

Setting up humanitarian corridors in zones of hostility

Five essential lessons



Setting up humanitarian corridors

Humanitarian corridors constitute one of the most dramatic arrangements humanitarian organisations can set up in conflict environments. They are also among the most unpredictable and contested crossline operations exposing affected populations and humanitarian personnel alike to significant risks. Over the recent decades, humanitarian corridors have saved the life of hundreds of thousands of civilians entrapped in besieged areas. Thousands, however, have also lost their lives or disappeared in these operations of last resort, set up in haste, under intense pressure and with limited experience. The purpose of this short note is to draw the attention of humanitarian practitioners on some of the essential lessons of setting up humanitarian corridors.

Five essential lessons

Humanitarian corridors require the involvement of all the relevant actors of the conflict

Humanitarian corridors consist of crossline operations organised in an agreement and

coordination between humanitarian organisations and parties to an armed conflict to facilitate the safe passage of goods and people in and out of zones of hostilities. The role of humanitarian organisations is to initiate a dialogue with the relevant parties on the practical arrangements for creating such corridors, advocate for the maintenance of their humanitarian character and facilitate the movement of goods and people through the corridors. Conversely, the role of the belligerents is to create a safe environment for the corridors through the provision of credible security guarantees, ensuring the adherence of the armed units under their command as well as engaging proactively in the demining of the corridors.

Humanitarian corridors entail both military and logistical procedures along a pre-established route

1. As a military operation, the parties in control of the area in, around, and above the corridors must:
 - i. Agree specifically to the terms, location, conditions of use and duration of the corridors.
 - ii. Provide the necessary guarantees on the suspension of the use of force within the

- parameters and for the duration of the corridors.
 - iii. Monitor actively the suspension of hostilities by their military units and auxiliaries in the area.
 - iv. Coordinate closely with the humanitarian counterparts on the implementation of the operations, including through a mechanism to problem solve promptly issues arising during the operations.
2. As a logistical operation, humanitarian organisations facilitating the movement of goods and people in and out of a zone of hostilities must:
- i. Stipulate the humanitarian objectives of their use of the corridors.
 - ii. Define the nature of goods that can transit through the corridors.
 - iii. Communicate to the parties in control their operational plan and monitor its implementation while ensuring that military units on the ground have been properly briefed on the arrangements.
 - iv. Communicate to the affected population the features, procedures, and limits of the corridors.
 - v. Ensure as much as possible an orderly passage of people and goods through the agreed corridors.

Humanitarian corridors remain hazardous operations

Notwithstanding the agreement of the parties, humanitarian corridors remain hazardous operations. They encompass major risks for the affected populations, the humanitarian personnel involved, and the belligerents concerned. These risks must be managed in a way to minimise the potential damages for all the stakeholders. In particular:

1. Prior to undertaking such operation, the misuse of the corridor by the belligerents, the risks of an attack against the convoys, other logistical incidents and general disorder must be evaluated based on an assessment of:
 - i. The context and lessons learned from past instances during the conflict.

- ii. Effective chain of command of all parties.
 - iii. Robust communication channel with known or pre-identified interlocutors.
 - iv. The identification of potential outsiders and spoilers.
2. Preventive measures must be put into place to limit these risks, including contingency planning for the worst-case scenarios of a suspension of the corridor or withdrawal of a humanitarian convoy. Seeking the informed consent of all the parties concerned constitute a central pillar of a proper risk management strategy.
 3. During the crossline operation, the necessary mitigation measures must be put into place to limit the damage of security and logistical incidents including measures to ensure the evacuation of the population already in the corridor, securing the humanitarian goods and vehicles in transit and ensuring the safe redeployment of humanitarian personnel in close coordination with the parties in control of the area.
 4. After the completion of the operation, a debrief and analysis of the operation must be undertaken to identify unforeseen risks and review the efficiency of preventive and mitigation measures.
 5. Negotiate with the parties on the treatment of the population entering and exiting the corridor ensuring their protection against ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest, and disappearance.
 6. Negotiate the terms of the provision and delivery of humanitarian assistance carried through the corridor.
 7. Take responsibility for the integrity of people and goods while transiting under their auspices and inform the population taking part to the operations of the inherent risks involved at the end of the corridors.

The entry and exit of humanitarian corridors may generate significant protection risks

Humanitarian corridors involve significant protection risks at the entry and exit of the operation.

The selection and treatment of people and goods by the belligerents in control may affect basic rights and dignity of the affected population. By conducting such an operation, humanitarian organisations should:

1. Negotiate with the parties on the treatment of the population entering and exiting the corridor ensuring their protection against ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and disappearance.
2. Negotiate the terms of the provision and delivery of humanitarian assistance carried through the corridor.
3. Take responsibility for the integrity of people and goods while transiting under their auspices and inform the population taking part to the operations of the inherent risks involved at the end of the corridors.

Humanitarian corridors can be instrumentalised by parties to the conflict

Finally, the setting up of humanitarian corridors represent substantial benefits and risks for belligerents. The maintenance of a dialogue with all the parties concerned will play a critical role in assessing the political and military interests of the parties in favour or against the proposed corridors and finding arrangements to seek their support while maintaining the humanitarian character of the corridors. Humanitarian organisations should be especially attentive to the instrumentalisation of corridors by the parties at the local and regional levels, the attribution of the blame for the failure of the negotiation or of the corridors, or a diversion of attention from other violations of humanitarian obligations.

The denial of a corridor may also provide valuable psychological gains to one party, exerting additional pressure on the opposite side. Humanitarian organisations should therefore undertake a thorough evaluation of the potential risks of instrumentalisation before attempting to negotiate a corridor.

About the CCHN

The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (CCHN) was founded in 2016 as a joint initiative of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières Switzerland, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN World Food Programme, and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. The Centre is hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross and is based in Geneva, Switzerland.




The CCHN aims to facilitate the capture, analysis, and sharing of experiences and practices around humanitarian negotiation and to provide a space for dialogue across organisations. At the core of its activities is a global community of humanitarian practitioners working at the frontlines of humanitarian action.





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