



Mission vs Safety

OCHA Somalia and the Baidoa Raid

Teaching Note

Case Summary

The task of providing aid to victims of natural disasters is already a daunting one. But when the needy live in conflict zones, the difficulties mount. This case goes behind the scenes to see how humanitarian agencies cope when they encounter so-called “complex emergencies” that arise in failed states with weak security and near-nonexistent government services. The agencies can operate only if the combatants permit. Yet neutrality, independence and impartiality are what allow humanitarians to operate—and keep them safe. This creates a dilemma—how to deal with local political actors without seeming to take sides. This ability to make deals while maintaining neutrality—both real and perceived—can spell the difference between helping the needy, or giving up.

Among the agencies in Baidoa, Somalia, was the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). OCHA was created in 1998 to coordinate an even and timely distribution of aid in times of disaster by UN and government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Due to hostilities within Somalia—a country at war for 18 years—OCHA—Somalia in 2009 operated from Nairobi, Kenya. But OCHA preferred to work in-country and sent international staff to Somalia as often as conditions permitted.

On July 20, 2009, the United Nations compound in Baidoa, Somalia, was overrun by insurgents from the militant Islamic group, al-Shabaab, who expelled members of UN agencies it deemed “political.” The militants made it clear, however, that humanitarian agencies could stay. Under UN rules, however, all international staff had to leave if the security staff left—and security officers were among those expelled. At the time, two international OCHA staff were in Baidoa: Cedric Petit and Birgitt Hotz. Reluctantly, they departed with their UN colleagues.

The head of OCHA—Somalia was Mark Bowden, the Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) for Somalia (appointed by a UN undersecretary-general). Bowden wore other hats as well: Resident Coordinator (RC) and head of the UN Development Program, as well as the Designated Official (DO) for security. Over the week after the raid, Bowden had to consider the options available to OCHA—Somalia.

On the one hand, Petit and Hotz—noting that al-Shabaab had not targeted the humanitarians—wanted to return to Baidoa. There were several refugee camps holding at least 6,000 people who required OCHA’s oversight to ensure that residents were getting the services

they needed. Without monitoring, experience showed that aid supplies too often went astray or disappeared before reaching the intended recipients. To leave also meant losing local contacts and local knowledge.

On the other hand, as RC and DO, Bowden had to be sure that guarantees were in place to secure the safety of international staff in Somalia. Power was shifting within al---Shabaab; former UN allies seemed to be sidelined while other, possibly al---Qaeda linked individuals were coming to the fore. Moreover, al---Shabaab was on the US terrorist watchlist; dealing with them at all risked putting OCHA on the wrong side of US regulations. Bowden personally favored providing humanitarian services to conflict zones as long as possible—but not beyond prudence. With Hotz and Petit pressing for a return, Bowden tried to establish contact with the new al---Shabaab leaders in order to make a reasoned decision on whether OCHA should return to Baidoa or not.

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to start discussions about the challenges of providing humanitarian aid to areas of conflict; international development; crisis management; and the world of international humanitarian assistance.

The case looks at the world of those who are asked to walk into dangerous situations in order to provide help to the most vulnerable—refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). It allows students to gain an understanding of the frontline realities of such work. International staff live in isolated compounds, often in sub---standard living conditions. Their work can involve travel by armored vehicle, accompanied by guards. They must learn to function using translators, if they do not speak the local language. While local staff are an invaluable part of any humanitarian operation, the international staff play an indispensable role in fulfilling the mission.

Humanitarian agencies, and in this case OCHA, have set themselves a high bar: to be neutral, impartial and independent. Ask students to consider what this means when working in a conflict zone. How can one remain independent if the agency relies on local protection to get the work done? On the other hand, once an agency or its representatives are perceived as partisan, that threatens the mission as well as the safety of all humanitarians. Consider the plea in the case (p. 19) from NGOs who decried “integrated” UN operations because political activities tainted humanitarian undertakings. Is their argument justified?

How can an international aid administrator balance the two priorities: protect staff, and deliver aid? What about responsibility—and blame? Ask students to debate what lessons Bowden should draw from the attack on the UN in Algiers, or his own experience in Hargeisa? What kind of training would prepare international administrators for the kind of challenges Bowden faces as head of OCHA---Somalia?

To function in south---central Somalia, OCHA must negotiate and work with the Somali al---Shabaab militants—who are on the US terrorist watch list. How does an international organization manage the restrictions posed by any of its members? Ask students to consider the interplay between funding and humanitarian agency independence. How can international humanitarians balance the obligations imposed by each? What about the known and even expected diversion of aid on its way to the final destination—how can an aid agency limit that and still get the job done?

Finally, consider the role of OCHA specifically. It has a mandate and responsibilities, but little or no authority. How can an agency created to foster coordination be effective without sanctions? What would its success look like, and what would constitute failure? Why would anyone want to work for an arguably toothless organization? Does an employee have to “go native,” as some consider Birgitt Hotz has done, in order to achieve professional satisfaction? Or are there other ways to derive gratification from the job?

Class Plan

Use this case in a class/course on aid to lawless societies; humanitarian organizations; multinational organizations or management.

Pre---class. Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) Should Mark Bowden send Cedric Petit and Birgitt Hotz back to Baidoa? Justify your answer.

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students’ work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions: The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80---90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) What are the pros and cons of sending staff back to Baidoa? List on board.
- b) In making a decision, how much should Bowden weigh the opinions of the two staff—Hotz and Petit—who would actually return to Baidoa?
- c) Bowden wears several hats within the UN establishment in Nairobi. Is this a productive arrangement?
- d) What are the advantages of grouping UN agencies together in Baidoa? The disadvantages?
- e) Bowden has to manage multiple constituents, including donors. What arguments might he present to US donors for supporting OCHA’s work in Somalia? What objections should he anticipate and how would he counter those?
- f) As international aid workers, Hotz and Petit often work in dangerous situations. Why do you think they do it? Would you do it?
- g) Should UN agencies and NGOs be free to deal with any authorities anywhere to get aid where it is needed? Or does that confer legitimacy on groups guilty of human rights abuses or worse? What if the groups demand substantial payments or even arms?

h) Is the US terrorist watch list a useful instrument for OCHA---Somalia? How should multinational organizations manage restrictions imposed by member states?

i) Is OCHA an effective agency? Is it a necessary agency? How can it best achieve its mandate?

j) International humanitarian NGOs claim that the UN threatens their aid work by “integrating” humanitarian with political and economic work. Is this a valid complaint?

k) How would you get humanitarian aid to south---central Somalia in August 2009?

Suggested Readings

OCHA website: Who We Are, What We Do, Where We Work

SYNOPSIS: This website is a great place to start to learn more about the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. It give a succinct overview of why and when it was created, a summary of its work and the countries in which it operates. Very helpful as a supplement to the background section in the case study.

<http://www.unocha.org/about-us/who-we-are>

Robert S. Jordan, Clive Archer, Gregory P. Granger, Kerry Ordes, *International Organizations: A Comparative Approach to the Management of Cooperation*, 4th ed. (Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers), 2001.

SYNOPSIS: This classic text (revised) by four experts in the field looks at challenges to the international system based on nation states. It provides a fine overview of the world within which OCHA operates as nation states and multilateral agencies, as well as international NGOs, seek new ways of working together. See especially Chapter 10: International Organizations and the Management of Cooperation with its discussion of international governmental organizations and international NGOs as global entities.

Mary Jane Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong?: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* [London, New York: Zed Books), 2012.

SYNOPSIS: This book by a BBC journalist chronicles the descent into 20 years of civil war in Somalia, and ways in which its society has managed to cope. It provides useful history and background for discussing the issues raised in the case study.