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Marawi's Humanitarian Challenges: Limits of Localising Aid

By Martin Searle

Synopsis

While the occupation of Marawi City has ended the immediate humanitarian emergency, efforts to limit the appeal of any future insurgency are creating new humanitarian challenges. These must be handled shrewdly to avoid worsening an already delicate relationship between the Philippine authorities and the local Maranao people.

Commentary

DEFEATING THE Islamic State-allied insurgents in Marawi City presented the Philippine government with many political and strategic dilemmas, including several born of the humanitarian imperative to help those most in need. Fighting a messy urban conflict with an adversary demonstrably willing to murder civilians resulted in often-extensive collateral damage.

By one measure 95% of the structures within six kilometres of the main downtown conflict area were heavily damaged. An estimated 200,000 people were displaced. This was at a time when maintaining local hearts and minds was crucial, making facilitating humanitarian aid both a moral requirement and a strategic priority.

Role of Local Aid Groups

This paradox – in which a belligerent both inflicts and seeks to alleviate suffering – is familiar to any asymmetrical conflict. [As argued in a previous RSIS Commentary](#), when that belligerent is a state, the paradox raises a critical challenge to the fundamental trust on which state-society relations are based. It becomes easy and useful for opponents to portray the state as contributing to the humanitarian crisis. Insurgents in

Marawi certainly employed this tactic to try and win support for their proposed caliphate.

As well as limiting collateral damage, governments must create space for humanitarian groups independent of them to provide aid to mitigate the suffering that stems from this paradox successfully. In the Marawi case, the role of local NGOs was crucial. They were willing and able to re-enter the city to evacuate people still trapped inside, often at tremendous personal risk.

They also mounted much of the medical assistance provided to the displaced and gave critical assistance to the many families in and around Iligan City that hosted the vast majority of those displaced by the conflict. [This example has been folded into a larger conversation within the global aid](#) community on “localising” humanitarian aid that crystallised at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016.

“Localising” Humanitarian Aid

Localisation is generally construed as giving money to local NGOs directly, and devolving more operational decision-making power to them. This first element helps reduce the inefficiencies that stem from the common practice of filtering donations through several intermediary agencies, each with their own organisational overheads, before money is deployed in the field.

Meanwhile, the second component helps circumvent the challenges outside aid agencies face tailoring the aid they offer to the contextualised needs of a given disaster situation. However, in conjunction with the clear evidence the Marawi experience provides in support of greater localisation of humanitarian aid, it also reveals two possible pitfalls that require consideration.

Is Localisation Always Useful?

First, the humanitarian system’s historical funding bias towards global disaster response organisations has left an enduring imbalance in skills and competences between global and local humanitarian groups. In Marawi, the general trauma of fleeing from one’s home and the particular violent targeting of civilian made mental health support critical. This proved a particular gap in the local aid response that was ultimately filled by international aid responders.

Mental health constituted much of the work reported by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). Of course, more aid localisation would eventually build these crucial humanitarian competences into the local response network. However, in the meantime efforts to localise must be cognisant of gaps such as these.

Second, local NGOs may face similar challenges to the state in so-called complex emergencies when a humanitarian crisis is either caused, or exacerbated, by local political volatility. The passing of Typhoon Tembin through the Marawi conflict area in late December 2017 provides some evidence of this.

Following their usual protocols, the ICRC and their local counterparts in the Philippine

Red Cross divided responsibilities according to perceptions of their respective independence. Thus the local chapter worked only in government controlled areas, while their foreign counterparts – who are less likely to be viewed as having stakes in local political frictions – delivered aid in contested zones.

Local Politics and Perceptions of Local Aid Groups

These complications will only deepen as the Philippines pursues its planned constitutional reorganisation in Mindanao, where Marawi is located. The July signing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law [is widely seen as an effort to blunt any potential appeal of secessionist opposition groups in the area](#) by reviewing the terms of Mindanao's governing autonomy.

The stakes in this rebalancing of political power are high, and local factions will therefore be jockeying for more advantageous positions. As such, the plan's long-term hope to reduce political tensions introduces a competition for influence within the new constitutional arrangement that actually increases tensions in the short- to medium-term. While this trade-off may be justified, it puts local NGOs in a difficult position.

If the local community in Mindanao itself is split – as may happen when the terms with which it interacts with Manila are being renegotiated – then projecting independence becomes much more complicated for local NGOs. With personnel, funding, connections, or even just support from one side or other of any ensuing political divide, they may find it harder to maintain the perception that their humanitarian work – and the decision-making underlying it – is independent of any political agenda. And yet, during the acute phase of the Marawi insurgency, that perception of independence was crucial to the success they had.

This does not mean that the drive to localise aid more should be curtailed. It does, however, suggest that this agenda needs nuancing. Local and international disaster responders ultimately have different advantages and disadvantages. The Marawi case suggests that successful localisation means recognising this, and then reforming the aid system to redress historical imbalances accordingly.

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