

Humanitarian Organizations And Peace Processes

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Introduction

Humanitarian organizations and peacebuilding groups often work in the same places, but they are not doing the same job. Humanitarian agencies are mainly concerned with saving lives, reducing suffering, and protecting dignity. Peacebuilding looks more directly at the relationships, institutions, and grievances that contribute to conflict.

The two fields can support one another, but they can also pull in different directions. A humanitarian organization may welcome peace while still needing to remain neutral enough to reach people on all sides. That tension becomes especially important when donors or governments expect aid organizations to become part of a wider political strategy.

Peacebuilding and the Meaning of Peace

Johan Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace remains useful. Negative peace refers broadly to the absence of direct violence, while positive peace asks whether the conditions that produce violence have also changed (Galtung, 1969).

A ceasefire can stop people from shooting at one another without resolving displacement, exclusion, economic grievances, or distrust. For that reason, peacebuilding often continues long after formal negotiations have ended. Lederach (1997) treats it as a long-term process of rebuilding relationships rather than a single diplomatic event.

Humanitarian Principles

The principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence are especially important for organizations working in conflict settings. Humanity focuses attention on suffering. Impartiality requires assistance to be based on need rather than political or social identity. Neutrality helps an organization maintain confidence among opposing sides, while independence protects humanitarian decisions from political or military control.

These principles have practical consequences. If an armed group believes that an aid organization is working for the opposing government or military, access to civilians may disappear. Neutrality is

therefore not simply an abstract moral position; in some situations it is what makes humanitarian work possible.

Why Aid and Peacebuilding Became Linked

After the Cold War, donors and international organizations became increasingly interested in connecting relief, development, governance, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. Humanitarian agencies were often among the few organizations with a presence in communities affected by violence, so it was natural to ask whether they could also support dialogue, reconciliation, or early warning.

That opportunity should not be exaggerated. Delivering food or medical care does not automatically make an organization qualified to mediate a political conflict. Peacebuilding can require skills in negotiation, political analysis, justice, governance, and long-term community work that may sit outside a humanitarian agency's expertise.

Aid Can Change the Conflict Environment

Humanitarian assistance is never delivered into an empty space. Resources affect relationships. A food distribution can reduce hardship but may also create arguments about who receives assistance. Hiring local staff can provide income while being perceived as favoring one group. Cash support may strengthen local markets but create security risks if the system is poorly designed.

Conflict sensitivity means thinking about these consequences before and during a program. It does not mean distributing assistance according to which group is considered more supportive of peace. Humanitarian aid should still be based on need.

Neutrality and Political Pressure

The greatest difficulty appears when peacebuilding is closely tied to a particular government, settlement, or state-building project. A humanitarian organization may believe that the political project is desirable and still decide that joining it would damage its ability to operate impartially.

Different organizations make different choices. Some NGOs combine relief, development, advocacy, and peacebuilding under one mandate. Others deliberately keep humanitarian activity separate. What matters is clarity. An organization should not describe itself as neutral while acting as a political instrument for one side.

Local Organizations and Local Knowledge

International organizations can easily overestimate how well they understand a conflict. Local organizations usually know more about community history, relationships, informal authority, and the practical consequences of outside intervention. That knowledge is valuable, but “local” does not automatically mean neutral or representative.

A community organization may reflect a particular class, ethnic group, religious network, political affiliation, or family structure. Good partnership therefore requires respect for local knowledge alongside careful questions about who the organization represents and who may be missing from the conversation.

The Sudanese Women’s Voice for Peace Case

Hilhorst and van Leeuwen (2005) examined the Sudanese Women’s Voice for Peace (SWVP), a local women’s peace organization connected to conflict-affected South Sudan. The group gained international attention and received training and financial support. With that support came pressure to formalize its structure.

Formalization brought resources, but it also changed relationships inside the organization. Some members became paid while others remained volunteers. Jealousy arose among volunteers who did not receive a salary, and new administrative demands created further tension. The relationship with the donor also changed as reporting and accountability requirements became more important.

This case is useful because it shows that “capacity building” can have social consequences. Money, salaries, job titles, and formal reporting do not simply strengthen an organization; they can also alter status and power within it.

Donor Influence

Donors are entitled to expect financial controls, safeguarding, and evidence that funds are being used properly. Problems begin when donor priorities become so dominant that the local organization starts responding more to external reporting requirements than to the community it was created to serve.

Before accepting funding, organizations should understand the restrictions attached to it. They should also be honest with communities about where objectives come from rather than presenting donor priorities as if they emerged locally.

Coordination Without Losing Independence

Conflict settings often involve governments, United Nations agencies, NGOs, development organizations, donors, military actors, religious groups, and local organizations. Coordination can prevent duplication and reveal gaps in services, but not every piece of information should be shared with everyone.

Humanitarian organizations may need to protect the identities, locations, or personal details of affected people. They also need to avoid becoming so closely associated with military or political actors that their independence becomes doubtful.

Women and Peace Processes

Women's organizations can play an important role in peacebuilding, especially when formal negotiations overlook the experiences of people dealing with displacement, caregiving, sexual violence, and loss of livelihoods. However, women should not be treated as one political group with identical interests.

Class, ethnicity, religion, age, political identity, and personal experience all shape participation. Inclusion is stronger when women are treated as political and civic actors in their own right rather than only as mothers or victims of conflict.

Measuring a Contribution to Peace

It is difficult for one organization to prove that it "created peace." Violence may decrease because of negotiations, military developments, economic change, local leadership, international pressure, or several factors at once.

Programs should therefore measure outcomes that are closer to what they actually do. These might include whether different groups can access services, whether local disputes are resolved more effectively, whether marginalized people participate in dialogue, or whether a partner organization can operate more responsibly.

When a Humanitarian Organization Should Say No

There are situations in which taking on a peacebuilding role would be unwise. The activity may compromise access, require support for one side, exceed the organization's expertise, or create unacceptable security risks.

Declining such a role does not mean that the organization is indifferent to peace. Keeping people

alive, protecting dignity, and preserving essential services can be an important contribution in their own right.

Conclusion

Humanitarian organizations can affect the conditions in which peace becomes possible, but they should be careful about claiming a role they cannot perform well. Their strongest contribution often comes from doing humanitarian work responsibly: understanding the conflict, avoiding foreseeable harm, respecting local knowledge, and protecting impartial access.

Partnerships with local peacebuilding groups can be valuable, but international support changes organizations as well as helping them. The SWVP case shows why donors need to think about salaries, status, authority, and reporting requirements, not only about program outputs.

The relationship between humanitarian action and peacebuilding is therefore best understood as cooperation with boundaries. The two can support one another without becoming the same thing.

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