org/resource/8761; Vicky Tennant, Bernie Doyle and Raouf Mazou, *Safeguarding Humanitarian Space: A Review of Key Challenges for UNHCR*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Policy Development and Evaluation Service, Geneva, 2010; Sara Pantuliano *et al.*, *Counter-terrorism and Humanitarian Action: Tensions, Impact and Ways Forward*, HPG Policy Brief No. 43, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2011; Bryony Norman, *Monitoring and Accountability Practices for Remotely Managed Projects Implemented in Volatile Operating Environments*, Humanitarian Innovation Fund, Tearfund, London, 2012; Sarah Collinson and Samir Elhawary, *Humanitarian Space: A Review of Trends and Issues*, HPG Report No. 32, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2012.

once would have been too insecure or volatile. This has generated increased incidents of violence against aid workers not necessarily *because* they are aid workers, but simply because they are present in such insecure situations. The move from security planning on 'when to go' to security management strategies on 'how to stay' – which includes adaptations like remote management – reflects this change in perspective on operating in conflict zones.¹² Another view holds that the increasing politicisation of humanitarianism has diminished regard for the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality, eroding the protection they once provided to humanitarians and making the delivery of assistance more difficult.¹³

Both perspectives in the debate agree, however, that there are situations – such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur and south-central Somalia – in which adherence to humanitarian principles does not ensure safe access for humanitarian agencies. These cases have several common characteristics: conflict is asymmetric and involves numerous non-state actors; there is a lack of a legitimate government; and the context has been polarised by the post-9/11 global security dynamic of international terror and counter-terror or counter-insurgency operations. While attacks on aid workers in other contexts have plateaued, levels of attacks in these particular situations remain so high that they skew the general trend.¹⁴ In Somalia, for example, it appears that attacks on aid workers may be due not to a particular agency's collaboration or connection to Western governments or policies, but rather to a belief that the entire humanitarian endeavour is a Western policy tool and, therefore, a legitimate target for non-state armed groups. In Afghanistan, the key factors explaining attacks against aid workers are the alignment of the UN and aid agencies with the US-led military intervention and state-building agenda, and the perception that aid is supporting a government that is seen as corrupt and illegitimate by insurgent groups and segments of the population.¹⁵ Since 2011, attacks against aid workers seem to have flattened out, partly because road missions of (particularly) international staff have been drastically curtailed, and partly because it appeared that the Taliban (but not necessarily other groups) had adopted a policy of not attacking foreign aid organisations that work directly with communities. However, recent attacks against the ICRC and foreigners in 2013 may indicate a change of policy, which could well be more deleterious for aid workers.

Politicisation

Projecting adherence to the principles of impartiality and neutrality has become especially problematic for UN agencies because of the dual political and

12 J. Egeland *et al.*, above note 3, p 8.

13 A. Donini *et al.*, above note 11, pp. 23–25.

14 J. Egeland *et al.*, above note 3, p. 11.

15 Antonio Donini, *Afghanistan: Humanitarianism Unraveled?*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2010; Prisca Benelli, Antonio Donini and Norah Niland, *Afghanistan: Humanitarianism in Uncertain Times*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2012; Samuel Hall, *Redefining Humanitarian Assistance in Afghanistan: A Contextual Analysis*, Samuel Hall Consulting, Kabul, 2012.

humanitarian roles required of the UN in such situations.¹⁶ This is exemplified in Afghanistan by the creation of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) – a UN integrated mission – in which humanitarian concerns were subordinated to, and part and parcel of, a political agenda in the context of which it became consistently more difficult to advocate for humanitarian principles and to even contemplate negotiations for access with the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

In addition to similar constraints, south-central Somalia presents relatively unique realities that limit access. These include not only extremely high security risks to staff, but also, since 2009, the risk of legal liability in the event that assistance goes astray and inadvertently assists proscribed groups. Since the US Supreme Court case of *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, it has been clear that humanitarian agencies could and would be prosecuted for violation of counter-terrorism laws by providing support (direct or indirect) to listed entities.¹⁷ Working within a conflict area generally requires negotiating with the belligerents for access, especially when they control areas where populations are in need of assistance.¹⁸ In the negotiation process, it is understood that the authority controlling the area may – as an unintended but very significant consequence – gain some benefit, whether material or in the form of legitimacy or political gain. In most contexts, as Bradbury states, this is generally considered ‘good field craft’ and a pragmatic approach to humanitarian negotiations. In Somalia, however, the fact that such negotiations take place with groups that have been ‘listed’ or ‘proscribed’ under various national and international anti-terror mechanisms criminalises this humanitarian engagement and places humanitarian agencies in an untenable position.¹⁹ While technically the same rules on contacts with proscribed groups apply in Afghanistan as well, there is much less angst in the aid community as a whole about violating counter-terrorism legislation in Afghanistan. Perhaps this is due to the current surge of interest in negotiating with the Taliban – a surge in which the US authorities are also partaking. The UN follows a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach, but most observers agree that political contacts are under way. The ICRC and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) are open about their negotiations with the Taliban relating to access and acceptance, and those NGOs that are still able to work in rural areas routinely negotiate

16 Mark Bradbury, *State-building, Counterterrorism, and Licensing Humanitarianism in Somalia*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2010; V. Tennant *et al.*, above note 11; J. Egeland *et al.*, above note 3.

17 US Supreme Court, *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, 130 S. Ct. 2705, 2010. For a discussion, see Naz K. Modirzadeh, Dustin A. Lewis and Claude Bruderlein, ‘Humanitarian Engagement under Counterterrorism: A Conflict of Norms and the Emerging Policy Landscape’, in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 883, 2011, pp. 623–647.

18 Humanitarian Practice Network, *Good Practice Review: Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*, No. 8 (New Edition), Overseas Development Institute, London, December 2010, p. 60, available at: www.odihpn.org/hpn-resources/good-practice-reviews/operational-security-management-in-violent-environments-revised-edition; M. Bradbury, above note 16; S. Pantuliano *et al.*, above note 11.

19 M. Bradbury, above note 16, p. 17; S. Pantuliano *et al.*, above note 11, pp. 6–7.

via community leaders or village elders with whomever is in charge in a particular area.²⁰

There are obvious benefits to remote management and other distance approaches since they allow some humanitarian activities to continue in otherwise prohibitive conditions. Remote management lowers the safety risk for international staff; some capacity-building may take place for national staff and/or local organisations, and re-entry when conditions improve is easier since a presence has been kept on the ground. The cons, however, sometimes overshadow the pros: they can range from increased risk, pressure and expectations for national staff who may not have the required skills for additional responsibilities, to the risk of diversion and fraud, logistical difficulties in moving commodities and project resources, and so on.

Research commissioned by Tearfund found that, although many drawbacks can be minimised through improved programme design and reliance on a growing list of 'best practices', approximately one quarter of the individuals interviewed for that research argued against ever using remote management. They felt that no amount of improvement could overcome critical issues of diminished programme quality and accountability, and the ethical problems of transferring risk to individuals who may not be able to cope with that risk.²¹ Other observers have noted that the practice of remote programming puts in place vested interests that make it difficult to exit out of the practice once it is in place.

Experiences with remote management

The following case studies from Afghanistan and Somalia highlight the major findings on the benefits and risks of remote management in volatile contexts.

Afghanistan: ups and downs of remote management (1988–2013)

Remote management has a long history in Afghanistan, dating back to the mid-1980s, if not before, and much in the current debates is not new. During the Soviet occupation, the US and other donors funded an array of 'humanitarian' activities inside Afghanistan in areas controlled by *mujahideen* groups. US citizens were forbidden (by the Reagan administration) to enter Afghanistan; assistance activities were therefore implemented by a number of proxies set up by USAID in Pakistan with Afghan and Pakistani staff, such as the Afghanistan Construction and Logistics Unit (ACLU), that provided services ranging from food aid to small-scale infrastructure projects and transport of non-lethal military equipment (medical

20 See, for example, Joel Alas, 'Five Years After Slayings: Doctors without Borders Returns to Afghanistan', in *Spiegel Online*, 12 October 2009, available at: www.spiegel.de/international/world/five-years-after-slayings-doctors-without-borders-returns-to-afghanistan-a-654702.html; Baba Umar, 'Even the Taliban Respects Us for Our Work in Afghanistan', in *Tehelka.com*, 24 May 2013, available at: www.tehelka.com/even-the-taliban-respects-us-for-our-work-in-afghanistan/.

21 B. Norman, above note 11, p. 2.

supplies, clothes, Tennessee mules used for transport, and so on), as well as monitoring of project activities. Assistance was also provided through US-based NGOs, such as the International Rescue Committee or Save the Children, who also had to rely on Afghan brokers and gatekeepers for the implementation and monitoring of their projects. Non-US NGOs and their international staff could enter Afghanistan, but in practice had to rely on similar proxy arrangements both because of security inside Afghanistan and because the Pakistani authorities controlled access to the border and were very selective as to who could cross it or not. Moreover, the various *mujahideen* groups and parties soon understood the benefits that they could derive by creating their own NGOs and by infiltrating international NGOs (INGOs) and solidarity groups to attract easy money and assistance to areas under their control. Because of the politicised nature of the context – Western support to Afghan ‘freedom fighters’ – manipulation was rife and monitoring of projects minimal. Many projects existed only on paper; commanders used mafia tactics to intimidate and control NGOs and to deny them access to areas under the control of other groups; and there were large-scale diversions of resources to support the war effort. Of course, there were also effective and successful initiatives set up by reputable NGOs, but the overall climate was one of happy-go-lucky operationalism. In the long run, this contributed to giving NGOs a bad name.

When the UN arrived on the scene after the 1988 Geneva Accords,²² which were aimed at bringing peace to Afghanistan, the situation of remote management and monitoring improved somewhat. The UN began operating inside Afghanistan on the basis of a ‘humanitarian consensus’ it negotiated with the Kabul government, the *mujahideen* parties and the neighbouring countries (Pakistan, Iran and the then Soviet Union). This ‘consensus’ allowed UN staff to enter the country and set up activities both cross-border and cross-line. Initially, the UN agencies had to rely on the same brokers, gatekeepers and proxies put forward by the *mujahideen* groups or the NGOs with ‘good contacts’ in particular areas. The UN also encouraged the formation of Afghan NGOs, nurturing and financing them, with mixed results. The political economy of the cross-border aid scene was such that it was extremely difficult to shake off the hold of key Afghan strongmen in the *mujahideen* groups and their Pakistani backers, who could control where and how much assistance could be directed.

Nevertheless, over time the UN was able to establish ‘dedicated NGOs’ able to implement rather large-scale programmes such as mine action and road construction. Access for UN and NGO international staff improved, and there was a gradual shift from remote programming and management to more traditional forms of UN and NGO implementation including with international staff presence or oversight. Offices inside Afghanistan, often staffed by international aid workers, gradually grew, and monitoring improved considerably. During the cross-border

22 Editor’s note: Signed on 14 April 1988 between Afghanistan and Pakistan with the United States and the Soviet Union serving as guarantors, the Geneva Accords aimed at regulating bilateral relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and at providing a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

period and the subsequent internal conflict period (1992–1996), and even under the Taliban (1996–2001), the half-dozen Afghan mine action NGOs²³ created by the UN – at the time the largest humanitarian mine action programme in the world – were able to work relatively effectively cross-border and cross-line, both in secure and relatively insecure areas. The programme was – until it moved to Kabul in 2002 – essentially managed by remote control from Islamabad, with only a handful of international advisers inside the country at any given time. Its success was predicated, in large part, on the separation of mine clearance and awareness activities from the tasking and monitoring, which was undertaken by a separate dedicated NGO. This experience is mentioned here because it shows that relatively large-scale humanitarian programmes could be implemented by remote management in contested and fraught environments since (a) there was obvious support from the communities and their leaders, (b) the activity was uncontroversial and was not a stake in the conflict, (c) there was transparency about the funding and management structure, (d) the separation between implementation and monitoring and evaluation provided a degree of accountability, and (e) the presence of agency international staff allowed direct monitoring and quality control.

While local strongmen sometimes tried to take advantage of aid agency presence, in the main access and security were not major issues. For example, during the Taliban period, the UN and ICRC, as well as many international and national NGOs, had offices in six to eight regional hubs as well as in Kabul. While the relationship with the Taliban authorities was tense, there were relatively few security risks for humanitarian personnel. The UN, ICRC and NGOs benefited from active support from practically all sectors of the population as these agencies were the only sources of external assistance at the time. Travel by road was generally unproblematic, except in a few areas where there was active conflict.

If we fast-forward to post-9/11 Afghanistan, we can clearly see an expansionist phase of international UN, NGO and donor agencies on the ground – up to about 2006 – during which aid agencies and their donors accepted the conventional wisdom that Afghanistan was in a post-conflict mode. Aid agencies naturally flocked to Kabul, access and acceptance in most of the country was not an issue, and remote management basically dropped from the agenda. Remote management approaches were replaced by normal subcontracting arrangements with local community groups and national NGOs and participation in large-scale national programmes in health or community development (the National Solidarity Programme, NSP), parts of which were implemented by INGOs and NGOs (and other parts by the state itself or private contractors). However, the fact that these arrangements were intended to extend the remit of the government in what was an increasingly contested environment was not lost on the Taliban and other anti-government elements, who came progressively to tar the overall aid effort with the occupier's brush. Nor did the fact that, with a couple of exceptions, the

23 Such as Afghan Technical Consultants (ATC), the Organisation for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation (OMAR) and the Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA). These (and other) NGOs worked under the umbrella of the UN mine action programme.

NGO community called for the expansion to the entire country of the presence of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), then confined to Kabul, go unnoticed.

This was followed by a retrenchment and 'bunkerisation' phase, which is still ongoing. As attacks against aid workers increased, international staff presence on the ground became more tenuous. Aid agencies faced difficult decisions, especially multi-mandate agencies that were doing both relief work and participating in government state-building projects. They were increasingly seen – and not only by the Taliban – as aligned with the Kabul government and its international military backers. Travel by international staff and even senior national staff to project sites became more difficult if not impossible.²⁴ A few NGOs with particularly strong or longstanding community support were able to rely on trust and acceptance to maintain activities and even visits to projects, but for most NGOs (not to mention the UN), outside the main cities accessible by air, the universe of access was rapidly shrinking. With visits by international staff and even senior national staff becoming increasingly difficult and dangerous, remote management became the *de facto* *modus operandi* in large parts of the country, a situation reminiscent in some ways of the years of the Soviet occupation.

Interviews with aid agency staff in Kabul in 2012 and 2013 showed the extent to which direct relationships between offices in Kabul and projects in rural areas had been replaced by remote management and, sometimes, the cessation of activities.²⁵ In some cases, projects were able to continue under management of local agency staff when Kabul-based staff had to be withdrawn. In others, agencies recruited new staff from the local community or from other NGOs that had departed the area. There was also experimentation with the contracting of former staff as short-term consultants for the provision of services that would normally have been the responsibility of regular staff, so that they would not appear on the agencies' books. In many cases, monitoring visits became impossible or very challenging even in areas where an NGO had worked for decades. Threats, both political and criminal, increased against staff and their activities, including in areas that were considered to be relatively secure.

The combination of decreased access by international staff and increased threats for national staff had resulted in the fraying of relationships on the ground: programme effectiveness was responding to the law of diminishing returns. Monitoring by international staff was being increasingly replaced by senior national staff and then more junior staff. Travel to visit project locations had to be under the radar, by local transport rather than agency vehicle. Because mobile phones were often checked at Taliban roadblocks, these and any other visible clues of agency affiliation had to be left behind. Local staff were seen to be particularly at risk ('just the fact that you come to visit our project is dangerous for us' was a refrain that was often relayed after field visits); in some areas, even staff working in Kabul could no longer return to their own districts, whether to monitor projects or visit family

24 See P. Benelli *et al.*, above note 15, pp. 28–29.

25 The following paragraphs draw on interviews in person and on Skype conducted by one of the authors.

(‘I can get to my village, but on the way back I would be stopped and beaten up or worse’). Senior NGO national staff interviewed in Kabul lamented the fact that they could no longer interact with communities where their agency had been working for years and that they were consequently losing credibility and the support of the community. As one experienced respondent noted, ‘When there was a problem in the community, I would go down and help sort things out. I used to be seen as a peacemaker because I convinced two groups to stop fighting. Now I can no longer go. My white beard carries no weight.’²⁶

Agencies often stress that acceptance is a function of community support. And there are many examples of community elders negotiating with Taliban commanders to allow projects of obvious benefit to communities to continue. The Taliban themselves have issued statements that they are not opposed to activities that benefit the population.²⁷ However, in practice, such local agreements are hostage to the shifting nature of the conflict, changes in the local Taliban command and control, perceptions of whether the activity supports the government or not, and so on. Agreements require lengthy negotiations, are a function of the personalities involved and often do not last. The patchwork of local power relationships in rural Afghanistan and the fissuring of the Taliban and other insurgent groups increasingly complicate the task of maintaining programmes and their effectiveness.

The ICRC, and to some extent MSF – because of their exclusively humanitarian profile – have been able to negotiate more comprehensive agreements concerning their presence and activities with the leadership of the Taliban and other groups. But even their activities are increasingly managed remotely from hubs in cities where they run health facilities. For example, the ICRC runs a taxi service to bring war wounded to the hospitals that it supports or for the return of mortal remains of combatants to their families.²⁸ Despite the organisation’s blanket agreement, its international staff are unable to venture outside government-held towns. The re-supply of health posts they support, as well as the basic training of the staff, is done through local proxies, short-term consultants or, in areas where it is accepted, by the Afghan Red Crescent.²⁹ Moreover, in the run-up to the withdrawal of most foreign troops in 2014, both ICRC and MSF are finding that the agreements they have negotiated at the central level with the Taliban and other groups are increasingly tenuous (as demonstrated by the attack against the ICRC office in Jalalabad in May 2013).

The experience of a mainstream US-funded NGO that has been working for the past twenty years supporting agricultural livelihood projects in Helmand and Kandahar provinces is indicative of the changing situation. Until 2011, it was working with some eighty rural communities or groups in these provinces, which are probably the most insecure in the country. It was able to do so because it had

26 Interview with a senior national staff member of an INGO, Kabul 2012.

27 Antonio Donini, *Afghanistan: Humanitarianism Unraveled?*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA, 2010; P. Benelli *et al.*, above note 15, p. 29.

28 Fiona Terry, ‘The International Committee of the Red Cross in Afghanistan: Reasserting the Neutrality of Humanitarian Action’, in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 881, 2011, pp. 173–188.

29 Interviews in Kabul, 2012 and 2013.

consistently refused both to participate in US-led stabilisation activities and to work as a subcontractor of the Afghan government. The longstanding relationships with the communities were the best guarantees for access and acceptance. However, by 2011, the situation had changed, and the NGO was forced to retrench and reluctantly resort to a greater use of remote management approaches. In the words of the country director: ‘With so much of the development agenda and associated resources now subordinated to counter-insurgency and state-building strategies, some stakeholders come to perceive NGOs as siding with their enemies.’³⁰ Access and acceptance in Afghanistan have been severely compromised by the escalation and radicalisation of the conflict.³¹ This has transformed the image of mainstream organisations from that of ‘benign infidels to agents of Western imperialism.’³² Humanitarian activities are still possible in some areas, but overall the distance between managers and their projects has been rapidly increasing.

Unlike Somalia, there is no famine in Afghanistan, and, while there is a humanitarian crisis, it is diffuse rather than geographically contained. It is a crisis of access to services (in particular health) and chronic food insecurity exacerbated by thirty years of war.³³ Also, unlike Somalia, there has been no major instance of denial of access to food. The World Food Programme (WFP) and the government have been able to move food convoys (in some areas with ISAF armed escorts). Moreover, a lot of food is moved by private traders, who are able to find their own ways of getting through insecure areas and delivering it to target groups identified by NGOs and their local partners. Nevertheless, the continuing insecurity has gravely affected the ability of the aid system to conduct in-depth needs assessments. This situation has resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy: donors ask for evidence because they are not anxious to be convinced that there is a humanitarian crisis, as this would undermine their post-conflict narrative. Agencies’ freedom of movement around the country is increasingly constrained. They are increasingly risk-averse and bunkerised. Therefore, needs are difficult to quantify and remain unmet.³⁴

Remote programming, management and monitoring are growth industries in Afghanistan, but the returns on investment are shrinking. In a few areas – the central highlands, parts of the northeast – international staff can still visit and monitor assistance activities by flying in and flying out. In much of the country, this is too dangerous, and national staff are left to face increased responsibility and insecurity (much of which becomes under-reported). NGOs have now learned that the perception of having taken sides can have dangerous consequences. Many, in anticipation of more troubled times ahead in the context of the withdrawal of most foreign troops in 2014, are trying to retain or regain a credibility as impartial and

30 Nigel Pont, ‘Southern Afghanistan: Acceptance Still Works’, in *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine*, No. 49, February 2011, available at: www.odihpn.org/humanitarian-exchange-magazine/issue-49/southern-afghanistan-acceptance-still-works.

31 A. Donini, above note 27, p. 6; P. Benelli *et al.*, above note 15, pp. 28–29.

32 F. Terry, above note 28, p. 176.

33 ICRC, ‘Insufficient Access to Health Care Exacerbates Humanitarian Crisis’, press release, 25 July 2012.

34 P. Benelli *et al.*, above note 15, p. 5; interviews with UN and NGO staff in 2012 and 2013.

independent players that was heavily compromised. This is likely to be a difficult task. Rather than being a local problem, the issue of alignment has become a systemic one. So far, there is no breakthrough: attempts by OCHA and the NGOs to agree on an approach for negotiating access and acceptance with the Taliban and other groups have failed due to lack of trust between the UN – whose integrated mission is seen as too partisan in its alignment with ISAF and the government – and the NGOs, but also because of the difficulty of identifying trustworthy interlocutors in the anti-government groups. This situation is likely to continue, if not worsen, in the coming months, and for most NGOs remote management will remain the default mode of operation in large swathes of the country.

Some major INGOs have a policy of not working in areas where they cannot be present and therefore will shut down operations rather than resorting to remote management. One major donor – ECHO – has a policy of not supporting activities that cannot be monitored by international staff. Given prevailing conditions, ECHO has recently showed more flexibility with respect to this requirement; nevertheless, some activities have been suspended. Moreover, most NGOs are anticipating a reduction of available resources in 2014 and beyond, with a corresponding reduction of activities on the ground. Our interviews show that, because of the diminishing returns on effectiveness of remotely managed activities in the most insecure areas, these are likely to be the first to be cut. This, and the fact that there is no common approach between the UN and NGOs (let alone donors) on negotiating access with the Taliban and other insurgent groups, does not bode well for at-risk vulnerable groups in Afghanistan.

The humanitarian response to the 2011–2012 Somalia famine³⁵

South-central Somalia presents one of the world's most complex environments for delivering humanitarian assistance in a manner that is consistent with humanitarian principles.³⁶ As the needs reached famine levels in mid-2011, the humanitarian community working in Somalia was presented with the challenge of rapidly scaling up assistance to a famine-affected population in an area of very constrained access, where operations were largely managed remotely. These challenges were greatly exacerbated by the departure and subsequent banning of the World Food Programme in 2010, and further accentuated in late 2011 when Al-Shabaab banned seventeen organisations from operating in this and other areas under its control. To scale up operations under these circumstances, agencies implicitly and explicitly had to tolerate increased risks, including the risk of misuse and diversion of assistance. These risks had to be considered in light of the more critical risk of failing to deliver assistance to affected populations in a timely manner. Agencies sought to mitigate

35 We are grateful for the insights and contributions of Merry Fitzpatrick, Hannan Sulieman and Genevieve Boutin, who collaborated on an earlier unpublished version of this case study.

36 Laura Hammond and Hannah Vaughan-Lee, *Humanitarian Space in Somalia: A Scarce Commodity*, HPG Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, London, April 2012.

those risks through the strategies they adopted to distribute assistance and to monitor and verify aid delivery. These strategies are briefly and partially outlined below.³⁷

In the years leading up to and including the 2011–2012 famine, organisations were negotiating individually with Al-Shabaab about the question of access, and there was no overall common approach to the delivery of humanitarian assistance. The lack of presence *in situ* challenged the ability of many organisations to assess the situation, to carefully select partners and contractors, and to implement, monitor and evaluate their work sufficiently. In this context, these challenges meant higher costs and significantly more complex, though not necessarily more effective, management structures and partnership strategies, as well as greater likelihood of poor decision-making and of diversion or misuse of aid. Other challenges included the lack of contact with affected communities and local leaders that would secure acceptance and a mutual understanding, and the fact that senior managers who were not present on the ground often had to use unreliable information to assess the situation. This, in turn, means that remote management runs the risk of being self-perpetuating.

Neither the provision of assistance in areas of constrained access nor the remote management of programmes is a particularly new phenomenon in humanitarian response. There are, however, several new aspects of access and remote management in current humanitarian environments, including some that are unique to Somalia.³⁸ The decision to rely on remote management was largely an *ad hoc* response, and therefore little formal policy or guidance was developed, either within organisations or across the humanitarian system.³⁹ However, as more agencies came to rely more heavily on remote management, some common practices have emerged.

The increase in the number of agencies relying on remote management is a reflection of increased insecurity targeted at staff of humanitarian agencies, barriers imposed by Al-Shabaab itself, and barriers imposed by donors to prevent aid from falling into the hands of Al-Shabaab. This is complicated by the perception on the part of Al-Shabaab that all non-Islamic humanitarian agencies are part of a ‘Western’ political agenda. Whether one agrees or not that ‘humanitarian space’ is shrinking, it is clear that contexts such as Somalia present numerous difficulties for humanitarian operations. According to Bradbury, there were approximately forty INGOs with a physical presence in south-central Somalia in 1995. This number had declined to twenty-six by 1997. By 2012, as the famine was developing, the INGOs present in south-central Somalia had withdrawn almost all their expatriate presence and were working almost exclusively by remote management. Any expatriate

37 Some agencies are understandably reluctant to disclose all their practices. This is therefore an illustrative set of practices, and not an exhaustive one.

38 V. Tennant *et al.*, above note 11, pp. 1–3.

39 Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Victoria DiDomenico, *Providing Aid in Insecure Environments: 2009 Update. Trends in Violence Against Aid Workers and the Operational Response*, HPG Policy Brief No. 34, Overseas Development Institute, London, April 2009; A. Stoddard *et al.*, above note 1.

presence that may have remained at that time had extremely limited, if any, ability to move and perform its function.⁴⁰

Remote management in Somalia in the run-up to the famine

Although Somalia remains a single country in the eyes of much of the international community, in many ways it constitutes three separate programming (and management) contexts for agencies working there. The most extreme challenge for remote management is in south-central Somalia, in areas controlled either by Al-Shabaab or by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The modus operandi for gaining access in the late 1990s and early 2000s required negotiation with multiple parties. Despite worsening security conditions from 2006 to 2009, national and international staff continued to have access to Al-Shabaab-controlled areas. But in the second half of 2009, Al-Shabaab banned foreign nationals from most of those areas. As of early 2011, some international agencies had national staff and offices in south-central Somalia, but no international staff. In November 2011, Al-Shabaab completely banned sixteen agencies from operating in areas under its control.

Agencies already had several remote management practices by 2011. The most significant was third-party monitoring visits to get an independent perspective on programmes. Data collection was mostly not tolerated by Al-Shabaab authorities in control of particular regions, and individuals found to be involved in data collection could be accused of spying or other allegations and subsequently punished (e.g., jailed or subjected to a more severe form of punishment). Third-party reporting was regular, but provided limited information on programme results given the monitoring focus on inputs; it could not provide much information on issues such as protection.

As the situation worsened in 2011, a number of agencies further developed risk management procedures. These included partnership reviews; assessment of ability to maintain access and abide by donor regulations; follow-up actions on the available monitoring information; and risk management training for staff. The UN established a Risk Management Unit (RMU), which became a resource for (mainly) UN agencies in conducting risk assessments, recommending risk management solutions and doing some direct monitoring. But of course, the RMU was subject to many of the same constraints of access.

Over the first half of 2011, negotiations with Al-Shabaab were stepped up over the issue of staff movement and access; in many cases, however, permission was denied. Then, as the extent of the crisis was becoming clear, Al-Shabaab announced a different policy in early July, stating that any group, whether 'Muslims' or non-Muslims', can give emergency aid as long as they have 'no hidden agenda'.⁴¹ But after the famine was declared and the WFP began to scale up for operations, assuming that it too would be allowed back, WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran

40 M. Bradbury, above note 16, p. 4.

41 See 'Somalia Islamists Lift Ban on Aid to Drought Victims', in *BBC News Africa*, 6 July 2011, available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14046267.

issued a press release in Mogadishu announcing that the WFP was ‘scaling up to reach an additional 2.2 million people in the previously inaccessible south of the country.’⁴² Al-Shabaab swiftly made it clear that the ban remained in effect for agencies like the WFP and noted that while the drought was a problem, the declaration of famine was ‘utter nonsense, 100% baseless and sheer propaganda.’⁴³ Relations continued to sour between Al-Shabaab and humanitarian agencies thereafter.

Remote management during the famine

As relations with Al-Shabaab became increasingly hostile, access became ever more constrained. Access by agency staff was limited by restrictions on movement. National staff of some agencies had occasional access to some areas. With the exception of a handful of agencies, there was little access to the areas hardest hit by the famine (Bay and Bakool regions, Middle and Lower Shebelle). The ICRC had access to these areas, and was able to distribute food to 1.2 million people at the height of the crisis. But even it had to suspend operations later, and was ultimately barred by Al-Shabaab as well.⁴⁴ This forced a number of agencies to make several rapid decisions about alternative approaches – again without access to the context.

Measures were devised in response to the challenge of remote management. A number of agencies set up ‘call centres’ in which staff were assigned contacting partners and field-based facilities by phone using Somalia’s well-functioning cell phone networks. Second, upgrading the staff of local partner organisations was facilitated. In some cases, INGOs seconded trained and experienced Somali staff to local partners. In some cases, funding for overheads to cover local partner staff support costs was increased. Through these measures, the timeliness and clarity of reporting improved, and there was less conflicting information both between and within reports. Even so, the very nature of the pressures to resort to remote management techniques also limited assessments or evaluations to measure the true impact of remote management.

A major decision – and one subject to considerable debate at first – was about the use of cash transfers, which, given the absence of all agencies able to deliver food aid except the ICRC, were seen as the only viable alternative. Somalia had the necessary money transfer and market infrastructure, but this was a completely new area of programming for some agencies, which presented considerable risks. Managing this response remotely made it extremely difficult to ensure that the most vulnerable were reached (in other words, minority groups). It also meant investments had to be made in multiple monitoring systems, including

42 Statement by WFP Executive Director Josette Sheeran on Visit to Mogadishu, 21 July 2011, available at: www.wfp.org/news/news-release/statement-wfp-executive-director-josette-sheeran-visit-mogadishu-somalia.

43 ‘Somali Islamists Maintain Aid Ban and Deny Famine’, in *BBC News Africa*, 22 July 2011, available at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14246764.

44 ICRC, ‘ICRC Temporarily Suspends Distributions of Food and Seed’, press release, 12 January 2012; ICRC, ‘ICRC Remains Fully Committed to Helping Somalis’, press release, 2 February 2012.

an independent monitoring mechanism covering the work of several NGOs; market monitoring; and third-party verification, in addition to complaints mechanisms. This ultimately resulted in the establishment of the Cash and Voucher Monitoring Group (CVMG), which collected extensive monitoring data, and eventually was able to undertake a substantial evaluation as well.⁴⁵

Another area of scale-up was the immunisation programme when a measles epidemic threatened. Because of constrained access, there had been little awareness-raising and limited work with local authorities. Immunisation campaigns had never been allowed in Al-Shabaab-controlled territory, but immunisation of individuals in hospitals and health facilities was allowed. Remote management compromised the quality of the little immunisation work that was allowed.

All of this was further complicated by the political situation. With the restrictions of the US Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and other counter-terrorist restrictions prior to the famine, donors questioned whether it was even possible to provide humanitarian assistance in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas. UN Security Council Resolution 1916 – concerned primarily with the arms embargo on Somalia and Eritrea – also affected the humanitarian response. A special ‘carve-out’ exempted humanitarian assistance from some of the resolution’s requirements, but also required that the UN Humanitarian Coordinator report to the Security Council on humanitarian operations and risk management every 120 days. To some degree, this may have appeared to put into question the independence and impartiality of UN agencies, and probably further soured the possibilities of negotiating access with Al-Shabaab. However, the carve-out effectively gave donors more room to provide funding for the humanitarian response. The US government also eased OFAC restrictions with a similar humanitarian carve-out after the famine was declared, to some degree easing constraints on international NGOs, but many remained concerned about possible criminal liabilities.

The ICRC and MSF, given their independence, their closer adherence to humanitarian principles and their ability to negotiate, were able to maintain presence much longer. MSF worked directly, not through operating partners. The ICRC worked with its Red Crescent partner in Somalia. But even these organisations’ access became increasingly difficult: the ICRC suspended operations in early 2012, after having operations blocked in several locations, and Al-Shabaab subsequently withdrew its permission to operate.⁴⁶ MSF withdrew in 2013, following the killing of several members of its staff.⁴⁷ These incidents highlight the kind of ‘red lines’ that exist for even the most principled of agencies in the Somali context.

45 Catherine Longley, Mike Brewin and Sophia Dunn, CVMG, *Final Monitoring Report of the Somalia Cash and Voucher Transfer Programme Phase 1: September 2011–March 2012*, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2012; Kerren Hedlund, Nisar Majid, Dan Maxwell and Nigel Nicholson, *Final Evaluation of the Unconditional Cash and Voucher Response to the 2011–12 Crisis in Southern and Central Somalia*, Humanitarian Outcomes, London, 2013.

46 ICRC press releases, above note 44.

47 MSF, ‘MSF Forced to Close All Medical Programmes in Somalia’, press release, 14 August 2013.

Risks associated with remote management

Remote management carries a number of threats. As noted by Steets *et al.*, ‘the quality of assessments cannot always be guaranteed in remote operations, and switching into remote mode can reduce the complexity and quality of projects. Remote management should thus be a last resort.’⁴⁸ The risks and potential costs of making a bad decision due to poor or inadequate information are potentially enormous – such as the risk of diversion, corruption, poor targeting or a host of other problems. In Somalia during the famine, the most commonly cited risks included:

Information management and the credibility of reports

INGOs and UN staff interviewed all noted that reports from local staff and partners are given less credibility by donors and the international community than those generated by senior staff in international agencies. Although several INGOs had raised red flags early in 2011 about the severity of the crisis, they felt that because their alerts were based on reports from local partners, they were not given the same credibility in coordination meetings as reports that had been generated firsthand by international agencies. As evidence, they point to the increase in CAP appeal only once the Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU) reports were available. Some agencies interviewed felt this was part of the reason for the delayed response.

Impartiality and neutrality

All local staff and partners belong to particular ethnic, political or other groups, and those members of the needy population not belonging to the same clan or group may not receive the same level of services. Because the situation in Somalia was so sensitive, agencies that depended on local staff or partners to make key decisions increased the risk of damage to their perception as a neutral, impartial agency, though it has so far been impossible to determine if this was the case during the famine.

Programme quality

Remote management generally means the less experienced and skilled staff must work with little direct support from those with more experience. Where specific guidance is required or senior staff must make decisions, the time required to obtain these from a separate location can delay the implementation of a programme, and certain time-sensitive milestones (e.g., seed distributions) may be missed.

48 Julia Steets, Urban Reichhold and Elias Sagmeister, *Evaluation and Review of Humanitarian Access Strategies in DG-ECHO Funded Interventions*, Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin, 2012.

The technical aspects of the programme, the quality of implementation and the humanitarian principles may suffer.

Partnership and the ethics of risk transfer

The transfer of risk from senior staff (who are largely not Somali) to local Somali staff assumes that the local staff face a lower level of risk, but this is debatable. While they may not present as significant a political target, they face pressures from community leaders and relations that foreigners would not, and they are afforded less protection in the conduct of their work. With increased needs during the famine, there was increased pressure to meet those needs. With remote management it is almost impossible to know exactly what pressures staff are dealing with. Staff and partners do not always want to say how they deal with these difficulties. Without being present, it is difficult to detect if staff find solutions that would be acceptable to the agency and the donors.

Taxation

Taxation or the risk of having to pay money to a local authority for access became something of a ‘public secret’ during the crisis. Almost no agency could admit to it because of the implications involved, but practically everyone knew it was happening to some degree. The issuing of an OFAC license that exempted some of the liabilities of agencies was a welcome development after the famine was declared, but the threat of potential prosecution on other grounds persisted. Fraud and the diversion of aid were an equal risk, and determining what was diversion and what was taxation was often difficult. Again, much of the brunt of this was borne by national staff who had to actually operate on the ground in these circumstances.⁴⁹ The circumstances forced agencies to operate on their own best judgement and keep quiet – there was little solidarity among agencies in opposing the taxation of aid, and there were justified fears of saying much about it.

Donors and risk

A number of agencies interviewed noted that in the period leading up to the famine, donors were uncertain of the risks and benefits of remote management, with the spectre of its inherent risks towering over possible benefits. In particular, donors were concerned about the lack of specific reporting on results that they partly attributed to the implementation modality. Implementing agencies were required to provide exhaustive justifications and laborious reporting to convince donors to support remotely managed programmes. The restrictions related to interactions with Al-Shabaab only compounded the difficulties, raising the need for intense accountability and higher legal liabilities.

49 K. Hedlund *et al.*, above note 45, pp. 66 ff.

Mitigating the risks of remote management

A number of lessons can be drawn about strategies and approaches put in place by humanitarian organisations to mitigate the risks listed above during the response to the famine in south Somalia in 2011. The purpose of this section is to draw out more general implications for policy and practice from Somalia, Afghanistan and other contexts.

Information management

The FSNAU remains the primary source for information on food security, nutrition and livelihoods in Somalia, and its independence ensures neutral and objective analysis; it is key that this remains uncompromised in such a complex political and humanitarian environment. Unfortunately, in November 2011, Al-Shabaab banned FSNAU from operating in areas under its control, effectively cutting off the most vital and consistent source of information from south-central Somalia. This complicated the ability of all organisations to manage assistance remotely. Diversifying sources of information – about both the situation on the ground and the impact of interventions – was critical to managing risk. The sharing of information between key actors is also of crucial importance. Because of a lack of trust, needs assessments and approaches to negotiating access are not shared in Afghanistan. The same applies to other contexts, for example Syria, where NGOs operating cross-border from Turkey are reluctant to share information and to coordinate for fear that information on where they work will be fed back to Damascus or to militant Islamic groups. Information is shared informally or ‘under strict Chatham house rules.’ Coordination, then, becomes that much more difficult.

Partnership

Most organisations in south-central Somalia traditionally use local civil society partners for programme implementation. Partnership, however, requires upkeep and interaction. Access restrictions – and the resulting inability to provide training and direct technical oversight, and to carry out the direct interactions that are important for passing on technical advice, brainstorming ideas, sharing information and so on – compromise programme quality. Staff visits by organisations to delivery sites are virtually impossible, and such direct means of oversight and/or monitoring can no longer be assured. As in Afghanistan and elsewhere, remote management also effectively outsources security risks to the local partner.

Monitoring

In addition to the norm, i.e., partner reports, on-site visits and the like, agencies in Somalia introduced additional approaches to ensure implementation quality and the monitoring of progress and the impact of interventions. Third-party monitoring requires triangulation of information reported by partners with different sources at

the community level, such as community elders, social committees, key informants and visual documentation. In addition, monitors investigate the leakage of humanitarian goods in local markets. Partnerships are increasingly scrutinised, whereby background checks are regularly commissioned on major partners and contractors to identify potentials for improper affiliations. As noted, some agencies established call centres that call every social service facility to check on staff availability, supply stocks and whether the facility is actually operating. But it practically goes without saying that organisations are unable to monitor all issues in the south-central Somalia setting. Particularly difficult are human rights and protection issues, such as recruitment of child soldiers and gender-based violence. In Afghanistan, some remote monitoring still provides good reports on assistance activities, but as in Somalia the quality of the reporting on protection and abuse by local non-state actors or criminal elements is much more difficult in the absence of international staff or senior national staff. The sharing of risk management and other information across organisations constitutes an important resource in such environments.

Decision-making

In the management of any programme, decisions must be made daily on the operations, reacting to changing information or circumstances. When managing remotely in south-central Somalia, some levels of decision-making were delegated to the field staff while other levels remained with senior management in remote locations. Decisions that remained with senior staff were often delayed by the additional steps in communication. Negotiations on the ground were necessarily delegated to field staff. Attempts by local authorities to influence targeting resulted in delays of days and sometimes weeks, and organisations by and large felt this could not be compromised and waited for negotiations to conclude. It is important to note that this did impact the security of national staff, who were undertaking access negotiations on behalf of their organisation.

While the humanitarian situation on the ground in Somalia improved in 2012 and 2013, the situation with regard to access and management remains largely the same. This situation has evolved over the time since then, with a much more capable government taking over the reins in Mogadishu, and some areas of south-central Somalia being won back to central government control by the combined forces of the new government and the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). The evolving military situation on the ground, however, has done little to change the reliance on remote management strategies. The UN has championed the move to put country offices back in Somalia, but the 19 June 2013 bombing at the UN offices in Mogadishu, and the recent terrorist attack in Nairobi, have put those plans somewhat up in the air. Even if country offices are physically located in Mogadishu, the same constraints will continue to exist on field access.

Remote management will no doubt continue to be the *modus operandi* in south-central Somalia for some time to come and will no doubt continue to be a significant feature of humanitarian response in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Syria is

likely to be an important source of lessons in dealing remotely with an array of militant groups, some of whom are openly threatening international agencies.⁵⁰ It is important that the humanitarian community reflects on and incorporates the lessons learned in Somalia in 2011–2012 as well as the broader lessons from Afghanistan and other contexts.

The benefits and risks of remote management and the importance of due diligence

Clearly, under circumstances of extremely limited access, a balance needs to be struck between humanitarian concerns of and for the affected population, and the imperative for humanitarian organisations to mitigate the various risks – security and others – associated with the delivery of this assistance. Thus, assistance is typically carried out subject to the consent or permission of the state. In the case of Somalia, however, the UN Security Council partially claimed that role through UN Security Council Resolution 1916, which could be partially understood as a response to allegations of misuse of humanitarian resources in Somalia due to remote programming.⁵¹ That resolution gave donors a high enough level of assurance that it enabled funding to flow to Somalia, but was problematic from a humanitarian point of view in that it further blurred the lines between the political and humanitarian missions of the UN. In this sense, better self-regulation by the humanitarian system itself is a preferable option.

The fact that remote management is becoming ever more common indicates that agencies often consider the benefits worth the risks. Yet it is the risks, of course, that are controversial and are therefore discussed more often. Staff from agencies interviewed for this article cited numerous benefits, the most common of which were: the reach of aid where it would otherwise have been unavailable (this was especially true during the famine in Somalia); local staff and partners developing a stronger sense of ownership, and often developing new solutions by taking on a larger management role; and agencies that would never otherwise have considered the use of local partners for implementation in their normal organisational strategies becoming aware of and investing in them and building their capacity, both in Afghanistan and Somalia. Other benefits included: more candid feedback from beneficiaries to local partners; expansion of the scope of the work by national staff and partners into areas foreigners could not go; and the development of long-term relationships that may serve as entry points for the international organisation when access improves and increase the likelihood

50 Interviews in Geneva with INGOs working inside Syria raised a host of new issues concerning the difficulties of remote management in the volatile and insecure Syrian context, such as lack of coordination on access negotiation; threats against international staff of NGOs (while national staff are allowed sometimes to operate); and difficulties in finding trustworthy partners on the ground with at least some experience in humanitarian matters.

51 See SC Res. 1916, 19 March 2010, which established *inter alia* a humanitarian exception to the Somalia sanctions regime. See in particular paras. 4 and 5.

that the international agencies will continue to work with those partners long-term in those areas.

All of this raises the question of what constitutes 'due diligence' in humanitarian management decisions in situations of highly restricted access. Fundamentally, due diligence is based on a 'reasonableness' standard – one that asks what a given actor should know in order to act (to prevent or remedy problems) in particular circumstances. Due diligence must also factor in the risk that avoiding decision-making and action may result in no humanitarian assistance reaching affected populations.

At its core, the due diligence principle represents a context-based 'reasonableness' standard. Due diligence asks that an agency adopt an appropriate 'standard of care' based on its obligations or responsibilities in a given context. This standard may be linked to contractual obligations (with specific requirements), but in some cases it may be more general and rely on a broad understanding of the actor's role.

Steps that humanitarians should consider taking to demonstrate adherence to the due-diligence principle include:

- Proactively examine the context within which their activities are taking place, with a view toward highlighting specific challenges,
- Assess potential and actual impacts of a proposed activity – as well as the potential impacts of non-action,
- Determine whether operational and logistical relationships contribute unreasonably to potential misuse, misappropriation and politicisation of humanitarian assistance,
- Determine 'reasonable' levels of loss or taxation before undertaking negotiations with armed groups,
- Put in place additional measures to monitor operations and supply chains based on what is reasonable in the specific context.
- Determine the limits of 'outsourcing' risk and understand the implications for the duty of care of staff, especially when resorting to short-term contracting arrangements that dilute the responsibility of the contracting party,
- Consider the implications of remote management over time, both for the quality of programmes and the safety of staff, especially when a 'temporary' arrangement of last resort tends to become a 'normal' operating modality.

It is important to note that under the due diligence principle, the humanitarian community need only demonstrate that it is making reasonable efforts to avoid contributing to misuse, misappropriation and politicisation, and not that it has a perfect record of delivery. This, in turn, suggests that it would be useful for the humanitarian community to develop a common understanding of due diligence in remote programming, spelling out minimum standards and red lines. This is not likely to be an easy process given the varied practices of agencies and other considerations, but would be valuable in the long-term.

Given the extremely limited access to affected populations during the 2011–2012 famine in Somalia, agencies were forced to make programme decisions

far away from the reality on the ground. Some of the programmes pursued had been in place for some time, but had to be significantly strengthened given the magnitude of the crisis.

The experiences of humanitarian actors in south-central Somalia during the famine underline the conceptual importance of due diligence for better understanding and of framing their choices to accept heightened risk in order to continue to deliver in high-risk environments. Major practices include partnerships, improved information management and third-party monitoring, but all rely on some level of negotiated access. While these practices helped to enable a critical response to the famine, they all carried costs in terms of increased risk, as well as staff time and financial obligations.

An additional complication is the tension between Dunantist and Wilsonian agencies on the issue of access and acceptance, particularly in Afghanistan. For the former, independence and negotiating with whoever controls territory are key. The latter, meanwhile, have to balance their humanitarian activities with their relationship with the government (or even the Provincial Reconstruction Teams),⁵² for whom they implement longer-term rehabilitation or state-building projects. Maintaining an independent profile is a difficult challenge for multi-mandate agencies that are seen by non-state actors and segments of the population as aligned with foreign military forces.

Although remote management has enabled some amount of assistance and essential services to reach vulnerable populations in crisis, it is equally important to stress that it is not an optimal mode of operation. Remote management of programmes has the tendency to become a self-filling prophecy. Physical presence is vastly more fruitful – not only for the quality of humanitarian programmes and decision-making elements of humanitarian operations, but also for protection. Experience strongly suggests a relationship between physical presence and contact with populations and authorities, the ‘acceptance’ of humanitarian organisations, and the degree to which acceptance results in improved protection of local populations.

Traditionally, the ICRC and other agencies involved in protection work would count on the presence of international staff for verification of violations or monitoring of protection activities, especially when the collection of information and analysis on threats and patterns of abuse could prove difficult and dangerous for local staff to carry out. Confronted with increasing situations where access is restricted or not possible, organisations including the ICRC have had to become more agile and creative, in particular by building up networks of trusted intermediaries in order to access reliable information. For example, the work of UNAMA to reduce the incidence of civilian casualties in Afghanistan benefited from prior informal networks including with local civil society actors, government

52 Editor’s Note: Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), currently overseen by ISAF, are joint integrated civilian-military structures, staffed and supported by ISAF contributing countries, and operating at the provincial level in Afghanistan. See ISAF, *Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Handbook*, 4th ed., March 2009, available at: <https://publicintelligence.net/isaf-provincial-reconstruction-team-prt-handbook/>.

personnel and communities or individuals associated with elements of the armed opposition. UNAMA routinely received reliable information from trusted sources, including mobile phone video footage of incidents involving casualties in remote areas. Context, however, is key: in Afghanistan these networks were often built on years of impartial humanitarian programming and presence by aid agencies. In Somalia – or in Syria – such networks are much weaker or do not exist, and setting them up from scratch will always be problematic.

The extent to which protection activities can continue without the presence of international or senior national staff is of course very context-specific. In some cases, good programming can make up for the absence of experienced on-site staff (e.g. camp layout or the provision of firewood to women can contribute to reduced risks of gender-based violence). However, activities around norm compliance or enhancing respect for the protected status of civilians may be more difficult to undertake. In many cases the outsourcing of risk to local staff, who often have their families on the ground, works against engaging in protection issues or inhibits analyses of patterns of harm detrimental to the safety and well-being of civilians.

The ability to manage crises remotely is important when physical access is simply not possible. The humanitarian community could benefit from a broader and more systematic evaluation of the practice and its effectiveness in a number of different contexts. If the suspension of presence is temporary, remote management may be a good approach in the short term. However, as mentioned above, experience from our two case studies and elsewhere tends to demonstrate that it obeys a law of diminishing returns. Guidelines and manuals may help, but the risk of improved remote management is that the systems put in place to guarantee that assistance gets to people become their own rationale. Rather than engaging directly, agencies might simply decide to reduce security risks by managing crises remotely. Such decisions could become increasingly problematic.

Remote management – necessary as it might sometimes be – is not as good as being physically present; it should continue to be an exception, not the rule. If not, remote management and the recourse to other distance technologies will radically change the way in which agencies look at conflict and crises. Over time, distance fundamentally changes the very nature of the humanitarian relationship.

Looking ahead: remote management and the future of humanitarian action

In the preceding pages we have documented a number of different types of adaptation aimed at allowing humanitarian agencies to continue to work in environments that are perceived to be insecure or where direct access is denied. Remote management is the broader category that comprises different sub-types: remote programming, remote control, remote support, remote monitoring, remote partnership and so on. Linked to remote management are digital mapping and other cyber-technologies that also substitute for the need for a presence on the ground. What these approaches have in common is the increased distance in the chain that

separates programme management and decision-making from purported beneficiaries. In extreme cases, this could take the form of aid or cash drops or the complete virtualisation of aid, for example, through needs assessments conducted by drones or satellite imagery and the use of credit cards or mobile phone cash transfers and other technologies that involve little or no physical contact between aid agencies and vulnerable groups.

Various analysts⁵³ have noted the parallels between the increased use of distance technologies by mainstream (Western) aid agencies and the use of drones and other technologies that avoid or replace close combat by (Western) armed forces. In both cases, the unacceptability of (military) casualties and the perceived increase in attacks against (civilian) aid workers result in heightened risk-averse postures, bunkerisation and other measures that reduce or even preclude physical contact with local populations. In the fraught urban environments of Kabul, Mogadishu or Baghdad, there is little to distinguish the blast walls and razor wire of the archipelagos of military bases and those of the UN, private security companies, civilian contractors and, increasingly, NGOs. This is not lost on the local population and on anti-government elements: the fact that aid agencies shelter behind much the same concrete fortifications as the military can only reinforce the perception that they are part of a joint enterprise. Even in less insecure environments, foreign aid workers tend to congregate in gated communities, recreation facilities and restaurants where access is regulated and locals are often unwelcome. Large numbers of expatriates live and work in the same place, rarely get outside the wire and even less often get outside the capital city. They move in armoured vehicles between protected islands: for all practical purposes, they live in a virtual Afghanistan, or Somalia, or Darfur.

These adaptations to insecurity go hand-in-hand with the increasing recourse to remote management, and in all likelihood reinforce each other and contribute to making remote management the default option in many situations. More research is required to better understand the triggers that lead to the adoption of remote management and to what extent there is a 'remote management trap' that makes remote management appear as the preferred option.

Anti-terror legislation and insurance and liability concerns, as well as the security training provided to aid workers in insecure environments, compound the distance issue.⁵⁴ Rather than focusing on trust, much of the emphasis is on protection from the risks of interacting with local groups. As a result, humanitarians' understanding of the human condition – long based on empathy, conversation, drinking tea and discussing culture and politics, if not living in the community – has become increasingly mediated by technological proxies and the computer screen. As they rely more on remote management and distance

53 For example, M. Duffield, above note 2, p. 276. See also Sarah Collinson, Mark Duffield *et al.*, *Paradoxes of Presence: Risk Management and Aid Culture in Challenging Environments*, HPG, Overseas Development Institute, London, March 2013.

54 M. Duffield, above note 2, p. 278.

technologies, aid workers risk being cut off from the actual reality of the conditions of the people they intend to help.

In sum, remote management is now commonly associated with the decade-long retreat of international aid workers – especially those operating in contested or fragile states – into fortified aid compounds. Such bunkerisation is a visible means of reducing exposure to an aid environment that is now judged uncertain and prone to surprise, if not hostile. It also makes access to the agency by beneficiaries seeking accountability or redress or simply information much more difficult, if not impossible. An extreme example of cutting the locals out of the humanitarian equation was post-earthquake Haiti, where coordination meetings were held in the US military compound at the airport – a manifestation of the physical distance, and in some cases mistrust, between the aid agencies and vulnerable groups.⁵⁵

Remote management aims to mitigate the problems associated with the resulting physical distance from the field. At its most basic, bunkered – or risk-averse – international aid managers now often routinely work well outside of affected areas, through intermediaries able to operate beyond the strict security restrictions governing the movement of international and senior national staff. As we have seen, subcontracting and risk transfer arrangements typically utilise local staff, local NGOs, community organisations and private contractors – and, in some cases, as in Afghanistan, even military actors. This routine use of intermediaries has increased the organisational layers that now separate policies, assessments and programme planning from actual implementation on the ground. Problems of how to independently verify and evaluate the impact of assistance, not to mention protection, activities are now acute.

Aid in fragile states is in the midst of what appears to be a major transformation. The time-tested anthropological-type approaches for understanding local situations are being replaced by the technologies of geospatial remote data collection, the promise of ‘big data’ and the algorithms to interpret it.⁵⁶ In Darfur, satellite imagery has been used by the UN to track population movements and to assess natural resources, in particular the strategic availability of water. There are reports that the UN mission has been using a ‘humanitarian drone’ in the eastern DRC. OCHA has produced a very optimistic report on humanitarianism in a networked age. This is the latest in a growing literature advocating cyber-humanitarianism, in this case growing out of OCHA’s experience in Haiti and more recent emergencies. There seems to be a potentially radical shift towards the use of technologies of distance, and not only in cases of denied access or widespread insecurity. The normalisation of remote management and other distance technologies, rather than their use as a last resort, carries potentially huge risks for the very nature of the humanitarian endeavour.

55 Mark Schuller, ‘Haiti’s Bitter Harvest: The NGOization of Humanitarian Aid’, in A. Donini (ed.), *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, pp. 179–193, Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA, 2012.

56 OCHA, *Humanitarianism in the Network Age*, United Nations, New York, 2013.

These developments raise a host of ethical issues for the future of humanitarian action. Undoubtedly, humanitarians can put distance technologies to positive use. They act as a simplifier and accelerator of tedious, time-consuming processes. They can allow spontaneous communities of vulnerable groups to emerge and articulate their needs, monitor agency activities, and broadcast information on programme ineffectiveness or critical issues, often bypassing the state or even established mainstream agencies (as in Haiti). They can be used to document human rights abuses (Darfur) or civilian casualties (Afghanistan). They can act as a tool for democratising the humanitarian enterprise and its knowledge base. At the same time, it is important to stress that many of the new cyber-technologies were originally developed for military and intelligence-gathering purposes. They are vulnerable to data mining for surveillance or political purposes; the information they carry can be manipulated or shut down at a moment's notice. They may well result in more rather than less political instrumentalisation of humanitarian action and more rather than less mistrust between the aid agencies and the communities they intend to serve.

The message from the proponents of 'big data' to the established humanitarian agencies is that, if they are to remain relevant, they must adapt to the network age and, in particular, open themselves to public-private partnerships. This adaptation is embraced by OCHA and a growing galaxy of non-profit and for-profit entities ranging from Ushahidi⁵⁷ to the innovation units of major INGOs.⁵⁸ Remote technologies are obviously here to stay. If they are to have a progressive future, however, they need demilitarising and opening to greater democratic control. More importantly, there is a clear risk that cyber-humanitarianism could contribute to deepening the disconnects and power differentials in the aid enterprise – by lengthening and technologising the chain of intermediaries between donors, agency decision-makers, aid workers on the ground and vulnerable groups. The humanitarian relationship already suffers from the lack of reciprocity between the giver and the receiver. Far too often, it is seen or felt as a dominant discourse where power is embedded in the nature of the top-down relationship. These features will be exacerbated by an uncritical use of remote management and other distance technologies.

The strength of traditional humanitarian approaches resided in the proximity and empathy that were at the core of a relationship which, even if it was unequal, stressed the common humanity of those involved. The future of humanitarian action as a compassionate endeavour is likely to hinge on its ability to maintain a critical balance between the promise of technology and the reality of

57 On Ushahidi, see Patrick Meier, 'New Information Technologies and Their Impact on the Humanitarian Sector', in *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 93, No. 884, December 2011, pp. 1239–1263.

58 See, among many others, Save the Children's radio and SMS initiative; CARE International partnering with telecom providers on the 'Digital Early Warning Systems' project (summary available at: www.humanitarianinnovation.org/projects/large-grants/care-international); the 'Random Hacks of Kindness' joint initiative between Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Hewlett-Packard, NASA and the World Bank (available at: www.rhok.org); see also Gaele Sundelin, 'Iris-Scanning Technology Streamlines Refugee Registration Process — UNHCR', in *The Jordan Times*, 21 July 2013, available at: <http://jordantimes.com/iris-scanning-technology-streamlines-refugee-registration-process---unhcr>.

peoples' lives on the ground. Without a modicum of presence, empathy and solidarity, the humanitarian endeavour is at risk of losing its meaning.

Areas for future research

This article represents a first stab at a series of complex and under-studied issues. It raises more questions than answers and, ideally, more in-depth evidence-based research should follow it up. A number of key issues would need to be addressed through thematic and country-based studies in order to get a better and more comprehensive understanding of what works, what does not, and what the implications of remote management are for the future of humanitarian action.

In closing, we offer some of the questions that further research would need to answer:

- Is remote management simply a means of outsourcing risk to partners or local organisations? What is the cost to those organisations?
- Is there scope for an overall common approach in addressing the pros and cons of remote management in insecure environments to be addressed at least in part through joint humanitarian negotiations?
- Does remote management tend over time to become self-perpetuating? In places where it has become entrenched (such as Somalia and Afghanistan), has it in effect become the 'new normal'?
- Are remote sensing, reliance on 'big data' and other remote technologies partly what drive the tendency towards the increasing remoteness of humanitarian management, or is the development of such technology merely a means of coping with a deteriorating security and access situation?
- Is it possible to document the impact of remote management and distance technologies on respect for humanitarian principles and in particular on the protection of at-risk groups?
- Do 'Dunantist' organisations have a different approach to remote management from 'Wilsonian' or multi-mandate agencies? Is one approach more effective than the other in insecure environments?