

# Humanitarian Exchange and Research Centre (HERE)

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The role of 'mandates' in humanitarian priority  
setting for international non-governmental  
organisations in situations of armed conflict

**Concept Note**  
**September 2016**

## BACKGROUND<sup>1</sup>

While the humanitarian sector has grown exponentially over the past 10 to 15 years, its capacity to operate in armed conflict remains limited. When it comes to identifying sources to, and remedies for, this problem, there are studies that have considered specific elements and contexts, such as for example the needs-based funding gap,<sup>2</sup> or the issue of securing access in volatile environments.<sup>3</sup> Little attention has however been given to operational ‘mandates’, and the degree to which they stand in the way, or enable, organisations to deliver humanitarian response in armed conflicts. “*The role of ‘mandates’ in humanitarian priority setting for international non-governmental organisations in situations of armed conflict*” study (hereinafter referred to as the ‘Mandates Study’ or the ‘Study’) is based on a recognition that the majority of international non-governmental organisations that are active in humanitarian response define their purposes broadly, to include both short-term emergency response and long-term development engagement. In contrast, a small minority of organisations exclusively focus on life-saving assistance in emergency settings. In humanitarian discourse, these approaches are frequently distinguished as ‘multi-’ or ‘single-mandate’. On the one hand, proponents of the latter approach have argued that relief work is more effective when carried out as a sole purpose, since other goals may detract from the priority of saving lives and can endanger perceptions of impartiality and neutrality. On the other hand, others have argued for more wide-ranging purposes, meaning that humanitarian relief assistance is more sustainable when shaped in conjunction with

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for example community development, livelihoods support and peace-building. Beyond such theoretical debates on the ‘virtues’ and ‘vices’ of ‘single-’ and ‘multi-mandates’, there is however a lack of evidence and common understanding, both with regard to the practical opportunities and limitations that would arise from different ‘mandates’, and with regard to the specific meaning of the term. It is this lack that this Study is set out to address. The Mandates Study intends to fill this gap, and in doing so, it will not only enable humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders to better understand the implications of organisational mandates for work in armed conflict, but it will also respond to recent calls for the humanitarian community to transcend the so-called humanitarian-development divide – not by pushing for convergence, but by providing an opportunity to better serve affected populations, by capitalising on complementarity.

<sup>11</sup> This Concept Note builds on an earlier version, that was developed in September 2015, following a broad range of discussions with INGOs and some donor governments. The document also draws from a detailed Methodological Note that was elaborated during the initiation phase of the study. HERE would like to thank the German Federal Foreign Office and Welthungerhilfe for their generous financial support of this phase. Importantly, the views presented in this document can in no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the German Federal Foreign Office or Welthungerhilfe.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Poole, *Bridging the needs-based funding gap: NGO field perspectives* (Geneva: NRC, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> SAVE Research Programme, *Improving the evidence base on delivering aid in highly insecure environments* ([www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/save](http://www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/save)).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The Study is carried out from a neutral perspective, and it does therefore not intend to answer the normative question of “which type of ‘mandate’ is best”, but rather to clarify what differences there are between organisations in terms of how they set priorities and come to strategic choices, and what the advantages and disadvantages of different ‘mandates’ are.

**In doing so, the research has two main goals:**

- ⇒ To enable humanitarian organisations (and other stakeholders) to understand the implications of different priority settings and strategic choices for their capacity to work in armed conflict.
- ⇒ To shed light on how differences in priority setting and strategic choices between organisations can be successfully combined to foster effective humanitarian action on the ground, in situations of armed conflict.

To achieve these objectives, the Study will address the following research questions:

- 1. Is it helpful to talk about mandate-distinctions? What does it mean?**
- 2. In regard to humanitarian organisations’ capacity to work in situations of armed conflict, what opportunities and/or limitations arise from different ‘mandates’?**
- 3. Where do these opportunities and/or limitations appear to allow for complementarity between organisations? Where do they engender competition or tensions, such as policy differences, incommensurable priorities, and different target groups?**

### Working definitions and operationalisation of concepts

**Mandate:** While the term ‘mandate’ can in a strict sense be seen as the legal framework that defines the responsibilities that an organisation has been given by a mandating authority, it can also be understood more broadly as the different kinds of legitimacy, mission, values, and goals that guide an organisation’s work. It is in this latter sense that this Study approaches the word in its working title and research questions, in the hope the Study itself will shed more light on the precise meaning and usefulness of the concept.

**Priority setting:** The dynamic process of deciding what goals or actions are most important, and the commitment of resources to that decision.

**Strategic choices:** The specific steps an organisation intends to take to pursue its vision, mission, values, policies, and/or primary goal.

**Capacity:** An organisation’s ability to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve its goals. Capacity may include physical means, institutional abilities, societal infrastructure as well as human skills or collective attributes such as leadership and management. Capacity also may be described as capability.

**Complementarity:** When the combined application of a set of practices and/or activities originating from various organisations can be rationally justified and empirically demonstrated to have a synergistic effect.

## BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

The participating organisations are the crucial element of this Study, and in order to best answer the research questions, it is significant that the participating organisations represent a range of activities in different sectors, and that they are of varying historical and ideological origins. Approximately ten organisations have expressed their interest in participating,<sup>4</sup> and together they ensure a balanced representation. Each participating organisation will sign a Memorandum of Understanding with HERE, and nominate a focal person to act as primary interlocutor for the Study.

### The benefits foreseen for participating organisations include:

- The opportunity to better serve affected populations by capitalising on complementarity to foster effective humanitarian action on the ground, in situations of armed conflict.
- Targeted research leading both to general insights in terms of shared best practices, and to organisation-specific insights delivered individually and confidentially.
- The chance to exchange and network with other humanitarian organisations.

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This Study does not start from an assumption that the participating organisations fit into a specific type of ‘mandate’, but based on insights drawn from the existing literature, it will disaggregate elements which can be considered to play a role in terms of an organisation’s priority-setting and strategic choices. It will then cross-analyse these elements with the constraints and

opportunities that the participating organisations perceive with regard to their capacity to work in situations of armed conflict. In doing so, it hopes to be able to identify trends which could inform the specific enabling factors of various approaches, and thereby help organisations to understand how to achieve complementarity in their work where helpful. This approach appears particularly valuable in view of the wide variety of humanitarian actors. Indeed, the literature at the basis of this Study has demonstrated that any effort to type-cast a specific member of the ‘family’ of humanitarian organisations on the basis of its ‘mandate’ requires careful consideration of a variety of issues. For reasons of feasibility, this Study can only consider a restricted number of organisations, which means that in order to ensure comparability, it is better to look directly at the factors that influence the definition of ‘mandates’, rather than attempting to group organisations in terms of different types or categories of mandates. An added bonus of such an approach is that it allows for an unbiased study, since by not categorising the participating organisations from the start with regard to various criteria, it places legal-technical, historical, substantive and ideological influences on an equal footing in the analysis.

### The Mandates Study consists of three main tasks:

1. Analyse the participating organisations in the light of criteria identified in the literature as playing a role with regard to the formulation of the ‘mandate’;
2. Identify which challenges/constraints various organisations highlight, and what they see as their added value/enabling characteristics, especially as regards their work in situations of armed conflict;
3. Assess to what extent it is possible to draw linkages between the different approaches through which organisations set priorities and make strategic choices, and the constraints and/or enabling factors they perceive.

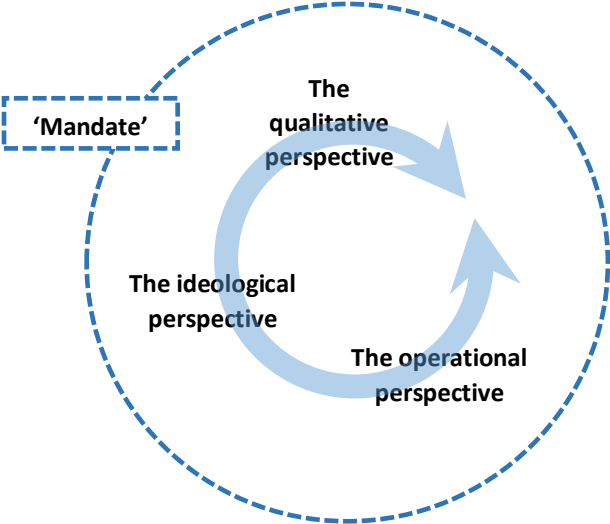
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<sup>4</sup> The final number needs to be confirmed.

In view of these tasks, the analytical framework for this Study can be articulated around two main axes: the substantive issues that the research will cover, and the structural and temporal dimensions that will be borne in mind in the analysis.

In order to assess the meaning and impact of the mandate-distinction, the Study will consider criteria highlighted in the literature as having a bearing on the formulation of organisational mandates (see the separate literature review for this Study). These criteria can be grouped in terms of an ideological perspective, an operational perspective, and a qualitative or evaluative perspective. The ideological perspective concerns the values and principles advocated by an organisation, the operational perspective the activities that it engages in, and the qualitative perspective considers the approach through which the organisation takes and gives account of its actions.

Together, these three perspectives cover the stages at which an organisation’s priority setting or strategic choices come into play. As illustrated by the figure on the next page, they are closely interrelated. Indeed, the literature review for this Study highlighted how the



ideological viewpoint of an organisation can be argued to influence its activities, but also its stance with regard to accountability. At the same time, the existence of organisational frameworks can be seen to inform the types of activities an organisation engages in, and the ideological stance of an organisation can also be viewed as dependent on its operational substantive focus.

The second task of the Mandates Study concerns the identification of the practical limitations and opportunities identified by the participating organisations with regard to their capacity to work in situations of armed conflict. The Study will not assess the actual outcome of activities, or the general performance of the organisations, but it will attempt to capture the constraints and/or enabling factors that organisations perceive themselves with regard to their capacity. In this regard, the data collection will attempt to cover both internal and external factors, as follows:

- **internal factors:** e.g. organisational choices in terms of staffing, logistics, risk tolerance, investment *etc.*, application of the humanitarian principles, degree of financial independence.
- **external factors:** e.g. funding availability, HR, access issues, structural and contextual particularities, synergies with other stakeholders.

In view of gathering programme and project-level insight, the Mandates Study will consider **four country case-studies**. This number of case-studies has been chosen as it is large enough allow for the identification of trends and tendencies, albeit small enough to remain realistic considering the timeframe and the resources of the Study. HERE suggests to consider in particular Afghanistan, Mali, South Sudan, and the Syria context for further study, with regard to WASH, food security, and health activities in particular.<sup>5</sup> The research will look

<sup>5</sup> The elaboration of this shortlist weighed a number of criteria, such as the type of conflict (e.g. large-scale armed conflict with a high international interest, or smaller-scale regional or local-based conflicts); phase of the conflict (ongoing or transitional) and low or high intensity fighting; humanitarian needs (e.g. based on CAPs/SRPs requirements, displacement numbers, number of people targeted); types of operations (direct presence or remote control operations); integrated or non-integrated UN missions; security of humanitarian actors (e.g. based on the safety & security of humanitarian personnel

at ongoing programmes/projects, while accounting for possible differences in terms of whether they are currently in an initial stage, in their mid-term, or in a phasing-out period.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND TOOLS FOR DATA COLLECTION

The Mandates Study will be mixing qualitative and quantitative research methods, incorporating the collection of both secondary and primary data. The **mixed methods approach**, using triangulation of sources, allows for capturing both the perceptions of individual people working at various levels in the organisations, and the official positioning and strategic choices of the different organisations.

Secondary data will be collected through a **desk review**, which will include independent studies and research based on publicly available documents, as well as on documents provided by participating organisations. The desk review will also undertake a **structured text analysis** of appropriate documentation, in view of gaining further insight into the public positioning and strategic choices of the different organisations. The desk research will include documents provided by the participating organisations. An indicative list of solicited documents/information will be sent to the participating organisations.

Primary data will be collected through a **quantitative survey**, as well as **semi-structured interviews** targeting at **HQ and field level**. The coding for this Study will endeavour to determine factors which intervene in the formulation of the participating organisations' 'mandate', and any possible correlation between these factors and the challenges and/or opportunities that the organisations identify when it comes to their capacity to work in situations of armed conflict. The resulting data will be analysed using statistical methods.

The data collection process will be explained to all informants involved, and the data collected will be kept confidential and only used in anonymised form. A consent form will be signed by all individual interviewees in the participating organisations, in the HQ and in field locations (a draft consent form is included in Annex).

### HQ Visits

In most organisations, even those with a decentralised structure, the HQ plays the main role in terms of the strategic orientation of the organisation. HQ also coordinates or influences relations with donors, public positioning, policy thinking and other dimensions of interest for the Study. The HQ visits will therefore serve as preparation ahead of the field visits by offering a conceptual picture of the organisation's policies and decision-making processes, which can then be compared against actual practice in the field.

The HERE research team will conduct interviews with key informants in person, and when not possible, by phone/Skype. Focus groups at the HQ level can also be considered to generate a consolidated picture for the organisation in question. HQ visits will last approximately two days for each organisation visited. In order to ensure that the visits are as profitable and efficient as possible, the HERE research team will work together with the focal points of participating organisations to ensure that relevant policy documents are shared ahead of time and relevant key informants are identified.

The initial analysis gathered through the open-ended questions of the semi-structured interviews at HQ level will provide a sound ground-work for the subsequent definition of the close-ended questions for the **quantitative survey**. Indeed, based on the findings of the HQ visits, the HERE research team will develop the

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report); presence of participating organisations (direct or remote); regional diversity; logistical/security capacity of participating organisations to support field visits; and capacity and willingness of respective governments to provide information for the Study.

questions for the survey, and then pilot test this survey in one of the participating organisations. Depending on the outcome of this pilot test, the survey will be adapted, and then sent to the other participating organisations, at HQ and field level. The precise size of the population the surveys will target be established based on in-depth studies of the structure of each of the participating organisations, but the aim will be to achieve a dataset which reflects the whole body of each organisation. The focal points of the participating organisations will work with the HERE research team to ensure that the survey reaches an as large a target population as possible, in view of guaranteeing an adequate response-rate.

### Field Visits

Subsequent to the HQ visits, the aim will be to analyse how the identified organisational policies and values translate to the field work in countries affected by armed conflict. The field visits will last **10 to 20 days in each country**. In each context, the visiting research team will work with as many participating organisations as possible. In order to avoid the perception of a possible bias, the team will be hosted by different participating organisations during its visit.

The main research tools used during the field visit will be **semi-structured interviews and/or focus group sessions** with relevant personnel from each organisation present in the country, and a **final workshop with country directors**. Ahead of the field visits, the focal point of each organisation will ensure that their senior staff in the country are well-aware of the Study. The focal point would also be expected to provide assistance in setting up meetings and appointments, *etc.* The mapping of stakeholders will facilitate the identification of relevant key informants. While the interview guidance will have been developed in advance, the country situation will provide further context on the relevance of questions and specific issues that should be examined. The

aggregated outcomes of the interviews will be shared during the workshop in order to stimulate debate as per the research questions of the Study.

Field visit 1 will be used to test the proposed methodology and adapt it for the continuation of the Study. Field visit 2 will be carried out by all team members who will split into two teams within the country (especially relevant if the country is large and/or with logistical constraints). Field visits 3 and 4 will be carried out in parallel with two team members in each country.

### ADVISORY GROUP

The Mandates Study intends to make use of an Advisory Group, which will act as a sounding board for the Study's development. It will have no managerial or oversight responsibilities. Its key tasks will include providing advice on the scope of the Study, comments on the findings, and advising on the follow-up to the Study. The Advisory Group shall act together, through the combined strengths of their individual professional contributions, to ensure the technical and practical soundness of the study approach. The Advisory Group shall operate under the guidance of the HERE research team, who will effectively act as the Advisory Group's Secretariat. The guidance provided by the Advisory Group is not binding on the HERE research team, which conducts this Study independently, and any input will be incorporated, as appropriate.

The Advisory Group shall consist of as many members as the number of participating organisations in the Study (one focal point per organisation). The participating organisations will inform HERE on who will be formally part of the Advisory Group. Other individuals with specific expertise relevant for the Study may also be invited to attend meetings from time to time, to provide the Advisory Group with information on specific items on the agenda. Local advisory groups can also be separately established at the country-level to inform more specifically the fieldwork in that country. The

composition of the local advisory groups will reflect that of the main one.

The Advisory Group will meet as required to fulfil its remit and will meet at least 4 times during the duration of the Study: at the end of the preparation phase, after the first field visit, after the last field visit and before the validation workshop. Two of the meetings are expected to be in person while the others will happen by phone conference. Urgent matters may be considered through email correspondence. Minutes, agendas and papers will normally be circulated to members of the Advisory Group at least five days in advance of the meeting. Late papers may be circulated up to two days before the meeting. It is expected that Advisory Group members should be able to devote approximately 1 day per month on Advisory Group related work such as reviewing of documents, online dialogues and teleconferences, liaising with internal colleagues as well as be able to travel for at least two of the Advisory Group meetings.

## RESEARCH OUTPUTS

**One public report** will present the findings from the Mandates Study, to inform the sector on good practices and lessons learnt during the research. The final report will seek to ensure a balance in its presentation between sharing relevant findings and maintaining confidentiality of information where appropriate. We propose that participating organisations not be named in connection with specific findings, but rather that these are presented thematically and in general. The research team will work from the start with participating organisations to define clear guidelines for sharing information gathered that will allow for a rich analysis while still respecting the sensitivities organisations might have. The draft of the report will be shared with the Advisory Group ahead of the final validation workshop, which will provide the opportunity to review findings and agree on conclusions. The research team will work to ensure that trust is maintained with the

participating organisations who, on their part, also agree to HERE's independence in writing the report.

**Individual debriefings** for each organisation in which individual organisational performance issues are raised. These debriefings will tackle the (sensitive) issues identified during the field visit that are not included or detailed in the public report. This discussion should encourage internal and mutual learning.

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